

**ROSE FORTUNE**  
**A Free Person of Character**

*A Solo Performance Piece  
for the stage inspired by the life of  
American Slave and Canadian  
Black Loyalist Rose Fortune.*

Written by  
George Cameron Grant  
adapted from his full length play

**FORTUNE**

WGAE Registration #I258666  
Registered with the US Copyright Office  
©George Cameron Grant

George Cameron Grant  
156 Pitney Road  
Absecon, NJ 08201  
(516)238-3869  
GeorgeCameronGrant@gmail.com  
www.GeorgeCameronGrant.com

## CHARACTERS

(In order of appearance)

Rose Fortune

Little Rose

*(Rose in Italics Act One & Act Two)*

Mama

Daddy

Mac

Young Rose

*(Rose in Italics Act Three)*

Jonah

Slave Trader

Isabella

All characters are to be portrayed  
by a single actress.

"I was aided in my hasty efforts to quit the abominable inn by a curious old Negro woman, rather stunted in growth, and dressed in a man's coat and felt hat. She had a small stick in her hand which she applied lustily to the backs of all who did not jump instantly out of her way. Poor old dame! She was evidently a privileged character."

*-Lieutenant-Colonel Sleigh of the 77th Regiment on a chance encounter with Rose Fortune at Annapolis Royal in 1852*

\*A note about the song

## **FOLLER DE DRINKIN' GOU'D**

Although there are many claims to the contrary, and many more contemporary versions, the true origins of this song appear very sketchy. The earliest account of the song, however, seems to go back to 1873, when Mary Austin wrote in her autobiography *Earth Horizon*, that as a girl of five or six she heard a black man, Moses W. Drakeford, sing "Foller de drinkin' gou'd!" in her hometown of Carlinville, Illinois.

In 1912, H.B. Parks reports hearing the song sung by a young black boy in the mountains of Hot Springs, North Carolina (on the Tennessee border), and a year later he claimed to have heard a negro fisherman on the wharf in Louisville, Kentucky "singing the same stanza on the same tune."

I have attempted to use the most original version of the song in *ROSE FORTUNE*, which appears to be this  
H.B. Parks "discovery."

-GCG

\*Big thanks go out to Joel Bresler for his extensive, wonderful research piece documenting the origins and history of the song -

"Follow The Drinkin' Gourd - A Cultural History"

Copyright 2008 - 2012, Joel Bresler.

**ACT ONE.**

Scene: The PIER at Annapolis Royal,  
Nova Scotia, represented by a weathered  
MILK BENCH upstage center.

Time: Dusk. February. 1864.

At rise: A WOMAN singing is heard.

ROSE (O.S. Singing)

*Foller de drinkin' gourd, foller de drinkin' gourd, fer de  
ol' man said, foller de drinkin' gourd -*

...ROSE FORTUNE enters, pushing an old  
WHEELBARROW. A dark-skinned WOMAN of  
90, she wears a SIMPLE COTTON DRESS  
cinched at the waist that barely misses  
touching the ground...

*When de sun come back, when de firs quail calls, foller de  
drinkin' gourd, when de sun come back, and de time is come,  
foller de drinkin' gourd. De river's bank it's a very good  
road, de dead tree shows de way, foller de drinkin' -*

...lowering the wheelbarrow, Rose  
reaches beneath the SACK CLOTH covering  
it, removing a gnarly WALKING STICK...

Wake up, ya nasty wharf rat!

...she waves the stick menacingly cross  
stage, stopping at the edge...

Git offa this pier and back to whatever poor woman hafta'  
sleep another night with ya.

...she raps the stick on the ground...

I said git!

...with the aid of the stick, she walks  
to the bench and sits...

Dear Lord, don't have to tell Ya, this load's gettin' more  
burdensome every day, but I be thankin' Ya fer another day to  
carry it, and the strength to do it.

...looking out toward the audience, and  
realizing she's not alone, she again  
leaves the bench, raising the stick...

Thought I told ya to git! Now come on outta them shadows 'fore I...(suddenly lowers the stick)...my apologies. Didn't see ya there. Sure hope I didn't give ya much of a start, jes figured ya fer another one of them stayouts is all. They know what the curfew is down here, and know even better than to mess wit' me, jes seems like every full moon they need a fresh remindin'a who keeps the peace on this wharf.

...she slides the stick into the wheelbarrow...

And that'd be me. Name's Rose. Rose Fortune. Mos' fortunate woman in all'a Nova Scotia. Why's that? Cause the Good Lord give me purpose. See, I'm what folks 'round here call an entre-pre-neur. Ya know, them that starts their own business from the dirt up, and I've pulled a few of 'em outta the ground, watered 'em, and made 'em grow, and this here wheelbarrow was the first. Waitin' on the ferry myself, no doubt some folks'll be needin' some personal effects, bags, and precious cargo carted off to a safe place, and I'll be right here ready to help 'em reach their destinations - fer a small fee, that is. Know every Inn and outhouse from one end of Annapolis Royal to the other - ones yer the better fer stayin' in, ones ya best be stayin' outta'. Folks settle in after a long trip, last thing they need is to be purgin' some nasty stew, or wrestlin' with a lumpy mattress filled with critters make 'em scratch all night. Those are the kinds of misgivins the right entrepreneur can protect visitors from, and that's exactly what I do. Matter'a fact, regular town folk got so used to me bein' 'round and keepin' things on the straight'n narrow up'n down this pier, they took to callin' me Officer Rose, and it kinda stuck. Not that I be needin' any title, uniform or badge, or that they be payin' me anythin' for the service, but I always figured that by me lookin' out for their business, I'd also be lookin' out for mine, and let me tell ya, those good-for-nothings would like for me to let my guard down or give up the ghost so they could nibble away at my business. But long as I'm breathin' there'll only be room on this pier for one wheelbarrow, and that'd be this one right here. See, this ain't jes any ol' wheelbarrow, you're lookin' at The Rose Fortune Cartin' Company of Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, 'stablished month'a April, year of Our Lord seventeen hundred eighty four. That's right, been luggin' this heap'a timber 'round since I'm ten years old. Why? Well, that's a mighty long story goin' back even longer than I do, and I confess 'fore my Maker to polishin' up some of the finer details over the eighty years I been tellin' it, but it pretty much started durin' the troubles with the colonies down below. See, my family, Daddy, Mama, and me, we was owned by the Devones of Philadelphia. They was a proper enough God fearin' family, well respected by their neighbors, who treated us decent-like, though I'd be lyin' 'fore God Almighty if I didn't recall the occasional whuppin' laid upon my Daddy, but those were few'n far

between, and a whole lot less than others we heared about. Turns out Mister Devone got himself into that tea party business, and all'a sudden official lookin' folks be goin' in and outta his parlor day and night, doin' and plottin' Lord knows what, and that's a good a place as any to start this story, which begins the mornin' we was told to pack up our things, then got carted off to Virginia with the Devones, pigs and chickens to boot. I was turnin' nine and the war was turnin' 'gainst King George, so no sooner did we settle into our new situation than Daddy heared 'bout the Governor of Virginia's Proclamation - believe his name was Dunmore, that's right, Lord Dunmore - sweet Jesus, the things I'm startin' to fergit - anyhow, this proclamation said that any slaves makin' their way behind British lines willin' to declare loyalty by pickin' up a musket in King George's name against the rebel army would be set free'n clear, along with their kin, and what I will never forget 'til the day I'm knockin' on the Gates of Heaven, was bein' woke from a deep sleep in the middle of that chilly September night.

DADDY

*Come on, girl, git yerself up!*

ROSE

I look up and there's Daddy in his tattered work clothes starin' down at me with eyes wider'n I'd ever seen, Mama at his side, her eyes weepin' beneath the bonnet she never took off, onto her thread-bare shawl, cotton dress and apron. Half asleep, I put up a fuss'n Mama raised her hand and voice.

MAMA

*You git yerself up and do what yer Daddy tells ya, 'fore I give ya the back of my hand!*

ROSE

Now I ain't ever heard my Mama talk like that, and I knew by the grit of her teeth and spread of her nostrils, my next move better be gettin' up from that floor and packin' my things, or there'd be hell to pay fer sure, so git we did, slippin' away into the darkest night I ever seen. Seemed like we was walkin' blind for hours'n hours, when suddenly we come upon a campsite of His Majesty King George's finest, all yammerin' away as they finished suitin' up in their fancy black hats, red coats with gleamin' gold buttons, ghost white pants, and shiny black boots. Curious thing was, they wasn't all white faces, 'cause huddled 'round a burnin' fire and rubbin' the mornin' chill from their hands, was some of the prettiest soldiers I ever seen, faces blacker'n mine, and to where my Daddy headed and presented himself. They chatted, then led him inside the tent, while Mama and I set ourselves by the fire. *Where those soldiers takin' Daddy, Mama?*

MAMA

*Gonna let yer Daddy tell ya that.*

ROSE

Which did nothin' to quiet my curiosity. Ain't we goin' back to the Devones?

MAMA

No, sugar, we ain't, not later, not ever!

ROSE

All'a sudden Daddy appeared, grinning ear to ear, dressed in an Ethiopian Regiment Uniform. Floppy, wide-brimmed black felt hat, burlap coat, white pants, black shoes, and a cotton shirt stretched across his barrel chest, words **LIBERTY TO SLAVES** stitched 'cross it, rope cinchin' it 'round his waist. He wore a big ol' smile as he gripped a musket in those huge hands that always protected us, and saluted.

DADDY

*Private Fortune reportin' fer duty!*

ROSE

Mama was not impressed.

MAMA

*No tater sack can contain the fineness of my man.*

DADDY

*What tater sack? This here's the official uniform of Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment.*

ROSE

*Why ya got **Liberty to Slaves** stitched onto yer new shirt, Daddy?*

DADDY

*Cause from now on, yer Daddy's gonna be fightin' fer England and King George.*

ROSE

He removed and opened a folded piece of parchment from his bag. He couldn't read, so he handed it to me.

DADDY

*Tell us what it says Rose, read it out loud.*

ROSE

I held it, looked around, then turned to Mama. *But what if someone sees? I'm not allowed to let anyone know I can read, said so yerself, didn't ya, Mama?*

MAMA

*That was back with the Devones, honey, out here ya can read anytime ya want, so shout it out as loud as ya want, and stand up straight while doin' it.*



ROSE

*It says Certificate of Freedom. This is to certify that to whomever it may concern, the Bearer hereof - John Fortune - a Negro, reported to the British Lines, in consequence of the Proclamations of Lord Dunmore, Governor of Virginia, and that said negro, as well as his immediate kin, has Permission to go wherever he may think proper. What's this mean, Daddy?*

DADDY

*Means you, yer Mama, and me are hereby declared loyal subjects of His Majesty, King George. We free, girl, free and clear as them mornin' doves ya be hearin'.*

ROSE

*Mama took the parchment from my hand and handed it back to Daddy.*

MAMA

*That scrap'a paper's a blessed thing, darlin', a gift from our Blessed Lord Himself.*

ROSE

*Then how come you and Daddy are cryin'?*

DADDY

*Cause Freedom ain't a word to be afraid of sayin' or thinkin' 'bout in secret no more.*

MAMA

*Feels as real as the first time I touched ya outside my womb'n heared ya cry, like the word Freedom jes been born. We don't know what else to do wit' it yet but cry.*

ROSE

*When ya hafta go use that musket, Daddy?*

DADDY

*Fore the sun climbs 'bove them trees.*

ROSE

*Promise you'll come back?*

DADDY

*I'd better come back or this Mama'a yours'll kill me.*

ROSE

*He hugged and kissed us both, then off went Daddy and Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment. Black men defendin' their new found freedom 'gainst folks wagin' a war fer independence. Now tell me, what kinda craziness is that? God Himself musta been lookin' down and laughin' at the lot of us, but I can tell ya this, there was no laughin' down here fer a long time after that mornin'.*

Next time I seen my Daddy, could tell by the tattered state of his uniform, fear in his eyes, and blood pourin' from his leg, not only was the war lost, so was he. *Daddy, you're hurt!*

DADDY

*Ain't but a scratch.*

MAMA

*Scratch, nothin', John Fortune, git yerself over here.*

ROSE

Mama moved to tendin' his leg, but Daddy shook her off.

DADDY

*No time, Mother, I need you and this child to pack yerselves up quick. We don't leave right now, we'll be headin' back to the Devones - if we're still breathin', that is - so if that's what ya both want, might as well jes sit ourselves back down an keep on cacklin' 'stead of gettin' ourselves packed up'n out with the rest, now which way does ya want it?*

ROSE

*Where we goin', Daddy?*

DADDY

*Ain't talkin' 'bout that now, all I gotta do is git my family outta' the danger they in.*

MAMA

*We best be listenin' to yer Daddy, darlin'.*

ROSE

And that's jes what we did. Whole campsite cleared out in less than an hour, scraps of whatever remained of Governor Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment runnin' and crawlin' their way through the woods in the blacka' night like bleedin' sheep runnin' from a pack of starvin' wolves. Round after round of musket shot was gettin' louder behind us, whoopin'n hollerin' drawin' closer'n closer, when we come upon a wide clearin' leadin' to a long pier, at the end of which rocked a big ol' boat waitin' for us to climb aboard and take us away, but Daddy was slowin' down with every step, so Mama and I each grabbed one of his arms and began to drag him.

MAMA

*They almost at the edge of them woods - pull harder, Rose!*

ROSE

*I'm tryin', Mama. But Daddy stopped dead in his tracks.*

DADDY

*Yer leavin' me here, and makin' it to that boat with Rose.*

ROSE

No!

MAMA

*We ain't leavin' nobody, we're gettin' ya onto that boat, and I ain't hearin' another word on it...(Mama looks out)... we almost there! Pull, Rose, pull!*

ROSE

*And pull we did, finally reaching the boat, and not one second too soon, 'cause jes as it pulled out, those boys came chargin' from the woods and down the pier, firin' everythin' they got at anythin' they could see. Not a soul'd dare go topside 'til we put that pier well in the distance, lest they wanted a musket ball whistlin' through their ears. Soon, we was surrounded by water, and I can tell ya this, don't remember a more beautiful night than that night we set off from Virginia. Lord, I never knew there could be so many stars in the sky. Where's the boat takin' us, Daddy?*

DADDY

*Town called Annapolis Royal.*

ROSE

*Annapolis Royal? Sounds like a Queen live there.*

DADDY

*Will be one once my little girl sets foot on it.*

ROSE

*Where is it, Daddy?*

DADDY

*Place called Nova Scotia. They say it's somethin' called a peninsula - an island connected to a big ol' piece a land by a sliver'a one. Least that's what they tell me.*

MAMA

*It's the Promised Land, far as I'm concerned.*

ROSE

*Bible says the Promised Land was where Moses took his people after he led 'em outta Egypt, away from Pharoah. Daddy laughed and gave me a hug.*

DADDY

*Done raised yerself one smart little girl there, Mother, but now I'm gonna tell ya both somethin' you won't be readin' in no book, includin' the Bible. Promised Land? That's any place you lay your feet down a free person.*

ROSE

*Don't understand, Daddy, thought we was free.*

DADDY

*Well, sugar, the way I heared it, General Washington ain't satisfied wit' jes winnin' this war, says he won't be signin' no peace treaty 'til King George turns all us slaves back over to those we set ourselves free of.*

ROSE

*But you ain't a slave no more, Daddy, got the ink on that paper and thread on yer shirt to prove ya ain't.*

MAMA

*Girl's right, John.*

DADDY

*Right or wrong, if those boys holdin' the muskets we jes left behind ever catches up on us, that word your Daddy fought fer won't be been worth the parchment it's printed on or fabric it's stitched into.*

ROSE

*That ain't fair!*

MAMA

*Ain't nothin' given to ya, Rose. Ain't no guarantees. Best ya can do is take what the Good Lord gives ya and make as much of the unfair as fair as ya can make it. Jes the way it is, girl, better grow up on that fact fast as ya can.*

ROSE

*I don't like the way it is.*

DADDY

*Ain't up to you, Rose, that up to God.*

ROSE

*Then I'm angry at God! Took a solid day 'fore the handprint on my backside faded, and about the same time to muster courage to go topside, where I found Mama and Daddy sittin', hand in hand, lookin' up at the stars.*

DADDY

*Well, now, look who's found her way back. Come on up here, girl.*

ROSE

*Daddy lifted me onto his lap. I could see his leg was angrier lookin' than ever and almost twice its size. Daddy, your leg!*

DADDY

*Don't feel nothin'. Look on up there girl, what ya see?*

ROSE

*The moon, the stars - whole mess'a stars.*

DADDY

*Well, time's come fer me to show ya somethin' gonna' guide ya through yer whole life.*

ROSE

*He pointed to the sky, slowly moving his finger across it.*

DADDY

*I'm tracin' out what they call the drinkin' gourd - like a big ol' cup - ya see it yet?*

ROSE

*No, Daddy, not yet.*

DADDY

*Then I'll do it again, jes keep watchin' my finger...(he retraces it)...there be the handle, now jes foller it down'n around 'til it makes the cup part, then -*

ROSE

*I see it! I see it!*

DADDY

*See them two stars makin' up the right side of the cup?*

ROSE

*I see 'em.*

DADDY

*Now jes foller 'em up to the star they be pointin' at - call that the North Star, cause it never changes its place in the Heavens, and always be pointin' North. No matter where you are in this world, if you can find the gourd, you can find the North Star. Folks been followin' that star to freedom long's I can remember, though we got it a whole lot easier than most, hitchin' a ride on this here boat'n all. Most folks gotta do a whole lot more than us, month after month in darkness, some by themselves, wadin' through swamps, stompin' 'cross rocks, sneakin' through weeds or gettin' sliced up by bramble, havin' to hide durin' the day in basements, barns, under floorboards'n outhouses, afeared of every sound, goin' hungry, dryin' up from thirst or even worse - gettin' found out'n sent back to the whip. Occurs to me we got nothin' but thanks to offer up to God at this time.*

MAMA

*Alleluia!*

DADDY

*There're these songs they sing. Secret songs only pickers know the meanin' of. Like a map givin' us a safe way to travel. The kind no one dare write down even if they could, fer fear'a gettin' caught with anythin' like that on paper.*

*No, sugar, these directions be written down in yer heart, so ya can sing 'em any time ya be needin' to...(he begins to sing)...Foller de drinkin' gourd, foller de drinkin' gourd, fer da ol' man said, foller de drinkin' gourd.*

ROSE

So off we went into the night, tearin' up the coastline toward the North Star, that drinkin' gourd, and an unknown world - this Promised Land called Annapolis Royal - on a peninsula called Nova Scotia. Didn't know it then, but not only was I lookin' back on America fer the last time, I was also sayin' goodbye to my childhood.

...ROSE gazes upward as lights dim.  
BLACKOUT.

**End of ACT ONE.**

Rose Fortune passed away  
February 20th, 1864  
and rests in an unmarked grave  
at Annapolis Royal's  
Garrison Cemetery.

On Canada Day, July 1, 2017,  
a Memorial created by sculptor Brad Hall  
was installed and dedicated to Rose Fortune  
at the same Garrison Cemetery.

One year later, the new Digby ferry  
was commissioned. It was christened  
The Fundy Rose.

In 2019, Rose Fortune was recognized  
as a person of Historical Significance  
by the Canadian Government.

A Canada 150 Special Edition Stamp  
Honouring Rose Fortune was created the same year.