

# Roses Brazen and Otherwise

by Angie

*"What a lovely thing a rose is!"*

- Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Something caught Vincent's attention as he was passing through a tunnel not far from the surface. Something that didn't belong. He picked it up and realized it was a dirty metal ... thing. Mouse would have undoubtedly called it a gizmo (a term which fit a lot of things their scavenger found). It had a small ring and a brass ball chain on one end and an oval metal piece hanging from it. The other end was rounded, heavier – and mysterious.

However, since he was on his way to Catherine, he didn't examine it more closely and put it in his pants pocket.

He did, however, gaze around, senses at full alert, always a little concerned when anything new appeared in a place he traversed fairly regularly. Father had often berated him for looking at the ground as he walked, but his senses took care of any possible dangers ahead. Anything new or changed on the ground caught his attention.

Now, looking up, he saw the light from a distant street grate at the end of a long angled shaft, and decided that the thing could easily have slid down from there, after being dropped or lost. It wasn't new, whatever it was.

He shrugged and turned away. Therefore, he didn't notice the ethereal figure face that materialized in the tunnel behind him, the cheeky expression and baseball cap easily recognized.

But Vincent had other concerns. If he hurried, it would be dark when he reached the threshold and took the elevator up. He was reluctant to cross the park before deep dark, and the elevator, even if he had to wait a while before he could get on top of it, was certainly more direct. And Catherine was waiting.

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Somewhat later, back in his chamber, happy as always after a night in Catherine's company, Vincent was preparing to take off his pants, to change into the sweat pants he wore as pyjamas, when the rattle of metal on metal reminded him of the thing he had put in his pocket. He fished it out and put it on his table, then finished changing, and sat down to take a

better look.

It measured only about two inches long, not counting the chain and the metal oval.

First, he separated the chain from the rest, then took the plaque off the chain, and looked at all the pieces closely, separately. No use. Whatever they were, they were filthy.

The larger object seemed had a handle and the two rounded plates above it had something between them. He couldn't get it out, whatever it was. The hinges, if that's what they were, were clogged with dirt and a grinding noise made him give up trying to force them, in case they broke.

With a sigh, he found a rag and some fine sandpaper he kept for such 'found' things, and went to work on the casing. It didn't take long before he realized it was brass. After a while, he found he could extract the inner thing from the rest, by carefully separating the halves of the casing. The casing protected a miniature magnifying glass! He put it aside to examine later.

Now, it was much easier to clean the brass and he did this diligently for several minutes. Finally satisfied that it was as clean as he could make it, he carefully used a little water on a cloth to clean off the sandpaper residue from the case. Well, it would never be pretty, and had obviously had hard use, but at least it was now clean.

He transferred his attention to the magnifying glass and gazed through it at the first thing that came to hand, a very faded book cover. The quality of the glass was excellent! He could see the grain on the old leather, and some of the faint gilding in the lettering, even by candlelight. It was at least a 5X magnification, he guessed. Incredible for such a small thing.

He carefully sanded the handle and frame of the glass, dampening his rag to wipe it afterwards, careful not to get any grit on the glass. Then he put it back inside the casing. Another wonder – the magnifying glass now fairly snapped back into place!

Then he looked at the oval metal thing. There was something etched into it! He got up and squeezed out a little toothpaste from an old tube he kept for polishing. He carefully rubbed it onto the oval and was not surprised to find that it too was brass. He carefully wiped it clean and then wet it with his cloth to move any residue. Looking at it in the light, his jaw dropped.

It was engraved with a rose!

Finally, to complete the task, he used more toothpaste to clean the ball chain. Now everything shone in the candlelight.

Now that the grunge was gone, Vincent was very curious about the magnifying glass. There was nothing to identify the manufacturer, yet it had certainly not been hand-made. Who would need such a small magnifying glass? A jeweller, perhaps? But they used a loupe, usually of much stronger magnification. This almost seemed to be a toy.

The rose plaque was equally a puzzle. It had been meant to hold a chain, so perhaps it was only decorative.



Vincent grunted, closed the case over the magnifying glass, placed it carefully on his book, and went to bed. From a corner of the chamber, the ethereal figure materialized briefly, gazed at the large figure in the bed for a few moments, then shrugged and disappeared.

The next morning, Vincent slept in, as he often did after a night with Catherine. She could not, of course, and that always made him feel guilty. He decided to invite her below to rest and catch up on her sleep on the weekend. Even if she spent it sleeping, it would be no more than he deserved for his inconvenient attentions.

Over over tea and a muffin grabbed just before William closed the kitchen, his eye caught the little brass magnifying glass and he picked it up again.

He recalled his speculations of the night before. Who would have used it? It seemed too small for any adult, unless it was meant to hang around the neck – but for what? Could it have been for a child? The magnification was so strong that it would not have been useful for reading. Those kinds of aides were usually much larger – so they could reasonably read a line of type, and people did wear them around their necks in the old days.

Could it have been an accessory for a doll? It seemed pretty crude for that, and also too big, unless it was a very large doll. He didn't know anything about dolls, admittedly, but his gut instinct told him that anything of that sort would be more ornate, less ugly than this obviously serviceable piece.

The ring indicated that it had been meant to hang on something. He assumed the ball chain was a later addition, although he had no idea how old the thing was, or even when ball chains had begun to be made. Could it have been meant to hang on a key chain? Or even be one of ... what had they called that person, the woman who ran a large household?

Vincent wracked his brain, conjuring up the definition from the French ... and ... yes ... '*chatelaine*'. Could this have been one of a *chatelaine*'s collection of useful tools kept handy on a chain around her waist? It seemed inordinately functional to be just decorative.

Vincent then thought back on his boyhood adventures with Devin. Like most boys, he was sure, they had experimented with magnifying glasses, attempting to make something catch fire ... but of course, since he himself could not be out in sunlight, this experiment presented a challenge. Then Devin had found a place where the sun from the world above penetrated near the surface, under a street where a storm drain at midday in the height of summer let through enough sun to give them what they needed.

It had worked! They had happily set fire to a load of paper rubbish under the grill ... but then had no way to extinguish it when it flared into life. They'd had to run when they heard shouts from above.

Vincent chuckled at the memory. *Father had never found out about that particular episode. Fortunately.*

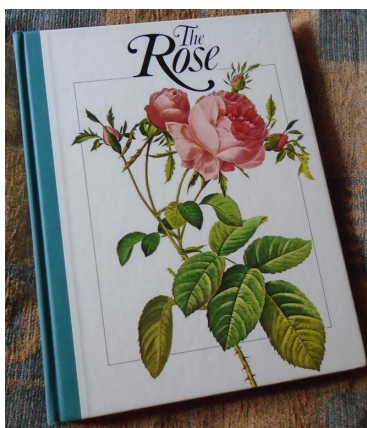
Yes, this was also the kind of 'thing' a boy might be given as a gift. But how had it come by the plaque? It would seem it had had another use, whatever it's initial purpose had been. No boy would add a rose engraving to a magnifying glass.

The little plaque made it special and Vincent decided to keep it for himself. Without a second thought, Vincent found a piece of leather thong and threaded it through the chain and then hung it around his neck. The cord kept the plaque from rattling too. He wanted to keep it on his person, just in case; just as he always carried a piece of chalk, a few matches wrapped in tinfoil, and a metal bar. Perhaps it would have no use for some time, but it weighed little and he liked the idea of having it handy. He had learned to trust such instincts. When it was needed, he would have it.

The rose engraving reminded him of something else. He knew almost nothing about plants, there being none below, so he went to Father's library to see if he could improve his knowledge of roses. Catherine's rose bush was now turning yellow with the cooler temperatures of the fall, but it still had a somewhat wilted flower or two. There had not yet been a frost.

He rummaged around the bookshelves, and soon realized, not without surprise, that there were no gardening books at all. However, he did find a largish hardcover called simply "*The Rose*". He leafed through it and then looked at the publishing date – 1979, the first American edition. He supposed it was where he had found it, in what passed for the general history section, because it was almost a textbook. And after all, very little had likely changed when it came to roses. Even he knew they had been around for hundreds of thousands of years.

The book appeared to be a history of the flower – and it had a lot of varied botanical information, as well as diagrams on pests and diseases, propagation and even how to lay out an ornamental garden. Even the illustrations were interesting.



Vincent nodded. Yes, this should be sufficient. He carried his find back to his chamber, looking forward to delving into the book. At the very least, he would be able to help Catherine identify any infestations on her rose bush. He was aware she knew next to nothing about plants – she had said so – but then, neither did he. No one had live plants below, naturally.

He sat on his bed, preferring to lean up against the wall and relax, and opened the book. A couple of hours later, he looked up in surprise when he heard the signal for lunch. He grunted and put the book down, promising himself to read more after lunch. It was fascinating!

He was therefore more than surprised to find Catherine sitting next to Father in the dining hall. He hadn't even felt her presence!

“Catherine?”

“Good afternoon, Vincent,” she replied with a smile. “I have the day off, so I decided to come down. It just seemed like too good an opportunity to waste. And if I’m not at home, Joe can’t reach me. I looked in and saw you engrossed in a book, so I came here. Father has been amusing me with tales of his boyhood.”

Father cleared his throat and admonished her mildly. “Catherine, it’s best you don’t let those stories get about. Might give the scamps here some ideas.”

“I think it is too late for that, Father,” Vincent told him with a chuckle.

Father nodded ruefully. He already knew this. The children passed on their misdeeds, and those of the adults, with great relish. He sighed deeply – but his eyes were twinkling.

Catherine laughed and Vincent joined her. There were knowing looks from several of the younger tunnel people, which Father studiously ignored. He concentrated on his soup.

They ate in companionable silence for the most part, William’s soup and sandwiches requiring everyone’s full attention. They were drinking their tea and munching on an oatmeal cookie when Catherine asked Vincent what his plans were.

“I have none,” Vincent replied. “I have no work to do this afternoon, I don’t believe, so I am at your disposal.”

“There’s an offer no sane woman would refuse,” she grinned at him.

Vincent pondered the question. *What could they do? Somehow, sitting at the waterfall, or even reading, had little attraction. He had spent the morning doing that. Of course, they could just wander the tunnels. Perhaps visit Narcissa or see what Elizabeth was working on.*

But those were not really attractive as a goal. The crystal caverns were too far away. Then he remembered the book he was reading.

“I would like a rose bush, Catherine,” he almost blurted out. *Of course – it was the next logical step. I must put what I have learned into practice.*

She looked up at him in surprise and smiled. She had seen the book he had been reading. The big flower on the cover was a dead giveaway.

“Of course you do. Do you think Mr Long might have one?”

Vincent suddenly looked very interested. He hadn’t considered their helper.

“It is possible, Catherine. Shall we pay him a visit?”

Catherine nodded. They rose to leave and stopped off in Vincent’s chamber long enough for him to grab his cloak and a lantern.

Their passage through the familiar tunnels was a sombre one, as they both recalled the last time they had come this way – and what it had lead to. Vincent tried not to sink into gloom, while Catherine, realizing this idea might not have been one of her best, took his hand and said nothing.

However, in due course they did reach the small tunnel entrance to Long’s Grocery and Vincent rang the little bell their friend had installed so they could announce themselves.

Long himself opened the door for them and greeted them with his usual big smile.

“Welcome! It has been a long time. Come in!”

Long, of course, had not been told about the Outsider gang incursion. It would have upset

him to have played even so minor a role in what occurred. So why should he not be glad to see them?

Vincent straightened his back when they were inside the low doorway and turned to smile at their friend, who immediately asked how he could help them.

"I would like a small rose bush plant, if you have one," Vincent told him.

Long creased his forehead and nodded. "I do have some, of course, but this time of year they are not pretty - no flowers, not many leaves. Waiting for next spring."

Vincent nodded. "It does not matter, my friend. I wish to try and cultivate it below, and learn about them. I can be patient."

Long asked them to wait, and went up the stairs to the back of his shop and was gone a little while. He returned holding two ornamental pots, both with somewhat straggly-looking, thorny twigs in them, sporting as predicted, a few dead leaves and a colourful hip or two.

"I do not know what colour these will be," Long apologized. "They are tea roses, I was told. Alive, but not pretty. They arrived late, so I could not sell them."

He asked them to wait a moment and went back up, returning with a bag of rose potting soil. Catherine took it from him.

"This will be perfect," Vincent told him. "I have a book about roses. I will learn everything I can."

"May they bring you both happiness and good luck. Confucius wrote about roses, you know," Long mused.

"*Cultivate the root; the leaves and branches will take care of themselves*," he quoted.

Vincent patted Long on the shoulder and accepted the two plants gratefully with thanks. They chatted for a short while about Long's family and the news from the tunnels, but Long was obviously anxious to return to his duties.

"Perhaps you will visit us in the spring to see these bloom," Vincent said to Long at last, as they said their good-byes.

"I will try to do so," the grocer promised.

Catherine preceded Vincent back into the tunnels, carrying the soil, and waited while he settled the plants in a sling of his cloak to make them easier to carry on the return trip.

Behind them, seen by neither, an ethereal figure danced a little jig and waved his Mets cap.

"Where will you put them?" Catherine asked, as they made their way back.

Vincent had only one option, as far as he could see. He told her and Catherine smiled.

"Perfect," she remarked. *And appropriate*, she mused, it being one of the places they sat together, where their worlds met, as on her balcony.

Vincent stopped long enough in his chamber to pick up a pair of scissors, then they walked to the spot where the roses would sit. How ironic that he had discounted this place earlier! Now it had a purpose beyond the usual. They placed the two pots on an elevated stone ledge, in a place where what light there was from the falls would benefit them. There was, after all, no other place where natural light occurred below, at least conveniently. Vincent hoped it would be enough. At least there would be no frost here, although it wasn't warm either. He had read that roses were quite hardy, as befit something that had been around for eons. They could water them easily here too.

Vincent took the scissors and carefully cut off the rose hips and put them aside. Then he pruned the branches as the book had recommended, quite short. They both looked very stark now, just short thorny twigs, but they had potential. The pots, though, would not allow much growth.

"Do you think we should re-pot now?" he asked Catherine.

She nodded. "I believe it's best done when they're dormant. Is there a pot you can use? There's plenty of soil here for a good-sized one."

"Come," Vincent requested, and he led her to one of the storage rooms, grabbing another lantern on the way.

Catherine used the other lantern and they both started a search. There was enough light to see there were some large urns, but they were entirely unsuitable for plants.

They rummaged around, looking behind and under the items in the cluttered chamber, until they discovered something lying on it's side under a piece of carpet they'd had to shift together. They looked at each other and grinned.

"Oh lord," Catherine exclaimed. "It lacks ... finesse ... but it's perfect."



Vincent nodded. It perhaps needed some paint, but on the other hand, why bother? He picked it up, found it gratifyingly heavy and sturdy, and they returned to the waterfall ledge.

Remembering the instructions in the book, Vincent gathered a few small stones from the river below to add drainage to the bottom of the pot, then carefully put in some soil. Between them, they managed to get both plants into the pot without drawing too much blood from the thorns. Then Vincent buried the rose hips as well. The plants now looked professionally potted. There was plenty of room for growth, and these were probably a small variety.

Then Catherine swore, sucked a finger and frowned.

"I think I may have a thorn in my finger," she remarked squinting at it. "I can feel it, but I can't see it."

"*She who dares not grasp the thorn, should never crave the rose.*" Vincent deliberately misquoted. Catherine frowned at him, but smiled as he took her hand to look at it.

The light was not ideal for examination. He led her closer to the lantern, with the light from the

waterfall helping to prevent deep shadows. Then he remembered his latest find, and fished it out from around his neck. Catherine looked at him amazed.

"Is there anything you don't have handy?"

Vincent chuckled. "I found this just two days ago, Catherine. I had no such object in my possession before then."

He slid out the magnifying glass and looked at her finger, quickly spotting the offending thorn, a very tiny one. He used his thumb and forefinger to squeeze it out, then licked the wound. Catherine had remained silent, but gasped when he did this. She looked up at him, her eyes smouldering. He recognized that look from a similar incident on her balcony.

"Do you have any idea how ...?" She stopped when Vincent gave her a look that was at least the equivalent of her own.

"Yes, Catherine, but it was important to cleanse it. Saliva is the oldest cleanser, after all. I do not want your finger to get infected. Thorns are dangerous. Now we need to get some water."

They did that by filling the empty pots where the nearby clear streamlet it ran out of the rock. Vincent insisted Catherine wash her hands in the cascade too. Then they watered the roses and sat down silently to look at the falls.

Catherine sighed. "It will be some time before we know how your roses will do, Vincent."

"Yes, but all the more welcome because of that wait, Catherine."

He put his arm around her and drew her to him. She leaned her head against his shoulder and mumbled something even his sharp ears did not catch.

"What did you say, Catherine?"

"Sorry, I hadn't meant to say that aloud. I was just wishing our lives were as simple as that of a rose, that everything happened in time, that patience was all that was required of us."

Vincent was silent for long moments. He could not fail to know what she referred to, but did not have a clear idea what he could do about it. Well, that was incorrect too, he berated himself. Of course, he knew what he could do about it. He just hadn't.

On impulse, he bent down, pushed her away just a little and then gave her a kiss full on her lips, before he could change his mind. Catherine grabbed his arms and held him to her. The kiss went on ... and on ... until they had to break it to take deep breaths.

Catherine said nothing, merely sighed happily, and Vincent was somewhat proud that he had elicited the response he could feel from her through the bond.

"May I see that device you used to find the thorn," she asked at last, curiosity getting the better of her, and needing to process what had just happened without embarrassing Vincent.

Vincent pulled it out again and showed it to her. She fingered it with interest and saw the little plaque. She smiled up at him.

"What a lovely little thing," she commented. "And I think it may be useful for your roses again, Vincent."

Vincent considered that. Of course! He could use it to examine his roses for pests and diseases ... as well as extract thorns from where they should not be. It seemed almost as if it had been ordained for him to find it, just before the book on roses, and the acquisition of the two plants, their soil, and even the pot they had used to transplant them. It seemed like rather a lot of coincidences, now he thought about it. His brow knitted a little.



"I think it might," he replied, finally, not quite sure where his train of thought was going, but sure there was something he had neglected to take into account.

Then suddenly he stiffened, as he felt someone nearby. Catherine moved back a little and then looked around.

"What is it, Vincent?"

"We have company, Catherine," he replied, craning his neck to look around.

"I don't see anyone," she replied.

"No, but I know who it is. There's only one person who can make my neck hair stand up."

Catherine chuckled. "Kristopher? Is he here?"

"I believe he is close by Catherine. It would explain a great deal."

"Explain what?" Catherine asked, now very puzzled.

"How roses seem to have entered my life in number, Catherine. He did put that rose at the bottom of our portrait. I wondered about that. Now perhaps he is moving his program forward, first having me find the magnifying glass, and then pointing me at both a book on roses and two rose bushes."

"Program? Surely, he wasn't responsible for the rose bushes, Vincent. That was just luck."

"I think it's fair to say he takes an inordinate interest in us, Catherine. I believe he's taken on the role of ... matchmaker."

"Oh, is that all? We don't need help, Kristopher!" she suddenly yelled into the air.

There was laughter from behind them and they both stood up and looked in that direction. It being still daylight, they could not see their ghostly friend well, but there was a slight mistiness near the entry to the scenic spot.

"And we do not like to be ... spied upon," Vincent added loudly.

The laughter this time was maniacal. Then suddenly it stopped abruptly.

"He's gone," Vincent informed Catherine.

"He does present a problem," she remarked. "How do you keep out a ghost?"

"I think we need to make it plain he is not needed anymore ... at least not the way he thinks."

"Oh?" Catherine asked, looking up at him.

"Yes. It is my fault he thinks we are not moving forward fast enough. Would you care to return to my chamber, my Rose?"

"To look at your etchings, perhaps?" she enquired mischievously.

Vincent looked a bit taken aback, and somewhat puzzled, and she was immediately sorry.

"A poor joke, Vincent – one used often above. I apologize for making light of your invitation. I was just a little surprised."

Vincent sighed. "I know that Catherine, but I didn't make myself clear. I want us to move our relationship forward ... but in a more comfortable spot. If you are willing."

"Vincent, do you even have to ask? Let's go."

When they got back to his chamber, Vincent pulled the rug across the door and removed his cloak, vest and boots. Catherine removed her jacket and boots and they both sat on his bed.

"Now I think we need to practice ...," Vincent mumbled, then stopped, uncertain what to suggest.

"And we don't need your help, Kristopher," Catherine declared. There was a sudden sensation of chill they both felt, and then it was gone.

"I think he got the message," Vincent commented.

"Yes. And I know just where I want to start practicing."

She pulled his head down and planted a kiss on his mouth, so strongly that they both fell back onto the bed. From there, they did indeed move forward, with care, just as Vincent had once declared.

"Roses," Vincent said at last, stroking Catherine's hip as they were both relaxing. "I love them in all their forms."

*'It is the time you have spent on your rose that makes her so important,'* he thought, remembering Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

His Rose was everything to him. Their irrepressible ghost would have to find another project. Perhaps they could get him interested in Halloween. The children would probably enjoy seeing what a genuine, and already very friendly, ghost could do.

END