Mystery at the Fairgrounds

By Claudia Busto

Rose Hakebourne excitedly clasped her gloved hands together. "Look at all the different activities!" she gleefully cried out to her companion, Hannah Astley, as they stood surveying the fairgrounds.

Everything from rich silks and colorful ribbons to fruit cobbler, pottery, and bouquets of nosegays could be purchased from various stalls. Sellers of food and drink with trays slung round their necks walked around peddling their wares—scones and preserves, teas from Ceylon, finger sandwiches, creams, and small berry tarts.

Light chamber music was being played by a small ensemble situated on a platform. Handsome gentlemen with long waxed moustaches wearing top hats and their finest attire walked with ladies in laced sleeves and long velvet ruffled dresses underneath gas lanterns, cutting a dazzling picture.

Tents galore contained a range of amusements—pantomimes, harlequinades, rope dancers, and elements of the macabre such as two-headed ladies and living skeletons. There were balloons, performing horses, and actors putting on scenes from famous plays.

The Hyde Park Fair was a relatively new tradition. Traveling from town to town, it was a month long extravaganza that everyone had looked forward to annually since its inception two years prior. It had been in the village of Cheltenham earlier and would be heading for Cirencester after its brief stay in Warwick.

"Let’s head over for a spot of tea. That cheese and orange marmalade sandwich has made me thirsty," Rose commented to Hannah.

As they walked to a nearby booth and were about to purchase some refreshments, Rose spied a striped burgundy and rose-colored tent that they had not spotted before.

"What’s in here?" she asked, peering around at the sign, which said "Madame Hillberry’s Traveling Doll Museum" in tiny gold letters.

"Let’s go in," Hannah said, pushing open the tent’s flap. "I used to love dolls when I was younger."

They gasped in unison at the spectacular sight that greeted them.

Dolls in every size, color, and shape were set up on wide wooden shelves. A pair of miniature walnut doll dressers was underneath a collection of tiny furniture, including a day bed and a rosewood piano with real strings. Stuffed, sewn, and whittled playthings were placed below a row of diminutive clothing and shoes. A papier-mâché Marotte whirled to a tinkling music box on a stand. A bride collectible in a long full puff dress carrying roses wore a veil studded with pearls the size of seeds, her lush brown hair piled on top of her head. Figurines of matadors, queens and kings, animals, dancers, babies, and famous artists made of felt, metal, wood, china, wax, and cloth intermingled for a visual delight. A metal-trimmed trunk with a domed top and storage pockets opened to reveal bonnets and little dresses of poplin, tulle, velvet, and muslin.

"Look at these!" Hannah exclaimed, picking up teeny buttoned boots with curved heels and a silk fringed parasol with a white handle.

Rose was captivated by a wax peddler doll whose cloth body and hoop skirt housed a table full of actual merchandise. There were mini knitting needles and pins, cushions and baskets, fruit and jams. A large split on the doll’s forehead continued down through her eye. She showed it to Hannah, who exclaimed in delight at the small little tokens.

"You like my dolls, pretty ladies?" a faintly accented voice inquired.

They turned to see who it belonged to, having been too mesmerized by the dreamlike dolls to notice an actual live person inside the tent with them.

It was, Rose guessed, Madame Hillberry. In a red cape and black peasant petticoat and waist, her somehow unempt hair framed an unpleasant, sullen face. Rose could not place the odd accent as Madame again spoke, introducing herself, as well as her assistant and museum caretaker, Simon Oxford. He was a large, bespectacled man with fleshy,
calloused hands who nodded curtly at them as he put on a pair of gloves.

Madame asked, in a not altogether agreeable tone, whether or not they were going to buy any of the things they were looking at.

“I’m not sure,” Rose answered honestly. “Although I enjoy looking at them very much, I don’t play with them now and just don’t find them to be a necessity.”

Madame frowned. “Dolls are not just toys,” she informed Rose coldly. “They have important cultural and historical significance and often embody the beliefs and values of their time. We could learn a lot from dolls, which is why so many people collect them. In fact, some of these dolls here are very valuable.”

Rose flushed. “They are indeed quite lovely,” she murmured, hoping she had not offended Madame or the scowling Simon.

She was relieved when two ladies and a man walked into the tent, taking some of the tension out of the air. Madame Hillberry began attending to the new customers, freeing Rose and Hannah to browse some more.

They continued to peruse the petit things, pointing out items of special interest to each other. Rose especially liked a breathtaking automaton of a porcelain blue-eyed girl with a powder puff in her hand. When activated, she turned her head from right to left, occasionally lowering her head to powder her nose, and then turning to glimpse her reflection in the mirror she held. There was a bit of trim missing from the base on which she stood.

Picking her up, Rose was examining the disfigurement when Simon rushed over.

“That doll is not for sale,” he declared, roughly taking it out of Rose’s cradled arms and placing it back on its shelf.

“Let’s go, Rose,” Hannah said, sounding disgusted. “As unique as the dolls are, I’m afraid I do not feel very welcome here.”

The three other customers, whom Madame had been harassing about buying everything they touched, followed the two friends out of the tent, agreeing that Madame and Simon had been most rude.

“Hello,” the man said cheerfully in a nasally tone, bowing slightly in Rose and Hannah’s direction. “I am Dr. Samuel Alcott, and this is my cousin Victoria and her friend Anne. We have not seen each other in quite some time and are having a wonderful time catching up. Are you also enjoying the fair?”

“Absolutely,” Hannah enthused, introducing herself and Rose. “We have already half the rounds, and we intend to see everything over the next few hours. We liked the doll display best so far. It’s a shame that Madame and Simon were being so unpleasant. However, I fully intend to not let it bother our enjoyment today one bit.”

“Of course, it shouldn’t,” Samuel concurred, sniffing slightly. “There is an unusual stall around the bend that we haven’t been to yet. Would you ladies like to join us?”

Rose and Hannah said they would be delighted to, and soon the five were laughing like old school chums.

The place Samuel had referred to was a short but hilly walk away.

It was a large booth that they easily spotted, mostly due to the colorful wooden pole with turrets and fish carved into it that sat to the side. A handwritten sign declared “Specializing in Natural Herbs, Cures, and Advice,” and there were odd-looking unlabeled bottles and jars on a table. A tall man with a dark beard, well-lined face and unsmiling eyes was manning the booth, which was laden with peculiar leafy plants of varying sizes.

“What is this, Samuel?” Rose asked. “Is he a shaman or medicine man?”

Samuel replied, “I have heard that he makes delicious tonics and elixirs that simply must be tried, despite the fact that they are a bit pricey.”

“Oh, good,” Hannah smiled. “Rose and I were saying before that we were thirsty and had been meaning to get some refreshments, but we got distracted by the doll tent.”

They all stepped up to the booth. Rose inquired of the man, who was tending to a plant with purple flowers, as to what precisely he was selling.

In a soft voice, he introduced himself to them as Josiah. With eyes that bore straight into Rose, he told them that he would concoct some drinks for them with what he felt they needed.

He looked at Samuel and said he thought he could use something honey-based for his cold and sniffles.

“Why, you have not even heard me speak yet!” Samuel exclaimed. “However did you know that I have a touch of the sniffles?”

Josiah smiled slightly. “I have a way of knowing these things,” he answered. “For instance, you—here he pointed at Anne—could use something a bit more hearty and substantial, as you have been feeling down lately and not eating much.”

She looked down and blushed, muttering that it was true, and lately she had not had much of an appetite.

For Victoria, he suggested a bubbly mixture that she promptly proclaimed “delicious,” and Hannah received a soothing blend of herbs and flowers which he said were edible.

He then studied Rose as he handed her a drink. “You are in great danger and I am not sure if even I or this liquid can help you. Beware of things that are not what they seem.”

Almost choking as she had gulped down her beverage too quickly, she shivered at the ominous words. “Whatever does that mean?” she asked.

He responded, “Look to the inside and not just what is on the surface or you will be sorry.”

“This is absurd,” Rose said angrily. “Now see here! You can’t just tell me something preposterous that you are making up and scare me like this just to drum up business. Come along, Hannah.”

“You’re making a big mistake by not listening to my wise words,” Josiah protested, calling after her as she walked off. “I urge you to reconsider your actions and not doubt me. Heed what I said or pay the consequences.”

Hannah, as well as Samuel, Anne, and Victoria, followed Rose away from the booth.

Hannah laughed, “We’re really popular today. We’ve managed to leave the last two booths without angering their owners.”

“I am definitely not feeling welcome today,” Anne agreed. “It sure was weird what Josiah said to you,” she said, turning to face Rose.

Rose shrugged. “He is just a carnival fraud, someone out to take everyone’s money. I wouldn’t listen to or believe a word he said.”

“He knew of my sniffles though before I even spoke!” Samuel cried. “How is that possible unless he is truly a real healer with powers?”

Rose again dismissed the comment, stating that either Josiah had seen Samuel walking around at another point in the fair or had noticed his eyes were slightly red and deduced the rest.

“Where should we go next? Has anyone been to watch the horses yet?” she asked.

“I’m actually feeling a touch woozy right now. It is probably just because that creepy Josiah scared me, or maybe I’m tired from walking around. At any rate, perhaps I should just sit down for a bit.”

Hannah hesitated before timidly asking, “Might we go back to the dolls? I know I
suggested that we leave, but I really was so drawn to so many of them that I would just love to purchase one as a souvenir. I've been thinking of them since we left.

While none of the rest of the group was enthusiastic about going back to the surly Madame and Simon, they could see how much Hannah wanted to buy a doll, and so the reluctantly agreed.

They wandered back to the doll tent, passing Madame on the way.

She nodded frostily to them. "Did you finally realize how significant dolls are and come back to purchase one?"

Hannah sighed resignedly. "Yes, Madame, I absolutely adore the divine peddler doll and must have it."

Rose also spoke with some reluctance. "I'm thinking of making a purchase too. I know Simon said the powder puff doll wasn't for sale but I was hoping you'd change your mind."

Madame chuckled. "If you like the powder puff doll and came back for it, then by a method, we can discuss the possibility of your procuring it. I love when people feel as passionately about the dolls as I do. Kindly make sure, however, that you remove your gloves before handling her, as you have some smudges on them. I don't wish to dirty her should you and I not be able to agree on a fee for the doll."

Rose consented, and Madame said she would return to the tent shortly.

Back inside the doll tent, Simon stared, but made no comment about their return.

Hannah peered over at a large brass bound trunk that was off to the side.

"What's in here?" she asked, flipping it open curiously.

"One of the dolls from our new life-size collection," Simon said gruffly, closing the trunk and locking it with a key he produced from his pocket. "They are not yet ready for the public eye, as there are some flaws we are still working on. Madame and I do not quite agree on the design thus far, but she feels that the life-size dolls will be a huge addition to her museum and a popular item for collectors."

"It looked pretty good to me," Hannah offered. "Only a few slight wrinkles on the forehead and around the eyes."

Rose was clutching the powder puff doll. "I want to see the life-size doll."

Simon turned and reached to grab the powder puff figurine from her. "That is not for sale, as I told you before," he snapped.

"Actually, Madame said that we might be able to work out a deal," Rose returned sharply, but then she clutched her chest, dropping the doll and falling onto the ground, collapsing in a heap.

"Rose!" Hannah called, sinking down beside her. "Are you okay?"

Samuel turned her over and examined her. "I'm afraid she's dead," he said, shaking his head.

"Dead?" Hannah questioned, her voice quavering. "Are you sure?"

He nodded gravely.

Hannah screamed, a piercing shriek that brought Madame rushing in.

"What is going on?" she asked, her eyes widening at the sight.

Anne responded, "Something happened to Rose and she died! We must contact the authorities immediately!"

Hannah faced Anne and Victoria. "Will you stay here while I get a policeman?"

They nodded in unison, and Samuel said, "I will come with you, Hannah."

She looked at him grimly. "No, Samuel, please stay here while I go get some help."

Hannah exited the tent and began searching for a policeman. She sniffed as she noticed a familiar odor in the air. Was that rare cherrywood tobacco she smelled? She looked around and saw a man from the back wearing a tweed suit in shades of chocolate and gray. He was carrying a russet-colored tin supply box. Could it really be? He turned to the side and she saw his profile with the recognizable horn-rimmed glasses. It was indeed the famed Inspector Halesworth! Formerly one of Scotland Yard's finest, he had struck out on his own, and was most respected throughout their entire county. Fresh off solving the legendary Case of the Velvet Jewels, he was known for smoking a distinctive blend of pipe tobacco, and always toting around his supplies in a metal box wherever he went. Hannah just knew he would be able to figure out what had happened to Rose.

She dashed over to him. Breathless she proclaimed, "Inspector Halesworth, we need you at once. My friend is dead!"

"What? Tell me everything!" he said, falling into step with her.

As they walked, she quickly filled him in on a brief sketch of Rose's sudden demise.

Upon entering the tent, he gasped when he saw the limp body resting on the floor. The powder puff doll was nearby and Rose's gloves lay next to her.

Bending down and kneeling over Rose, he also examined her, declaring her, with no uncertainty, to be dead.

"Hmm," he mused aloud to himself. "Her skin is red and mouth appears to be most dry. It seems she died almost instantly."

"Do you suspect foul play?" Hannah asked.

"I do," Inspector Halesworth confirmed.

He looked around at the faces of Simon, Madame, Anne, Victoria, Samuel, and Hannah.

"I demand stories immediately from each one of you."

"Stories?" Samuel scoffed. "Anne, Victoria, Hannah, and I were right in the tent with Rose when it happened."

"I was in here also," Simon piped in nervously.

"I did not ask where you were when it happened," the inspector retorted.

"I just asked for stories."

"Well, I will begin," Hannah said. "Rose is my dear friend and we had so been looking forward to coming to this fair together."

She started with the day's beginning and ended with Rose's fatal fall, telling Inspector Halesworth all about the booths they had visited and their experiences. Hannah described in vivid detail the dolls they had admired, the rude actions of Simon and Madame, and the visit to the natural herb stall. She mentioned that they returned to the doll tent and Madame had told Rose to take off her gloves to handle the doll. Every word of every conversation got repeated verbatim to the best of her ability.

"Maybe that spooky Josiah poisoned her," she cried out. "After he made his horrible predictions and she drank his concoction, she said she felt woozy, and she died several minutes afterwards. Shall we go get Josiah, Inspector Halesworth?"

He held up his hand. "I most definitely will want to speak with thismedicine man character, but only upon hearing everyone else's stories."

He pointed to Victoria. "You're next."

She flushed crimson. "I don't know what to say," she stammered.

"With all due respect, Inspector Halesworth," Samuel said, "my cousin and her friend and I don't even know these ladies that well. As Hannah already told you, we just met them earlier today in this same tent. We went to the other stall and then came back here.
There is nothing for us to tell. If anything, you should question Hannah some more. She claims to be Rose's dear chum, but she is the only one who knew her before and would have any reason or motive to want her dead."

"What?" Hannah asked, flabbergasted. "Maybe YOU are the one who wanted her dead! After all, it appears she was most likely poisoned by Josiah, and you, Samuel, are the ones who suggested we go visit that odd booth! Perhaps you did know Rose before somehow unbeknownst to her, or did want her dead for some reason."

She looked toward Inspector Halesworth. "I would not be surprised to hear that Josiah and Samuel were in cahoots. After all, I sincerely doubt that Josiah is indeed a true shaman, and he gave us all vastly different drinks. None of the rest of us appear to be having any difficulties, so he obviously deliberately gave just Rose a fatal mixture."

She continued triumphantly, "Josiah knew somehow that Samuel had sniffles, and yet they claimed to never have met before. Call me a skeptic, but I don't believe in "medicine men" and I therefore think these two cooked up some sort of a scheme."

"I am going to get this Josiah," Inspector Halesworth said firmly. "If any of you dares to leave, I'll have you jailed for life, so it's in your best interest to stay here."

He looked them each in turn. "On second thought," he said, "we'll all go together. Nobody even try to run off because you'll be very sorry."

"This is so preposterous," Samuel exploded. "I am a doctor and come from a fine family and you are treating us as though we were criminals."

The inspector shot him a scathing look. "You are all guilty in my eyes until you prove yourselves to be innocent. With my vast network of contacts that could ruin your life, I suggest strongly that you cooperate with my investigation."

They ambled over to Josiah's stand.

Inspector Halesworth cornered the supposed healer and introduced himself as an officer of the law.

Perusing the array of jars, bottles, and plants, he said, "Josiah, we already know from Samuel that you and Samuel know each other. You made your fatal error by mentioning Samuel's sniffles. Since we all know there is no such thing as a medicine man, please explain your lies."

"We do know each other," Josiah conceded as Samuel groaned.

"He tricked you, Josiah," Samuel said. "I never said that we know each other."

"The jig is up!" Hannah said. "You two are guilty as sin!"

"No," Samuel said. "We do know each other and we are guilty, but it is not of murder. We're friends from our whist club, and we came up with a plan to swindle people out of their money by having Josiah pretend to have magic healing powers. I was trying to impress Rose and Hannah with Josiah's prowess and make him seem intuitive by mentioning sniffles just from the sight of me. We have been hustling folks out of their money from town to town. We serve them tasty teas of honey and flowers and spices at pretend they have curative powers. I really am a doctor and this seemed like an easy way to make some more money. Josiah told Rose those weird predictions to make him seem more real and drum up belief in his abilities, but this does not make us killers, I swear."

"No, it doesn't necessarily," Inspector Halesworth allowed. "However, it makes me suspicious, and I intend to pursue this further upon hearing the stories of Simon and Madame as we all stroll back to the doll tent again."

He gazed at Madame as they walked. "You are next, my friend."

She sniffed. "This is outlandish. I was not even in the tent at the time of Rose's death. I was innocently out getting some fresh air because it gets draining being cooped up in tents for so long. I became amused watching a squirrel playing with a red scarf up in t

tree. Just as I saw the squirrel back down the tree, I heard a scream and ran in to the tent. When I saw Rose, I was extremely despondent. I had never met her before but nobody likes a death, particularly not where they work."

Simon squeaked, "It is true. Neither Madame nor I had ever met Rose before, and we feel just terrible about this situation."

Inspector Halesworth asked, "Why weren't you going to let her buy that doll?"

"It's rare," Simon answered. "It is one of the favorites in the collection and people adore seeing it. We prefer to have it in our traveling museum where many people can see it rather than only having one person enjoy it."

"It must be very special," the inspector said, taking a look at the doll. "Ahh, how unique these features are. Automatons are exceptional by nature."

"You should see their life-size doll," Hannah told him. "It is a huge doll in that large trunk over there but Simon locked it up. He said they were not yet ready to release the oversize collection to the public."

"No matter about not being ready for the public; you will kindly open that trunk now," Inspector Halesworth thundered.

Simon sighed and opened the lock with his key. Inspector Halesworth looked inside. "Very interesting," he said, snapping the trunk shut.

He stared at the group from underneath his glasses.

"There has been a lie told here tonight. I think that person, along with perhaps another as well, is guilty of murdering Rose and committing a foul at the fair!"

The Mystery at the Fairgrounds MUST be solved!

Who killed Rose?
How did they do it?
How did Inspector Halesworth figure it out?

You don’t have to be a world-class detective in order to figure out the Mystery at the Fairgrounds. Simply re-read this story for anything you might have missed. Next, put together the jigsaw puzzle, searching for any vital clues.

The winners and solution will be posted after June 1, 2007 on our website at: www.bitsandpieces.com.

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