

# The Case of The Shrinking Shopkeeper

## I

"I'm at my wit's end, Miss Trent."

"It *is* an unusual predicament you've found yourself in, Mr Foggity. When did you first notice something was amiss?"

"At the beginning of last week," he frowned. "No, one moment," he counted on his fingers. "Yes, it was the Tuesday before last." Mr Emmanuel Foggity was in his mid-fifties, but his youthful complexion and brilliant, chestnut-brown hair veiled this fact. Neat brows and strong cheekbones framed his lively, light-blue eyes. Pale lips, topped by a wax-coated moustache, were nibbled upon as he watched Miss Rebecca Trent write her notes.

The Bow Street Society clerk wore a light-weight jacket over a high-necked, plain-white shirt. A tie, secured into a large Eaton knot, rested between the broad lapels of the former. Both tie and jacket were forest-green to compliment the season. Though already slim, Rebecca's figure was nevertheless exaggerated by the synching of her clothes and the contours of her tight, corset undergarment. Her own brown hair had been tied into a neat French braid and hung between the excess fabrics of her jacket's mutton-chop sleeves. Mr Foggity's attire, on the other hand, was far less elaborate—a light-grey suit with matching waistcoat and tie over a pristine, white shirt. The collar of the last was broad and so heavily starched, his Adam's apple caught upon it each time he swallowed.

The sounds of birdsong and passing carriages drifted upon a light breeze through the half-raised sash window of the Society's parlour. Miss Trent's notebook, knees, and feet were bathed in golden sunlight as she wrote. Though a handful of furniture had recently been added—a sofa by the hearth, a dresser, and armchairs in which the two sat—the room remained cavernous.

"I've never been a tall man," Mr Foggity went on, "but to shrink as quickly as I have isn't natural, is it?" He simultaneously lifted his hands and shoulders for a moment. "Yet, my doctor has sworn to me on his reputation as a man of medicine that I'm *not* shrinking." Holding his knees, he leant forward. "Am I mad, Miss Trent?"

"I certainly believe you're convinced something is happening to you, Mr Foggity." She rested her hand upon the notebook and met his gaze. "Whether it's madness or not is something that remains to be seen by our members."

"Does this mean you'll accept my case?"

"It does." She rose. "If you would wait here, I'll telephone some members and ask that they come here to speak with you as soon as possible."

"*Thank you*, Miss Trent. Of course!" The clouds shifted and his face was at once lit up by sunlight.

## The Case of The Winchester Wife

### I

"It's preposterous, expecting a man to unburden himself to a woman," Bennett Winchester slurred as the mantel clock chimed. Though it was midmorning the Bow Street Society's parlour had neither daylight nor gaslight to soften the retired captain's pointed profile. Bloodshot, brown eyes looked beyond the wall as he approached, turned, and retraced his route, each thump of his boot succeeded by the heavy thud of his peg-leg.

Miss Trent's gaze tracked him during each pass of her armchair yet she remained seated. "Captain Winchester," she began, "you weren't obligated to come here and I wasn't obligated to receive you, yet here we are. Putting aside my disinclination to beg your pardon for my gender, I instead ask you to observe your surroundings. You and I are the only ones here. Therefore, your choice is clear—either swallow your masculine pride and tell me why you're here, or leave and put your trust in those at Bow Street Police Station."

"Don't speak such impertinence to *me*!" Captain Winchester barked, drawing Miss Trent to her feet.

She countered, "I shall speak whatever I want, Captain, when you are in *my* domain." His lips repeatedly furled and unfurled against gritted teeth while calloused hands, which had previously rested within his greatcoat's deep pockets, balled at his sides. Starting at his neck, his already pink face steadily flushed as if port had spilt under his skin.

He snarled, "How *daare* you, you uncouth *wretch*."

"Continue as you are, Captain Winchester, and *I* will be calling upon the officers at Bow Street," Miss Trent promised despite his stale-rum-drenched breath turning her stomach. Whether it was the tone of her voice, her fixed gaze, the words themselves, or a combination of all three which cooled Bennett Winchester's rage was unclear. Regardless the result was the same. After some aggressive chewing of his anger, the captain plonked himself in the vacant armchair. The clerk wasn't naïve enough to think it ended, however. Instead, she enabled additional calming time by fetching tea from the kitchen. Coffee would've been more sobering for him but, alas, she suspected such a blatant assumption wouldn't have been welcomed by his volatile temper.

In due course Captain Winchester's pallid complexion had returned and his hands had come to rest upon his thighs. She poured the amber liquid in silence and he accepted the cup without remark. "I must beg your pardon for my brutishness, Miss Trent," he muttered against the steam rising from his cup. Taking a second sip, he balanced it on its saucer and put both down while continuing, "I would say it was the worry for my wife which drove my temper but that would be a plain dishonesty." Rebecca held her tongue as the truth of his words hung between them like a lead weight. "I'm not aggrieved by your silence, Miss Trent." He withdrew against the armchair's back corner and the elongated shadows cast by its wings seemed to age him beyond his forty years.

"I came to London to work," his sombre voice began from the depths. "I was offered the position of ship's captain on a trading vessel bound for Scotland. The company had heard of my reputation for being a loyal employee who wouldn't permit the allure of illicit profit to compromise his integrity." The fingers of Winchester's right hand strummed his knee, mere inches above his wooden appendage. "And they weren't perturbed by my affliction when I informed them of it in my letters." He paused to allow the expression of disgust or sympathy that usually followed such a statement. Yet all he received was stoicism masked by a curt nod and a sip of tea.

His Adam's apple constricted and his jaw began to clench. "*This morning, then,*" he resumed as his fingers curled. "My wife, Daphne, and I travelled by railway from Liverpool

to London's King's Cross. The company had arranged for us to be *met*, by private carriage, at the railway station to take Daphne to our new residence and *me* to the company's offices. As expected, when the two of us left the station, we were met by their driver. He, alongside myself and the station's porter, loaded our few trunks and boxes onto the carriage's roof. My wife, in the meantime, waited at the station door. The bustling crowd, the dirt in the air, and the traffic moving every which way compelled her to alight the carriage soon after." Captain Winchester's voice had quickened the more he'd realised how little emotion Miss Trent expressed. "There were carriages on three sides, boxing ours in. Daphne wanted to leave."

"Did she tell you that?"

"No, of *course* not!" he snapped. "*She* never made such a *spectacle* in public. Being her husband, I *knew* she was getting agitated." He made a flourish with his hand, "She was looking behind our carriage and in front. In the end, I told her to get in and close the curtains."

"And did she?"

"Are you *trying* my patience on *purpose*—?" He abruptly interrupted himself and stood. Though he towered over her, Miss Trent felt no fear. She didn't hide this fact, either.

Standing to look him in the eye, she said, "Your wife climbed into the carriage and closed its curtains. What then?"

"She *disappeared*," Winchester growled.

At once, Miss Trent asked, "She left the carriage?"

"No, she *disappeared*. She *closed* the door, *drew* the curtains, and was inside, *alone*, for mere *seconds*, before I *opened* the door and found the carriage *empty*!"

## The Case of The Perilous Pet

### I

Smoke billowed from a pipe's bowl as pale lips repeatedly puckered and relaxed around its bit. Having imbibed enough to satisfy his craving, the pipe's owner lowered and held it in his wrinkled, emaciated hand upon his lean knee. A clattering of china attracted his pale-green eyes to a tea tray placed onto a low table before him. The bearer, a young woman of twenty-eight years, took a seat on a tête-à-tête sofa to his armchair's left, facing a cold hearth.

Both pieces of furniture were upholstered in a navy-blue fabric, embroidered with light-blue leaves to complement the primary colour of the bronze gilt paper adorning the parlour's walls. The aforementioned table matched the fireplace's ornately carved surround in that it, too, was made from oak. Its Queen Anne feet stood on a square rug laid over exposed—yet polished—floorboards. The rug's light blue-and-cream leaves, set against a dark-blue background, perfectly complemented its surrounds.

Beneath a moustache of brilliant white, the pipe owner's tongue snaked across his lips as he laid eyes upon the Victoria sponge cake in the tray's centre.

"How do you take your tea, Mr Treaves?" his hostess enquired.

"Cream with one, please," he replied, lifting his gaze to meet hers. "Did... you bake the cake, Miss Trent?"

"Yes, would you like some?" she offered.

Mr Treaves hummed, nodding as he put down his pipe in readiness. Miss Rebecca Trent, after completing the preparation of his tea, set it down on his side of the table. She next reached for the cake slice and cut into the light sponge.

"So, how may the Bow Street Society be of assistance?" she enquired once he'd accepted the plated-up cake with his free hand. Emaciated hands and white facial hair aside, his sixty-odd years could be perceived in his rounded shoulders and dark blotches littering his skin. A skin so thin the Society's clerk could follow the contours of his cheekbones and knuckles without scrutiny.

His preferred choice of attire, a thigh-length coat with skirt—more commonly known as a frock coat—over a black suit with matching waistcoat, hinted at a more conservative world view. The only signs of his current financial health were the chain of a gold pocket watch draped across one half of his waistcoat and some gold cufflinks in his shirt's sleeves. He'd arrived with an ebony walking cane, topped with a silver ball handle, which he'd left in the hall alongside his ankle-length, black fur coat, top hat, and scarf. These latter two accompaniments had evidenced, in Miss Trent's mind, a stronger vulnerability to the cold. Especially since the day hadn't only contained plentiful sunshine but also high humidity.

She had chosen a much lighter material in lieu of this fact. Her bustle dress was therefore pale-yellow cotton with white lace on its three-quarter-length sleeves and high, square collar. To further lessen the chances of overheating, she'd pinned up her chestnut-brown hair to expose her neck. Her fair complexion also lacked its usual blusher for it would've likely run the moment she'd started sweating.

"For over thirty years, I've been retained by Sir Thomas Russell as his solicitor," Treaves began, when he'd savoured a morsel of cake. "Delicious," he added with a smile. Switching the cake for his tea, he continued, "We'd also become good friends during that time." He took a quiet slurp and replaced the cup upon its saucer. "As you can imagine, then, it came as quite the shock to receive news of his sudden passing."

Miss Trent's hand, lifting her own teacup, halted. Meeting his gaze with a loft of her brow, she replied, "Indeed."

"It was a month ago now," Treaves went on.

The clerk, having taken her intended sip, put down her drink to commence taking short-hand notes of the discussion. Waiting a moment, Mr Treaves said, "Mr Appleby, Sir Russell's manservant, found him on the floor at the foot of the stairs. He'd heard a cry and the sound of something heavy tumbling down them. It took only a few moments to reach him but, by the time Mr Appleby had, Sir Russell was dead—his neck broken."

"Was a doctor called?"

"Yes. He confirmed the cause of death. He explained a younger man may have survived the fall, but Sir Russell's frail bones had sealed his fate. Eighty years old, he was. Much older than I or even Mr Appleby." Mr Treaves frowned. "Doctor said he wouldn't have felt a thing—even after his neck had snapped. A small mercy." Another morsel of cake, clasped between thumb and forefinger, was deposited into his mouth. Smacking his lips together as he sucked—not chewed—the sponge, he added, "One reads about heads still showing life after being cut from the body. Speaking, blushing, and the like."

"There was no question it was an accident?" Miss Trent enquired to sharpen his focus.

Swallowing, Mr Treaves shook his head and had another slurp of tea. "None at all. Not in my mind, Mr Appleby's, the doctor's, or even the coroner's. Sir Russell's son, Stephen, was a different matter entirely, however." The solicitor gathered up the remaining crumbs and, still gripping them, slipped both thumb and forefinger into his mouth to their knuckles.

"He has accused Sir Russell's Staffordshire bull terrier of murder," Mr Treaves added, putting the plate down.

"Pardon?" she enquired, halting, this time in her writing, to stare at him.

"Stephen's argument rests on the well-known fact Claude followed Sir Russell everywhere. The younger Russell insists the dog must have crossed his father's path while he was descending the stairs—thus causing Sir Russell to catch his foot and tumble down the stairs to his death."

"Did Stephen see his father fall?"

"No, no one did. Master Russell hasn't resided in his father's home for years and Mr Appleby was in another part of the house altogether. There's a cook and butler, of course, but they were tending to their duties elsewhere."

"Why is Master Russell convinced it was Claude, then, if the coroner has already ruled Sir Russell's death an accident?"

"Because, Miss Trent, he is determined to prove Claude guilty to disinherit him," Mr Treaves stated. The clerk must have looked the very picture of confusion for he at once continued, "Other than a small legacy for Mr Appleby and a sum to settle my fee as executor, Sir Russell's will bequeathed the entirety of his estate to his dog."

"Pardon?" Miss Trent's eyes widened. "But surely a *dog* can't legally inherit?"

"It can when the terms of the will stipulate the monies are to be used to ensure the dog's wellbeing and comfort, as Sir Russell's did." Mr Treaves drank his last drop of tea and dabbed at the corners of his mouth with his handkerchief. "I knew of the will's contents, of course, because I'd advised Sir Russell on its legality. His son didn't, however. When the will was read therefore, he erupted into a rage and vowed to see to the dog's destruction. That is when he made his ridiculous allegation."

"Do you have any idea why Sir Russell would disinherit his son?"

"Stephen has a penchant for the gambling tables and assembly rooms. His father believed, as do I, the family fortune would be squandered within a matter of months—if not weeks—should Stephen be given access to it."

“Would he be? If Claude’s guilt was proven and he was destroyed?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Mr Treaves replied. “Currently, it’s Stephen’s word against Mr Appleby’s, but I wouldn’t think it beneath Stephen to fabricate evidence to serve his purpose. To answer your earlier question about how the Bow Street Society may assist me, Miss Trent, I need it to conduct an independent investigation into Sir Russell’s death and prove, once and for all, the truth of the matter. Should evidence be found to substantiate Stephen’s allegation, I would, as the will’s executor, grant Master Russell access to his father’s estate. If, on the other hand, Claude is proven innocent, I shall have incontestable grounds on which to carry out Sir Russell’s final wishes.”

“I understand,” Rebecca replied in a sombre tone. “The Society accepts your commission, Mr Treaves. If you could give me the address of Sir Russell’s residence, I will make arrangements for two of our members to meet you there today.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you, Miss Trent.” Treaves smiled. “May I have another slice of cake?”

# The Case of The Eerie Encounter

## I

### HORROR AT BAKER STREET STATION

The wondrous marvel of the underground railway paid witness to a scene of utter horror last eve when a man purportedly fell beneath a train.

Mister Frank Denman, as he has now been identified, was seen falling onto the tracks by his fellow travellers at four p.m. yesterday. Seconds later, the train arriving at Baker Street station passed over him, despite the driver's valiant efforts to avoid catastrophe.

By fate's hand, Doctor Percival Weeks—whose long-standing association with the Metropolitan Police at Scotland Yard has been well documented by this newspaper—was present. Tragically, the medical assistance administered by Doctor Weeks in the immediate aftermath was unable to stem the poor man's blood flow. Mister Denman passed away shortly thereafter.

"He had drunk whiskey at the bar," a witness—who preferred to remain nameless here—told your correspondent. The spoken 'he' being a reference to Mister Denman. "Then he stood," my witness continued, "Walked to the platform's edge, waited 'til the train come, and just *went!*" A gentleman, who'd overheard my witness's exclamation, offered his own conjecture upon the matter.

He said, "He jumped. There's nothing for a man to trip on, and no one was near him."

Rapid knocking stirred Miss Trent from her reading. Discarding Tuesday morning's edition of the *Gaslight Gazette*, she went to investigate. As she passed, the hall's grandfather clock chimed eight thirty—an early caller indeed! With this in mind, she slid back the heavy bolts, turned a key, and opened the Bow Street Society's front door.

"Good morning, Miss Trent," a narrow-faced woman stated the moment her dark-brown eyes met Rebecca's hazel. A dry, coarse hand extended toward the clerk, holding a calling card. "I'm Mrs Madeleine Snelling. I hope you shall forgive my unexpected visit when you hear what I have to say." A short pause followed. "May I come in?"

"Of course." Rebecca stepped aside. Having taken, and read, the card while Mrs Snelling introduced herself, the clerk slipped it into her pocket. Ending at her waist, the thick jacket matched Rebecca's burgundy bustle skirts in colour. Beneath these, she wore dense, woollen, black stockings. Her tight corset, beneath the dual layers of jacket and blouse, provided additional protection against the chilled air. It also served to enhance the natural, inward curve of her waist. Chestnut-brown, corkscrew ringlets lay between her shoulders, while her remaining hair was curled, and pinned, into a tight bun upon her crown.

Closing the front door and sliding its bolts back into place, she led her visitor to the parlour. Mrs Snelling halted the moment she entered the room, however. Staring at the newspaper lying upon the overstuffed, tête-à-tête sofa, she enquired, 'You have read of yesterday's ghastly event at Baker Street station?'

"Yes," Rebecca replied. Stepping around her, she took the newspaper from the sofa and placed it behind the clock on the mantel piece.

The sofa's high back had a triple balloon shape to it, while its navy-blue fabric matched an armchair facing the door. The sofa looked to the hearth on the parlour's left side.

Both pieces had heavy, worsted fringes, bullions hanging from their arms, and embroidered light-blue leaves.

A low, oak table with curved legs and feet resembling paws—known as Queen Anne feet—stood before the sofa. It was placed upon a rug whose colour, fringing, and embroidered design matched those of the seating. In the back, right corner of the parlour, a bookcase stood against the light blue and bronze gilt wallpaper.

The previously mentioned fireplace had an oak surround featuring hand-carved floral embellishments down each side and a flat mantel shelf on top. Lumps of coal, orange with heat, sat in a pile within its iron hearth. An oil painting, depicting a bleak and wild Hampstead Heath, hung upon the chimney breast.

Once she and Mrs Snelling had settled upon the sofa and armchair respectively, Rebecca enquired, “Did you know Mr Denman?”

“No,” Mrs Snelling snapped, though her tone was more firm than angry. Due to her lips barely moving, her voice had also sounded nasal. Sitting erect upon the armchair’s edge, her hands clasped in her lap and her gaze fixed upon the clerk, she continued. “My *son*, Jerome—who has been but eighteen years on this earth—is insistent he has met Mr Denman, however.”

“Which you consider to be ill fortune...?” Rebecca hazarded.

“I *do*. My son has—” Mrs Snelling cut herself off and pursed her lips. After a moment, she said, “...He has no work to speak of—though it’s not for want of trying.” With a satisfied expression, she glanced at her hands and gave a curt nod. “Yesterday, when poor Mr Denman was breathing his last at Baker Street station, my son claims to have spoken with him.”

“I don’t understand—”

“I’m being unclear,” Mrs Snelling interrupted. “I don’t mean to be, I assure you. The whole thing is simply *preposterous*!”

“Please, take your time,” Rebecca smiled. “I have plenty of it.”

“Thank you, Miss Trent,” Mrs Snelling’s taut lips morphed into a smile. A swift recollection of her surroundings dispersed it, however. “My son was at home at four o’clock yesterday afternoon. This morning, upon reading of Mr Denman’s ghastly accident in the newspaper, my son told me he had spoken to him at four o’clock precisely. Jerome said he’d introduced himself as Mister Frank Denman and stated he was looking for a friend—Mister Archibald. Naturally, my son informed him no one of that name dwelt at our address. Mr Denman had next enquired how long we’d resided in the house. My son informed him of the answer—three years. Mr Denman then obtained directions to Baker Street station and left.”

“How could your son be so certain it was the same Mister Denman?”

“He cannot, but, nonetheless, he *insists* it to be the one and the same man. *Please*, Miss Trent. I’m worried about Jerome. Could the Society convince him of his foolishness?”

Rebecca couldn’t help but frown at the prospect of convincing an eighteen-year-old boy of anything. Yet, she was, admittedly, intrigued by the story. It also fulfilled the Society’s criteria for case acceptance. She therefore smiled and replied, “Of course, Mrs Snelling. I’ll arrange for two of our members to visit upon you and your son this afternoon. If you would be so kind as to give me your address?”

Mrs Snelling’s body became rigid and she stared at the clerk a moment. “Yes,” she said, with a rapid blinking of her eyes and slight shake of her head. “I’ll write it down for you...” Her voice trailed off as she rummaged in her pockets. Miss Trent, having stood from the sofa and gone to the bookshelf, returned with both pencil and paper in hand. “Oh, thank you,” Mrs Snelling mumbled upon taking them. Hastily writing down her address, she offered the items back to the clerk. “Whom should I expect?”



## The Case of The Christmas Crisis

### I

The year was almost over. Summer was a distant memory, and winter had moved in. Rain had been a frequent visitor during the first half of December but, as the holy day of Christmas approached, snow showers took its place. In the early hours of the seventeenth, an earthquake shock had brought excitement to many across England and Wales—particularly those in the western counties.

Yet, as more snow descended upon Bow Street, thoughts of this occurrence were far from Miss Georgina Dexter's mind. Sitting at a dilapidated table within the kitchen of the Bow Street Society's house, she hummed *O, Holy Night* while threading twine through a packing needle's eye. Working in the light of a kerosene lamp, she sifted through laurel, ivy, and mistletoe until she found a fresh, curled holly leaf. This she speared with the packing needle's point before pushing the needle through and guiding the leaf along the twine to its knotted end. After adjusting the leaf's orientation, she delved into the mass of greenery to repeat the process.

The tip of the artist's petite nose was red despite the stove's warmth at her back. Her usually light tone was also deeper and, every now and then, she'd sniff and give a small cough. Nonetheless her fair skin remained pink in its complexion, while her green eyes paid careful attention to her slender hands' work. Yellow lamplight danced over her forest-green blouse and auburn hair. The former covered her entire bosom and matched her bustle skirts in colour, while the latter was wrapped into a large bun against the back of her neck. Tiny balls of light appeared and disappeared as the plain, silver hair pins and brooch she wore caught the lamplight when she moved. Though aged eighteen, Miss Dexter's diminutive stature and proportions gave her the appearance of someone much younger.

"That bough's up," Mr Samuel Snyder's rough, east end of London-accented voice remarked from the doorway. Brown, beady eyes, warmed by the lifting of his rotund cheeks by his smile, met Georgina's when she looked up. His larger-than-average hand was lifted with its thumb pointed over his shoulder. Unlike Georgina, Mr Snyder was broad in build—and taller, too. His own nose was perpetually reddened, while his complexion was coarse and dry. Even the thumb he held aloft was calloused and cracked. The sleeves of his off-white shirt were rolled up to his elbows, sweat droplets had formed in his black, bushy sideburns, and his short hair was more unkempt than usual. Patches of dust spotted his dark brown trousers and worn, black leather boots.

"I surrender," Miss Rebecca Trent declared from the table's other end. Putting the torn piece of brown paper she'd been attempting to sew leaves onto down, she said, "I'm too heavy handed for this."

"I'm happy to finish it, if you'd like?" Georgina replied with a smile.

"Would you?" Rebecca enquired. At the artist's nod, Rebecca at once smiled and sighed. "Thank you." She put the materials before Georgina and, standing, wiped her hands upon her apron. To Sam, she enquired, "You put the bough around the handrail?"

"Yeah," he replied. Taking a seat opposite Georgina, he watched Miss Trent prepare some tea at the stove.

In her late twenties, Miss Trent was younger than Mr Snyder's forty-odd years. Attired in a burgundy jacket with matching bustle skirts, her clothes were far more ornamental compared to Georgina's. The jacket's lapels were silk, and framed a stark-white blouse with three vertical lines of ruffles down its centre and a gold and ivory brooch pinned to its high neck. A broad, black belt with brass buckle separated her jacket and skirts. The

latter having a light burgundy, front, lace panel. The tight curls of her chestnut-brown hair were pinned atop her head with a few loose strands permitted to hang down her back.

Dark-brown eyes looked to the snow-streaked window and bleak, afternoon sky beyond as she remarked, "I suppose it doesn't matter how long it takes us to decorate the house, as long as it's done by Christmas Day." Pouring steaming water into a teapot, she added the last onto a tray with three cups and saucers, a jug of cream, and a sugar bowl.

"How shall you make merry on Christmas Day, Miss Trent?" Miss Dexter enquired as the Bow Street Society clerk joined them at the table.

"My aunt has written, inviting me to stay with her in Tonbridge," Rebecca replied. "Which would be lovely... for a day." She gave a weak smile. "I'm too accustomed to the unpredictable liveliness of London."

"Family's still family, though," Mr Snyder pointed out. "Some folks've got none."

"Still, you're welcome to share Christmas Day with us, Miss Trent," Georgina added.

"Thank you, Miss Dexter," Rebecca replied with a warmer smile. Setting the table with the tea things, she next picked up the pot and gave its contents a stir. Replacing it to stew awhile, she remarked, "Christmas has snuck up on me this year, it seems."

"Time's flown," Mr Snyder said. Folding his large arms across his chest, he continued, "The London to Brighton run woz back in November but it feels like it woz only yesterday." He smirked, "The weather woz more dreary, then."

"I can imagine it being rather exciting," Miss Dexter remarked, her features lifted by her wide smile. Guiding another holly leaf along the twine, she laid her creation upon the table and, while holding it, leant forward with wistfulness in her eyes. "Seeing the horseless carriages and... what were the others, Sam?"

"They called 'em 'motor cars'," the cabman replied. "And it woz excitin', but *very* wet. Most drivers didn't have roofs," Sam chuckled. "No wonder only some got to Brighton. Still..." He gave a nod. "The start of the run woz sumin' to see. There's even talk of 'em doin' it again next year—"

The sudden sound of hurried knocking interrupted the cabman, however. Though he and Miss Dexter looked toward the hallway, Miss Trent went to investigate. "The tea should be ready to pour now," she remarked before she left the room.

Further knocking filled the hallway as she walked past the grand staircase and slid back the front door's numerous bolts. Yet, despite her making considerable noise, the knocks became frantic raps.

"*Ooohhh*... please *open* the door!" a low voice cried from the other side.

"I am!" Rebecca called back, turning the final key. When she opened the door, however, a willowy, gaunt woman stumbled inside with it. Catching her in her arms, Rebecca felt the contours of the woman's skeleton through her clothes, comprised of a tattered, midnight-blue, woollen shawl over a pale-blue, straight-lined dress. The dress had a high neck and long, narrowed sleeves. Her shawl's edges dripped melted snow onto Rebecca's blouse, while small puddles formed beneath her heavy, black-booted feet.

"*Ohhhh*," the woman repeated, her voice mimicking her shivering. "Begging your pardon," she added as she straightened and surveyed the damp patch on Rebecca's blouse. "Miss Trent...?" the woman enquired, meeting Rebecca's gaze with a look of trepidation in her own. She couldn't have been any older than nineteen, but her mouse-brown hair was streaked with grey. Her thin skin—stretched across angular cheekbones and sunken eye sockets—did her an equal disservice.

"I am she," Rebecca replied. She closed the door on the falling snow and, sliding a bolt into place, turned toward her visitor. "And you are?"

“Mrs Winnifred Rowe.” The woman came forward, her face contorted with desperation. “I know I’m not expected, Miss Trent, and I can’t pay but... I *must* have the Society’s help, if I’m to save us from the workhouse.”

“As much as I’d like to help, Mrs Rowe, the Bow Street Society’s funds aren’t as buoyant as they ought to be—”

“But it’s *Christmas!*” Mrs Rowe wailed, her voice drawing both Mr Snyder and Miss Dexter from the kitchen.

“Everythin’ okay?” Sam enquired, putting himself between Georgina and the emotional visitor.

“Yes, thank you, Sam,” Miss Trent replied. To Mrs Rowe, she explained, “This is Mr Samuel Snyder, a cabman, and Miss Georgina Dexter, an artist. They are both Bow Street Society members.” She shifted her gaze back to those she’d introduced, “Mrs Rowe is here to ask for the Society’s help. Miss Dexter, could you bring Mrs Rowe and me some tea in the parlour?”

“Of course,” the artist replied with a meek nod.

“Thank you,” Miss Trent replied and, indicating the aforementioned room, told Mrs Rowe, “There’s a fire you may sit beside.”

Mrs Rowe, though dejected, hurried toward the hearth’s inviting glow seen through the parlour’s open doorway. When she saw the plump, blue sofa set before the fire though, she hesitated.

“Please, sit,” Rebecca invited upon entering behind her.

“I’d rather stand, thank you,” came Mrs Rowe’s terse—yet nervous—reply.

“Very well,” Rebecca said and took a seat upon an armchair facing the now closed door. Maintaining her calm composure, she continued, “As I’d begun to explain earlier, Mrs Rowe, the Society can’t afford to gift monies—even at Christmas. Have you spoken to the parish—?”

“I’m *not* here to *beg*,” Mrs Rowe interrupted with wide eyes. Her grip tightened upon her shawl as she continued, “I want the Society’s help. The sort of help it’s given others.” She darted her eyes around the room and, shifting her weight between her feet, added, “Maybe I oughtn’t of come...”

“Mrs Rowe,” Rebecca said as she stood.

Mrs Rowe’s gaze snapped back to the clerk’s.

“Please...” Miss Trent began with a smile as she placed her hand upon Mrs Rowe’s arm and guided her to the sofa. “Settle down by the fire and tell me what has happened to bring you here.”

Mrs Rowe followed the clerk to the sofa but wavered as she looked upon its unblemished cushions.

“I wouldn’t invite you to sit if I didn’t want you to do so,” Rebecca said, her voice gentle, as she witnessed her visitor’s trepidation.

“Thank you,” Mrs Rowe whispered and sat on the sofa’s edge. When the firelight warmed her face, the rigidity fell away from her lips and she bent forward a little. Miss Trent, who had returned to the armchair, watched her entranced visitor in silence. One by one, Mrs Rowe’s lean fingers regained their colour while a rosy tinge spread across her cheeks. The dampness of her shawl also waned and, for a time, Mrs Rowe enjoyed some comfort.

“Thank you, Miss Dexter,” Rebecca said as the artist carried in a tea tray following Mr Snyder’s opening of the door.

“You’re welcome,” Georgina replied with a meek smile while placing the tray on a low table near Rebecca. The clerk again thanked her, and the artist left with a rustle of her skirts.

“How do you take your tea, Mrs Rowe?” Miss Trent enquired.

“Black... thank you,” Winnifred replied.

“Now,” Miss Trent began after she’d passed the cup across. “Why have you come to the Bow Street Society today, Mrs Rowe?”

Taking a sip of tea, Winnifred felt its warmth soothe her nerves. All the same, she waited until she’d replaced it upon its saucer before replying, “I work at *Brewer’s Toymakers* in the Lowther Arcade—y’know, in the Strand?—well, I *did*, until I was dismissed for—” Her brow furrowed as she glanced toward the ceiling. “... ‘Improper conduct,’ Mr Brewer said.” She looked back to the clerk and shook her head as she continued, “But I *neva*, in all my years working at the shop, done anything shameful.” She straightened, “I’m polite to the customers.” She gave a nod. “I smile when I ought.” Another nod. “And keep my mouth closed when I ought. I’ve neva had a bad temper and I don’t scowl at the children when they touch the toys.”

Her shoulders slumped as she released a loud sigh. “I told Mr Brewer I’d not done what was being said of me, but he paid me no mind. He gave me my pay—on account of it being Christmas—and told me not to go back.” She bowed her head, “My Stephen’s work don’t pay too well, but we always made ends meet. We can’t now, though.” Putting her cup down, she reached for Rebecca’s arm and looked her square in the eyes. “*Please*, Miss Trent. It’s a lot to ask a person but I ask it anyway, not for me but for my children. The work at Brewer’s meant the difference between our home and the workhouse.”

“I can’t guarantee the Society will be able to—”

“*Anything* the Bow Street Society can do for us would be a blessing, Miss Trent. *Anything!*” Mrs Rowe released the clerk’s arm and added, “My Stephen’s a sweep. He’ll sweep your chimneys and won’t ask for coin.”

“That shan’t be necessary,” Miss Trent replied with a soft smile. “Let me be certain we understand one another, however. You wish for the Bow Street Society to convince Mr Brewer to reemploy you, correct?”

“Yes’m,” Mrs Rowe replied.

“The ‘improper conduct’ you mentioned,” Rebecca said. “What is it you are accused of, exactly?”

“Improper letters to a customer,” Mrs Rowe said. Leaning forward, she shook her head and insisted, “But I *neva* done anything of the kind, Miss Trent. I would neva chance losing my work like that—or my Stephen. Lor’ *knows* I love him so.”

“Very well,” Miss Trent said after a few moments’ consideration. “The Society accepts your case, Mrs Rowe. Now, take some more tea and warm yourself by the fire until the snow passes. In the meantime, I will send word to some of our Society members who will look into this matter for you.”

“*Thank* you, Miss Trent!” Mrs Rowe cried, covering her mouth as tears erupted from her eyes, her body trembled, and her head shook. “*Thank you*, thank you, thank you...”