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## THE METROPOLITAN HOLIDAY



As we approach the New Century, our age-old traditions  
and celebrations join us in this modern world.

-H. M. Hardcastle, *A Modern Yuletide:  
An Historical & Scientific Discourse on the Christmas  
Holiday & Its Most Venerable Traditions*, 1893

“Don’t blame me if you’re disappointed. You’ve been warned.” Miss Judson, my governess, dipped a gloved hand into her jacket pocket and withdrew her watch, frowning slightly. “Your father was nearly inconsolable when he heard.”

“I just want to read it for myself,” I said stoutly. I’d been waiting for the December issue of *The Strand Magazine* to come out, for I had yet to read the newest Sherlock Holmes story, “The Adventure of the Final Problem.” It had been released in America the prior month, which I thought patently unfair, since Holmes was, above all, an English sleuth.

Moments later, a foggy-breathed Caroline Munjal joined us outside Leighton’s Mercantile. “Is it here yet?” she asked, shaking snow from her black hair.

We were not the only people awaiting the opening of the shop. A whole crowd had gathered this Saturday morning for the grand unveiling of Leighton’s annual Christmas window display. Caroline had been alight with eager speculation for days now over what Mr. Leighton might have chosen to depict.

“Maybe it will be the Redgraves Murder!”

As if on cue, another figure flitted toward us, balancing a stack of magazines—our neighbor, heiress Priscilla Wodehouse. “The latest issue of *Tales from the Red Graves*,” she announced. Capitalizing on her home’s recent history, she’d opened a small publishing enterprise named for the notorious residence. “Hot off the press and ready to stock Mr. Leighton’s newsstand.”

“Is there a Mabel Castleton story?” Caroline wanted to know. The new penny dreadful tales were gaining popularity—at least among a small crowd of devoted followers. Priscilla held out high hopes of their worldwide success. I had mixed feelings on the subject.

Priscilla’s eyes twinkled. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“I see Dr. Doyle has a rival,” Miss Judson Observed.

“We’ll read them *both*.” Caroline was nothing if not loyal.

I stood on tiptoe, trying to look past the assembled company. Would there be a miniature Redgraves manor, site of my own first triumph as an Investigator?

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Miss Judson advised. “It has been a busy year for the village.”

“Indeed it has.” Here came Mrs. Munjal, arms laden with parcels. She wore a sprig of holly pinned to her collar, and the mingled scents of pine and peppermint came with her. “There was the flower show, Lancelot and Elaine’s cygnets”—referring to the illtempered swans at the park—“and of course we have a Mayor now.”

“Don’t remind us,” Caroline grumbled—but it was too late. The crowd parted, somewhat reluctantly, and a grandly dressed pair of females paraded through like peahens, nearly identical in matching velvet and fur and towering, beribboned hats.

“Good morning, Mrs. Spence-Hastings, LaRue.” Miss Judson’s voice was as frosty as the morning as she greeted our former neighbors.

“You may address me as Mrs. Mayoress,” LaRue’s mother said. Inaccurately, not that anyone bothered to correct her.

“And *me* as Miss Spence-Hastings,” put in LaRue, her mother’s perfect miniature, down to the arrogant angle of their heads as they gazed down their noses at the common folk.

I managed to avoid rolling my eyes, but Caroline was not as successful. LaRue had been putting on airs even more than usual since her father’s appointment to the new office of Mayor. It was all part of Swinburne’s ongoing Modernization, efforts to secure its status as one of the most progressive villages in England.

“It’s sure to be the Mansion House,” LaRue declared. “We’ve entirely refurbished it, you know. Father’s found the biggest tree in the county for the Mayor’s Christmas Ball.”

I ignored the Spence-Hastingses and turned my attention to the rest of the crowd. Despite the cold, throngs had turned out for the big reveal. A Salvation Army band played an enthusiastic medley of “We Three Kings” and “God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen,” and Mrs. Munjal wrestled an arm free to drop a shilling into their red bucket.

The shop itself was quiet, its gas off and a green baize curtain closed over the window, inscribed

**LEIGHTON’S MERCANTILE EMPORIUM:  
FINE GOODS & WONDERS  
FROM ACROSS THE EMPIRE.**

The deep glass windows were usually crammed full of every manner of necessity and luxury, from reels of lace to rows of books to crocks of marmalade and mincemeat.\* They’d recently showcased an Underwood typewriter, and inside I was hoping to find a new leather brief-bag for Father’s Christmas gift. I still had not decided what to get Miss Judson. Despite being my closest companion in the world, she was notoriously difficult to shop for. Her reception of the pocket toxicology analysis set I’d produced for her last year (for testing her food against poison) had been somewhat . . . lackluster.

This being the first Saturday in December, the ordinary goods had been cleared out of the windows to make room for Christmas. One window held the tree, sparkling with silver and red ornaments, paper chains, sweets, and candles, while the other featured The Display: a meticulously crafted scale model of Swinburne, dressed up for the holidays and depicting the year’s most notable events in the village. Mr. Leighton worked on it year round, and the shop window had been shrouded for the last two weeks, as he set up the final touches in absolute secrecy.

As the band played and the snow fell and the Spence-Hastingses preened, the rest of us craned our necks, trying to peek round the curtain for a glimpse.

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\* Cook turned up her nose at this, saying any self-respecting Englishwoman made her own.

Mrs. Leighton finally arrived, bustling through the assembled crowd with the great brass key to the shop doors in her hands.

“It’s so nice to see you all!” She beamed, blue eyes crinkling beneath her frizzy red fringe. “Basil has been working so hard this year—claims it’s his best Display ever, and won’t let me see a peep of it! Even stayed in the shop last night to make sure everything was perfect. Had to bring him his breakfast, I did.” She patted her basket. “Now, wait out here while I rouse Himself to unveil it properly. He’ll want to point out all the details.”

With a rattle of her key, the shop door opened, emitting a very Christmassy jingle. A moment passed, then another, then at last the green cloth parted, and—with a little tugging and hesitation as the curtains caught on the roof of a model building—a miniature Swinburne Village appeared.

There was a burst of applause. The band struck up “Pat-a-Pan,” and there came gasps of appreciation as we all marveled at the perfection of the replica: the exact details of the Town Hall’s broken chimney pot and wreaths of evergreen in every window, the red postbox and telephone kiosk at the High Street tram station, the flocked model horses pulling their glossy sleigh across the wool-wadding snow.

This year Mr. Leighton had *not* elected to reproduce Redgraves and the Gilded Slipper lilies, or the change in Swinburne’s local governance. Or the swans. Instead, he had expanded the Display to include nearby Schofield College. The streets of the model village were empty, and there was a collective murmur as we realized that the tiny villagers were all clustered round the Campanile, the college’s famous belltower.

Amid a ring formed by the model people stood two small objects that seemed incongruous: a stone wishing well, painted entirely black, tipped on its side; and a life-size sprig of grapes—no, olives—still on the stem.

“That’s not very interesting at all,” the Mayoress exclaimed. “What is that supposed to be? People standing about staring at rubbish?”

“It’s certainly . . . unusual,” offered Miss Judson. “What do you suppose it means? Olives and a well?”

“What? Let me see!” Mrs. Munjal shoved her way forward, barreling through several small children and their mums, who howled in protest. I squeezed aside to make room, but she halted a few feet from the window, staring at the Display. “No,” she breathed. “It can’t be. Not again.” Without further explanation, she seized Caroline by the arm and hauled her away from the shop.

“Mother!” Caroline cried—but whatever had startled Mrs. Munjal was stronger than Caroline’s curiosity, and Caroline could not escape her mother’s

grip. She gave me a look of confused apology as Mrs. Munjal bundled her swiftly into their carriage and rode away.

“What was that about?” Priscilla said.

“I have no idea,” I said. But we had no time to wonder further, for at that moment, from inside the shop erupted a bone-rattling scream.

Miss Judson and I exchanged one brief, significant Look before turning on our heels and diving for the shop door. It flew wide under Miss Judson’s grasp, onto a peculiar scene. Deep in shadows, in the very back near the stove, sat Mr. Leighton, in a hard kitchen chair with a mug in his hand, looking for all the world like he’d just sat down for tea and dozed off.

Except his eyes were open, staring blindly at nothing.

Mrs. Leighton’s white hands clutched her anguished face. “He’s *dead!*”