

Rose to the Occasion is the second in a series of stories involving the rich and bored amateur sleuths aptly named The Merry Chasers. Trot along, sniffing out the clues while digging up secrets long buried. You will be champing at the bit in this hilarious mystery until all is revealed in a surprising ending that will have you howling.

Rose to the Occasion

by

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Chapter One

She enters the softly lit room of the Place de la Court and pauses. She needs only a moment for her eyes to adjust, her vision as good as any cat's in the dark. On each crisp white linen draped table, plates, silverware, wine and water glasses are arranged at exact measurements from the table edge. A small vase artfully placed in the center contains flower buds the precise number of two. Silver tipped shakers next to miniature silver bowls filled with tiny sugar cubes nestle under the foliage, inviting intimacy. Delicate bone china cups and decadent desserts will arrive much later after dinner has been removed. Certainly no room for elbows here.

Targeting the purpose of her visit she deftly makes her way on long slender legs to the far side of the room through a set of French doors, opulently draped in burgundy damask, where her beautiful white haired supplicant sits on the terrace, diamonds and rubies bejeweling her neck, and who at the moment is very much at rest-- evidenced by the sonorous sounds coming from her chair.

Stopping a moment to admire the scenery, a garden of colorful delights even in the diminished light of pre -dusk, Rose settles gently into the adjacent chair richly covered in a silk pattern of white

orchids on royal blue, befitting her companion's status. Lady Olivia Marksman, her Auntie O, the beloved of the recently deceased Lord Rodger Marksman, lived in the lap of luxury itself while traveling the world and dining at the best establishments. The petite frame and mild manner concealed a tenacious nature, taking some by surprise when exhibited. Rose's thoughts are interrupted by a dainty snort and Lady Olivia, righting herself into a more respectable pose, turns to greet her guest, "Rosie, my dear, so good of you to come."

"It is my pleasure Aunt Olivia. I look forward to our visits, but why..."

"Which are much too infrequent," Lady O interrupts, "I *am* grateful for the speed at which you came, but first Stevens will be here shortly to serve. The usual all right? White fish and sirloin pate'?"

Rose, famished after her long trip, welcomes the delay. "Nothing would please me more."

After the meal and some pleasant updates of family and mutual friends, Rose, unable to contain her curiosity, finally blurts, "What's this business about murderous attempts on your life, Auntie O.?"

"Too many in the past year to be ignored I am afraid," Lady O. begins. "I may be old, showing it physically, but the grey matter continues to hold a spark that hasn't failed me yet." She gracefully leaves her seat at the table. "Shall we walk in the gardens? I don't know whom I can trust these days and I wouldn't want what I have to tell you to be overheard. No need to air my unwashed togs on the line for all to see."

Rose and Lady Olivia walk side by side down a path of crushed white stone bordered by fragrant companions: pale blue alyssum, purple salvia and delicate pink roses. They stop at a stone bench sheltered by a weeping willow and view the large pond a short distance away.

Rose, deciding to give her Aunt time to formulate her thoughts, sits quietly scanning the environs, a habit she has become accustomed to when on a case. Catching movement to her right at the edge of the pond, she notices a great blue heron, blending with its surroundings in motionless stance, then spearing with lightning speed an unfortunate frog that jumps into its line of vision. Tilting back its

head, it swallows its afternoon victual whole then raises its mighty wings the span of six feet and quietly flies to the rookery where three nests are visible high in the tree tops spanning the sky. Rose releases a breath she hadn't known she had kept after the stately bird had taken flight.

Startled from her reverie, Rose turns to her Aunt's voice. "It is always a beautiful sight to see, those birds rising skyward. I often wonder what it would feel like to soar above the earth." Lady O turns to her niece and continues. "Now my dear, I shall share my suspicions with you. Make what you may of them, but I am convinced there is mischief afoot. It all started shortly after Lord Rodger's murder."

"Murder!" What do you mean? I thought they said his heart had given out."

"His heart did 'give out' as you put it, but why? He was in excellent health. He had just had his annual exam the week before. Doctors found nothing wrong then, and I doubt he was overcome with illness in that short a time. No, my dear, he was murdered."

Goodness sakes! Perhaps she hadn't known her uncle as well as she had thought, but the reasonable niggles in her brain suggests that her Aunt's accusations are only suppositions clouded by grief. Carefully she poses the question. "Why would anyone want to kill Uncle Rodger? He had no enemies, did he?"

Her face must be revealing something akin to skepticism because her Aunt abruptly rises and replies, "Perhaps you will understand better if I explain the inheritance arrangements." Relinquishing the seat with more agility than Rose, half her age, she charges, "Let's stroll a bit. Stone is so cold and my bones need the warmth a little exercise will generate. Another perch awaits us further on, a wooden one, more pliant and likely to be heated from the sun by now."

Walking on, Rose is beginning to understand why her aunt might be in danger. If she were stalking a killer then said killer would be best served by ridding him or herself of her interference, but her interference is based on her belief that Lord Rodger was murdered; and if he wasn't murdered then why had there been attempts to get rid of her? Her thinking becomes a circle of murky confusion

that she hopes her favorite aunt will shed light on. Only then will she be able to untangle the threads of truth and fiction.

“Sir Beacham. You remember Sir Beacham, Rose?” Still the crisp chilled voice.

“Yes, a very nice person. Kind and gentle. I hope he is well.”

“He has aged considerably since Rodger’s death; dotes on me with a loyalty that speaks of their friendship. I see the sorrow of loss in his eyes every time he looks at me. That is the reason I am on this little respite: to allow him to grieve without my presence constantly reminding him, and me, of that loss; and to engage your services.” A small pause while she gathers her thoughts. “Sir Beacham’s last will and testament was recently revealed to your uncle and me. An arrangement that was to keep us comfortably provided for...until our own deaths.”

Finding the next stop on their journey, they sit. “Then Rodger was killed,” a steely voice addresses the horizon.

After a lengthy silence, Rose broaches the subject of her summons and bravely says in her most commanding voice, “Tell me about the attempts to silence you. “

Auntie O. regards her with a distant mien, clouded eyes clearing, as a determined resolve stronger than her pain replaces it. “There have been only three that I can positively relate to actual attempts; although I am sure there are more that missed my observation. I wasn’t expecting them you see, but with my doubts surrounding Rodger’s untimely death I began to piece the unusual events into a plot to take my life as well. I have studied it from all angles and the only one that fits is the inheritance and who would benefit after Rodger and I are removed.”

“And what did you come up with?”

“I narrowed it down to five likely suspects. I would like you to investigate each of them.

Chapter 2

“There’s our driver now. You remember Axel, don’t you Rose?”

The chauffeur opens the rear door, allowing the pair entrance to the car; then, taking his place behind the wheel, he extends his right arm to gently close the partition between them. The engine purrs to life and the Bentley coasts with ease from the private parking area out onto the road that leads to Cormier Place.

Once settled, Rose’s taciturn remark, “Mister Personality, isn’t he?” elicits the response,

“Well, he may not be much for words, but he drives splendidly and...he minds his own business.”

Rose studies the back of the chauffeur’s head. What was his name? Angus? Ansell? Axel. Yes, Axel, that was it. Number three on the list wasn’t he? Her eyes meet his in the rearview mirror. They appear friendly enough with maybe a question or two in them. Or was that *her* curiosity reflecting back?

Glancing over, satisfied her Auntie O. is resting peacefully; Rose sighs and settles in for a short nap herself.

When they arrive, Sir Beacham is waiting at the door sputtering pleasantries with unfocused eyes and all the emotion and warmth of a turnip. The smell of scotch is overwhelming.

Rose follows her aunt to a lovely apartment overlooking the gardens. As they stand viewing the expansive grounds she asks, “Is he always this...preoccupied?”

“Since Roger’s death, yes. They were so close, did everything together; fished in the pond you can see just off to the right, hunted in the forest beyond and endlessly walked the grounds.”

Lady Olivia gestures to the photographs on the wall, a number of them professionally taken, but many candid shots of the activities she was now describing. Wistfully pointing to one she says “They built this simple fort one summer; the summer before I made an appearance. They never finished the roof, whether by chance or design, and slept many a night under the stars. They continued having new

adventures even after I arrived.” Turning from her memories, Lady Olivia faces Rose, her eyes burning with that fierceness she kept hidden, and avers in a low growl, “I will find his killer, if it is the last thing I ever do.”

Rose has no doubt she means every word of that promise and turns back to the photographs. The scenes depict happier times; and although they should add cheer, they succeed only in adding to the feelings of sadness and loss. If Uncle Rodger died of natural causes that was bad enough; but if what Auntie O. is saying is true--well, Rose decides, she will make the culprit pay, and pay dearly.