

## Mr Beccles' Christmas Dinner

Christmas, thought Frances Doughty, was a time for memories and reflection. Only a year ago she had shared a meagre dinner in the small parlour above the chemists shop on Westbourne Grove with her father, who did nothing but grumble about the expense, and his assistant, Mr Munson, whom she preferred not to think about. As Christmas 1880 approached, she was shocked to realise how much had changed. Her father was no more, she was establishing a reputation as a private detective in Bayswater, and Sarah, her trusted companion, was cooking up a nice piece of beef in the basement kitchen of their new apartments, while a pudding that would probably last them a month was boiling in a pan.

She had not imagined that a client would approach her on Christmas Day, but to her surprise, a hesitant knock at the door announced the arrival of Mr Beccles, an elderly watchmaker with a shop on the Grove. He was wringing his hands in despair, and she quickly invited him in.

'I am sorry to trouble you at this time, but I am afraid it is too distressing!' exclaimed Mr Beccles. 'I had just purchased a nice pie for my Christmas repast, and some bottled fruit, but just as I went to prepare the meal, I found that it had been stolen. I suppose I don't mind having to make do with bread and cheese, but I am quite distraught at what has happened!'

Frances was sympathetic. Mr Beccles, she knew, had very few customers nowadays, and mainly subsisted on rents from the rooms he let above his shop. His son and his family who usually invited him for Christmas dinner had gone to Australia only a few months before, so it was all the more upsetting that his solitary feast had been taken. 'Do you suspect anyone?' she asked. 'Have you seen any suspicious persons about?'

'No, and my tenants are all trustworthy, I am sure,' he said. 'Could I trouble you to take a look?'

There was still an hour before her dinner would be ready and so Frances left the arrangements in Sarah's capable hands and went to inspect Mr Beccles' gloomy little parlour. She could see no sign that anyone had forced an entry into the premises, and more surprisingly, there were several clocks on the mantelpiece, which even to her inexperienced eye were of some value. Why had the thief chosen to steal a dinner, and leave items that might have been pawned for a substantial sum?

Mr Beccles looked so forlorn that Frances, while she considered the problem, suggested that he join herself and Sarah for Christmas dinner, as there was more than enough to feed them all. His face brightened at once, and he accepted the invitation, bringing as a gift a small box of sweetmeats.

Mr Beccles proved to be a fascinating guest, since he had lived in Bayswater for many years, long before the Grove had become a fashionable shopping promenade, and he was a fount of wonderful stories about events and persons in

its past. When dinner was over, he said that he had enjoyed himself so much that he begged Frances not to trouble herself over the matter of his missing pie and fruit.

'I am glad that we were able to cheer him,' said Frances, as she and Sarah cleared the dishes. 'He seems to be quite unworried about the theft, now.'

'Oh, as to that,' said Sarah, 'I'm not sure there ever was a theft. I saw him in Whiteleys the other day, looking at the pies, and he thought them too big for one person and decided not to buy one. Poor man, I expect he was just lonely.'

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