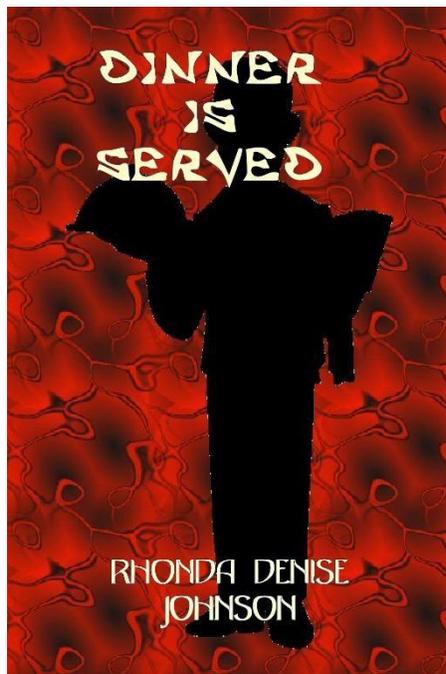


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Dinner is Served

A Short Story

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Dinner is Served

Nothing must go wrong tonight. Albert checked the alignment of the napkin beside his plate and the one beside her plate—again. They were a centimeter off—again. If he could tell, she'd notice as well. He straightened the napkins—again.

He glanced at his watch. Ten minutes. In ten minutes the only woman who'd answered his discreet announcement would arrive. His announcement was straightforward enough. Handsome, well-bred bachelor of comfortable means seeks compatible lady for possible marriage. He'd had it copyedited and proofread by five professionals before sending it. They'd all assured him that it was immaculate and he should expect a flood of replies. But this woman was his only prospect for meeting the requirements of his uncle's last will and testament before his entire estate went forfeit. He could allow nothing, absolutely nothing, to go wrong.

To his dismay, light from the zirconium chandelier twinkled in his wine glass, betraying a most horrid clash between the color of the napkins and that of the wine. Terrible feng shui. "Don, do we have any white napkins? These are off-white. They'll never do."

Don appeared from the kitchen. His silent footsteps might have been those of a ghost gliding across the floor. Albert had to turn to see that his uncle's servant had answered his call.

No, sir. The white napkins were used at the funeral. You had any remaining thrown out."

Albert drew in a breath. "Goodness gracious. Well, I suppose she'll just have to not notice. As long as nothing else goes wrong."

Just as he was about to reach down to straighten the napkin, the doorbell chimed. His hand slipped, leaving a visible print of sweat on a wine glass—her wine glass. The napkins were hopelessly misaligned. He looked at his watch again and then at Don. Had he miscalculated the time? That couldn't be her. Only women of the highest pedigree could have seen his announcement. Why would any lady of high breeding be so obnoxious?

"Don, see who is at the door. Make sure it is . . . what is her name?" "Tiffany, sir."

"Yes, make sure it's Tiffany. I'll have no other callers at this hour."

When Don left, Albert removed a handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped the smudge off the wine glass. He realigned the napkins and the wine glasses.

Don reentered and Albert's stomach flipped over. On Don's arm rested the hand of the ghastliest woman Albert had ever seen. Long, thin strands of what Albert supposed was hair hung from her scalp. Two shapeless ash grey eyes flanked a nose that managed to be hooked and bulbous at the same time.

"Sir, may I present Tiffany of Wizaland."

From somewhere beneath her layered rags one of the hag's hands reached out to shake Albert's. "A pleasure to meet you."

She smiled and Albert reached back to steady his nerves with a sip of wine. More than a sip. He drank half the glass before he was able to face this woman and shake her hand. "Um, do have a seat."

There was something he was supposed to do as a gentle man. Oh, yes, hold her chair for her as she sat. Maybe Don would do it. He's the butler. No, it was *his* uncle and *his* inheritance. No matter the cost, he had less than two weeks to marry someone. To tell the truth, he had

nothing but the promise of an inheritance to present to any woman. And this Tiffany was his only prospect. He could have the ceremony with the certificates, have the estate transferred to his name, and divorce the hag before the marriage was consummated. As he pulled the chair out and she sat, he glanced down at the flakes, no scales of dandruff on Tiffany's head. Long before it was —gulp—consummated.

When Albert took his seat across from Tiffany, Don bowed and turned to leave, but Tiffany stopped him.

“Would you happen to have any roast frog?”

The butler paused and pivoted on his heels. “I beg your pardon, madam?”

“Roast frog. It's so succulent and I was hoping to have some tonight.” She looked at Albert as she said this.

Albert flinched, but Don's training made him the epitome of graciousness

“I do apologize, madam, but regrettably that is not one of our delicacies.”

“Then I must introduce this dish to your cuisine.” Albert gulped the rest of his wine.

“Shall I refresh your glass, sir?”

“Yes, Don, please. I suspect I'll need much more before the night's over.”

Tiffany laughed. Actually, she cackled. “But my dear, frogs and wine don't mix well.”

“I don't think I shall be having any frog tonight.”

“I didn't say *you* were having any.” Don took his leave.

Tiffany stood, “I think I'd like to dance.”

“How shall we dance without music?”

“Oh, but there is music, listen.”

A soft waltz echoed through the chamber. The hem of her skirts rose and fell in time with the music, with no wind to account for their movement. With more strength than a lady of her size should have, she hauled him from his chair and ushered him to the middle of the floor. Remembering that he had to convince this hag to marry him before he could divorce her, he bit his lip and took the first awkward steps of a waltz.

Just when he thought he would faint from horror, she grabbed his head and pulled him closer still. “Kiss me.”

A humungous wart on her lower lip reminded him of the fairytale where the beautiful princess kisses a frog to turn him back into a handsome prince. Well, he knew that though handsome he might be, he was no prince, and doubted that even the most passionate kiss would turn this hag into the beautiful princess she'd never been. At that time he did faint.

“Dinner is served.” Don entered from the kitchen, bearing platters of delicious smelling dishes. He stopped, looking from Tiffany to the empty chair where Albert had been. “Has sir stepped out?”

“I'm afraid so.”

“Then will you have dinner now, or wait for his return?”

He started to lower the platter, but noticed that Tiffany already had something on her plate.

She smiled. "Oh, that won't be necessary." She waved the platters away. "Looks like I'll be having roast frog tonight after all."

With that, she turned back to her plate and fell to.

###

The end

I hope you enjoyed reading "Dinner is Served."