

Heaven Scent

The theatre was filling up rapidly – the great and the good occupying the gilded balconies and boxes nearest to the stage, the hoi-polloi, the serried ranks of hard, wooden chairs below. People were streaming in, greetings shouted between old friends, overcoats dispensed with, and seats taken.

Francois du Bois, celebrated perfumier, tucked his tails beneath him then leant forward wearily on the edge of his box.

“Why d’they let the rabble in, Henri? But, I suppose, it all adds to an evening’s entertainment at the opera.”

His servant – the aforementioned Henri – allowed himself a polite, restrained, laugh. “You have to keep the masses entertained, monsieur. Without the opportunity to shout and abuse those on stage they would, no doubt, turn on the likes of you, and tear London to bits! It’s a small price to pay to stave off the sort of revolution our own benighted country suffered!”

“Wise words, Henri; and as usual, you’re absolutely right! Now, pass me my opera glasses.”

The lights of the auditorium were beginning to dim and the orchestra starting to warm up in the pit beneath the stage. The effect of the increasing noise on those below was negligible – if anything, Francois realised, ‘the rabble’ seemed to be getting louder, rising, as it were, to the challenge. He fiddled with his binoculars then scanned the hall, allowing his gaze to fall on this, or that, pretty thing, before moving on. Suddenly, he stopped, transfixed. His gaze settled on the face of the radiant young lady occupying a box, opposite, his eyes feasting, unseen, on her full lips, her sweet, retrousse, nose, her deep décolletage...

“My God! Henri, pray tell, who’s that, the vision in the box opposite?!”

Henri squinted. “I’ve no idea, monsieur, but I have ways of finding out...”

The next morning, Miss Rosemary Montague-Peake, twenty-year old beauty, only child, and prospective heiress to the Montague-Peak trading company, was at breakfast – a lightly boiled egg, buttered toast, and English, breakfast tea. Bessie, her maid, approached her. “Beggin’ your pardon, ma’am, but this arrived this morning.” She held out a small, beautifully wrapped, package, and a tiny sealed envelope affixed by scarlet ribbon.

Bessie took two steps back, and without a word Rosemary carefully stripped away the pretty packaging to reveal an equally beautiful rosewood box. Intrigued, she undid the tiny latch and lifted the lid to reveal the contents – an exquisite cut-glass scent bottle, complete with a delicately engraved silver stopper. Placing the bottle on the table, she unscrewed the stopper and dabbed a little of the contents onto her wrist, then put it to her nose and took in the fragrance. Her head swam – she had never smelt a perfume quite like it before. Hurriedly, she opened the card. On one side, ‘To the beauty in the box, opposite. XX’, on the other, a painting of a flower.

“Bessie. You know these things. What does this signify – the picture, I mean?”

Bessie took the card, then handed it back to her mistress. “That’s pansy, ma’am,” she said, her cheeks reddening, “It means ‘you occupy my thoughts’”

Rosemary straightened. “And do you know who sent it?”

“No ma’am, but I can try to find out.”

Over the ensuing days and weeks, Rosemary received a seemingly never-ending stream of perfume bottles and cards: Clover, white, “Think of me, ma’am”; Heather, purple, “Admiration, ma’am”; Heather, white, “First emotions of love”; Acacia, “Secret love”, and so on, *ad infinitum*, until the largest and most exquisitely ornate package arrived – Primrose, “I can’t live without you!” Rosemary, though admittedly flattered by the profusion of gifts (and the sentiments attached thereto) grew weary, “And besides, Bessie, as you know, I am betrothed! You need to take this to Monsieur du Bois’ man. It really *has* to stop...”

For weeks, no more bottles arrived, until one morning Bessie approached cautiously and curtsayed. “Beggin’ your pardon ma’am – but there’s been another delivery.” She handed the package, smaller than normal, to her mistress.

“Oh, very well, Bessie, let’s see what *this* one says,” Rosemary sighed, rolling her eyes. “The perfumes *have* been delightful, I suppose.” She opened the box to the usual, superbly-crafted bottle, and started to unscrew the top. “No, first, let’s see what he has to say *this* time.” She cut open the envelope to reveal a blank card inside. “Nothing? No message?” and then she dabbed her wrist and inhaled. In an instant her body fell to the carpet, eyes bulging, legs and arms twitching, a stream of acrid, bubbling, foam emanating from her gurgling throat...

At his subsequent trial, du Bois, ‘the message-in-a-bottle’ killer, pleaded guilty to the cold-blooded murder of Rosemary Montague-Peake, the judge declaring that, despite the mysterious blank card, du Bois’ message was crystal clear:

‘If I cannot have you,’ it declaimed, ‘*nobody* will!’

800 words