

MR BEECHAM'S COAT

by

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Sidney Pickles placed his cup of tea and newspaper in the space he'd cleared next to the till. He unfolded the Illustrated London News and scanned the headline. Blimey, what was the world coming to? John Lennon marrying a Japanese woman? That wasn't news, that was –

The door bell tinkled. He looked towards the shop entrance and recognised the hatted silhouette instantly. He straightened himself, adjusted his tie and pulled down the sleeves of his cardigan. Standards. Only way to keep society civilised. If more people thought like him, there wouldn't be –

'Good morning, Mr Pickles.'

'Mrs Beecham.' He dipped his head and smiled at the slight figure. She dipped her head back at him before taking a small step forward. Always the same greeting ritual: but today, she was carrying a much larger bag than usual.

'Now you just stay where you are and let me help.' Sidney sidestepped round the counter, careful not to bump the case of Boer War medals he'd been dusting before the newspaper arrived. He wound his way past the table displays of memorabilia to where the old lady stood. As usual, she was as neat as a pin. He recognised the cotton frock and jacket: it reappeared every spring without fail.

Now he was closer, he peered at her through his bifocals. Only the barest smile tipped her lips and her soft cheeks quivered as though holding the pose was a strain.

He picked up the bulky shopping bag. Goodness knows how she had managed the bus journey and walk to his shop. But, he thought with pride, this lady had standards - and grit - she wouldn't complain. Not like those young ones nowadays –

'Thank you, Mr Pickles, most kind,' said Mrs Beecham. She hesitated as though unwilling to begin what they both knew would be a difficult task. Sidney indicated the way with his hand and she moved slowly to the counter. He positioned himself on the other side and placed the bag between them. She stood ramrod straight but he noted her fingers were shaking in their semblance of prayer.

'This is the last but one,' she said, in no more than a whisper.

He cleared his throat but didn't answer. He undid the zip and when he saw what it contained, looked up at her.

'Are you sure Mrs Beecham?'

She shook her head and, for an instant, he saw her eyes glisten.

'This is what Arthur said I must do. He understands, Mr Pickles, so don't worry.'

Sidney pulled out the single item: an officer's greatcoat. He gave it a quick once over, the least Mrs Beecham would expect him to do. It was in good condition: the grey wool was clean and strong with only the faintest trace of mothballs and tobacco. He unbuttoned the two diagonal rows of brass buttons and opened the coat. Sewn onto the red satin lining was a label bearing the words 'Wilkinsons Sword Co Ltd, Pall Mall'.

'Top price for top quality, I always say.' Sidney said the words with a resigned acceptance as though she'd just put him through the negotiating wringer. Again part of their ritual. And as part of *his* ritual, he gave silent thanks that she had come into his establishment first and not Reggie Bunce's pawn shop further up the road. That man would cheat his own shadow if he thought he could get away with it.

Sidney handed over the crisp notes. As ever, he felt that he had the best end of the deal. Arthur Beecham had fought for his country and he, Sidney Pickles, was proud to be able to help a brave soldier's wife in her time of need. He recalled the first time she had come into his shop. It was late 1957 and her husband had died in the June heatwave. She had clutched her small bag to her and nervously asked if he would be interested in purchasing a few items.

Over the years with each visit, Mrs Beecham shared a little more of their history. Arthur Beecham had joined the Grenadier Guards in 1914. He had been been invalided home three years later after the third Ypres offensive. But the man who returned was a shadow of the man he'd been, and her husband became the only child that his twenty-two year old wife would ever have. Sidney had bought an impressive array of his medals – Military Cross, First and second bars, Distinguished Cross, Distinguished Service Order as well as all the campaign ones. A true hero who Sidney would have loved to meet. Though from what Mrs Beecham had told him, there wouldn't have been any stirring tales of derring-do: for the rest of his life, Arthur Beecham refused to say a word about the war.

That day, Mrs Beecham did she as she always did and visited the items she'd previously sold him. She picked each one up and spoke to it in a low soothing tone as though comforting a child. Of course, if anyone asked Sidney about one of her treasures, he simply said someone had already bought it and directed them to something similar.

The next morning, Sidney shuffled down stairs to open up. He switched on the light and almost fainted. A mannequin wearing Arthur Beecham's coat was blocking his way. How on earth did that get there? He was sure he'd left the garment in the store room when Mrs Beecham had gone. Maybe he'd got more done yesterday than he'd remembered? He tutted. His bloody memory must be playing tricks again. Still, the coat did look good on the wooden figure with its handsome painted face and Kitchener-like waxed moustache. He would dress it up properly when he had the chance. But not today: he had a list as long as his arm to do first. He manoeuvred the dummy next to a helmet display and, after collecting his stocktake sheet and pen, made his way to the cabinet full of cloth and metal insignias.

Mrs Beecham came in early. Sidney was surprised since she usually only visited once a fortnight. He met her halfway just as she caught sight of the mannequin wearing her husband's coat. A flicker of panic crossed her face.

'Is everything alright, Mrs Beecham?'

'Is that where you're going to keep Arthur?' she asked.

Sidney hesitated, wondering as to the correct response.

'The helmets, Mr Pickles.' Her lips made a little moue and she lowered her voice.

'They're all *German*...Arthur wouldn't be comfortable there...'

He felt himself blush. Stupid blighter. How could he have been so insensitive? He quickly assured her it was only temporary, and for good measure shifted the mannequin a few feet away from the offending headwear. A smile replaced Mrs Beecham's pucker.

Relieved, Sidney went back to the cabinet he'd been working on and resumed his counting. Every now and then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw her stroke the woollen sleeve of her husband's coat. Her lips never ceased moving. Sidney thought that, even with his burns and disfigurement, Arthur Beecham had been a lucky man. He had had a lifetime – and more - of his wife's devotion. Not many could say the same what with that women's lib tosh and the like.

Although the next day was Sunday, his one day off, Sidney went down to the shop and continued stocktaking. It was only when he moved in the direction of the German helmets that he noticed the mannequin wearing Mr Beecham's coat was missing. He looked all around but couldn't spot the familiar figure. Had he shifted it after Mrs Beecham's departure? Bloody hell, if he had he must be losing his memory. He thought back through what he'd done the previous day but no recollection of moving the dummy surfaced.

He walked to the front of the shop and checked for any sign of the errant mannequin. It was only when he entered the side room that he found it: next to the photograph cabinet showing campaigns of the first world war. Sidney scratched his head. He decided to leave it where it was and for good measure, made a note of this fact on his sheet. He then spent the rest of the day completing the stocktake.

The following morning, Sidney went straight to the side room. No sign of Mr Beecham's coat. He shook his head. What was going on? Maybe he did need to see the doctor. He checked his record but then wondered if he'd forgotten to write down his later actions. He eventually found the mannequin alongside a shelf of military headwear. He picked up the nearest cap and looked at the tag. It listed Captain Arthur Beecham as its owner.

Over the next couple of months, Sidney found the mannequin either close to something that had belonged to Arthur Beecham or in the middle of one of the British or Allied displays. He found this a surprising source of comfort and decided it was best not to think too deeply about it. Mrs Beecham never once questioned this constant relocation. But it gave Sidney an idea.

After a final polish, Sidney stood back to admire the mannequin. Not only was it wearing Arthur Beecham's greatcoat and officer's cap, but many of the items brought in by Mrs Beecham. The rows of medals on the chest now gleamed as did the boots and gaiters.

He moved the mannequin so it was under a spotlight at the front of the shop – pride of place - to be seen by all who entered Pickles Militaria Ltd.

'That looks wonderful.'

Sidney had paid no attention to the jingle of the opening door but now he turned. He straightened himself and tipped his head to Mrs Beecham. Today, in the heat, no jacket accompanied her favourite frock.

'Do you think Mr Beecham is pleased?' he asked, with a smile.

Mrs Beecham nodded. Her eyes twinkled at him. 'Very.'

After sharing their wonderment at Neil Armstrong's first steps on the moon, Sidney left her admiring the display.

Summer changed to autumn and autumn took on a darker hue. Mrs Beecham visited every day except Sunday. To make up for this, she stayed twice as long on a Monday. Sidney enjoyed her company and made sure that even if he was very busy he spent some time with her. Mr Beecham, despite his prime position, continued to move around the shop each night,

and every morning Sidney would hunt for him – on several occasions he was even found on the first floor where the model collections were kept. And just as Mrs Beecham held conversations with her husband, so too did Sidney.

December segued into early January, and Mrs Beecham's visits became progressively fewer. Every two days, then every three. The next time she came in, Sidney invited her for a cup of tea. As she held out her hand to take some sugar, he noticed how thin her wrists had become. He went straight up to his kitchen and returned with a plate of biscuits. She ate four and, he thought, if it wasn't for her standards, she probably would have eaten more.

'Is everything alright, Mrs Beecham?' he ventured.

'Yes, thank you, Mr Pickles. Now I must go and tell dear Arthur who I met on the bus. He'll be most surprised.' She rose slowly from her seat. 'Thank you very much for the tea, Mr Pickles, I do appreciate your kindness.'

Sidney nodded and the next morning when he found Mr Beecham beside the kettle and his biscuit tin, he took the hint. Whenever Mrs Beecham came to the shop, he served her tea and always with plenty of biscuits.

The February weather took a turn for the worse but still Mrs Beecham battled the elements and made her thrice weekly visits. True British stamina, he thought. You had to hand it to the old girl, she might look frail but there must be steel within those bones. Good on her. On her next visit, he gave her some fruit cake he'd bought and warned her that - as he had done every year - he would be closing the shop for a fortnight. For his 'holiday' when he would take day trips to purchase more stock and see what the competition was up to.

But on the day of his first outing, Sidney came downstairs early to find Mr Beecham – or rather the mannequin – blocking his path. He almost chuckled as he remembered his initial shock at these occurrences when he noticed that Mr Beecham was missing his coat. Was this the start of a new game? He had a few minutes to spare so he set off, imagining he'd find it after his usual hunt. But that was not to be. He searched high and low – including the German displays which Mr Beecham normally steered clear of.

Sidney racked his brains as to where the coat might be. He checked the front door: it was still locked and all the windows were intact. He even went back upstairs and searched his flat. Worrying thoughts of early dementia surfaced, but he knew that there was no way on this earth he would have let the coat leave his shop. It was Mrs Beecham's prized possession, one that he was temporarily responsible for. He hadn't - he just couldn't have - let her down. *His*

standards wouldn't allow it. He didn't make it to Ramsgate that day. After thoroughly searching his premises, he temporarily moved the dummy to the storeroom.

The next morning, he was surprised to find it still there. The mannequin hadn't moved. For the next few days, it stayed in the backroom still without its coat. Sidney made a few trips out but his heart wasn't in it. He wasn't expecting Mrs Beecham for almost a fortnight, but he found himself trying to think up possible explanations for when she did arrive. And any chance he got, he searched some more.

It was during Sidney's first morning of his reopening that he thought he'd found a way to solve the problem. He would purchase another greatcoat. Surely with his contacts, he could find one which would – he gulped at this point – make Mrs Beecham believe it was her husband's. It wasn't the ideal solution, but he couldn't bear the thought of...

Sidney broke off when he heard someone enter the shop. He looked up to see the local constable making his way towards him. He squinted. What the...?

PC Hobbs greeted him and removed a bulky woollen coat from under his arm. He placed it on the counter.

'Does this belong to you?' asked PC Hobbs.

Sidney picked it up just to make sure. He confirmed it did and mentioned it had gone missing from his shop.

PC Hobbs wore a puzzled expression. 'Are you sure you didn't sell it?'

'Of course I'm sure. I know my own stock. Why? Where did you find it? Who had it?'

'Mrs Rose Beecham.'

It was Sidney's turn to look puzzled. Had he given it to her? But why would he do that? No, he was positive he hadn't...

'Did she buy much from you? Maybe you forgot you'd sold it to her?' The constable's voice tailed off.

Sidney bristled at the man and briefly explained *his* purchases from *her*. 'And tell me, Constable,' he tried to think of the most outlandish thing possible, 'were you arresting her when you discovered this contraband?'

P C Hobbs raised his bushy eyebrows. 'No, Mr Pickles. A neighbour had reported not seeing Mrs Beecham for about a fortnight. We broke into her flat.'

Sidney frowned. 'Is she alright?'

'No, she's not, Mr Pickles. She'd fallen on the kitchen floor and hadn't been able to get up.' He paused. 'I'm sorry to tell you but that's where she died. Hypothermia by the looks of it. But when we found the body, this overcoat was tucked around her.'

Sidney saw the questions in the constable's eyes.

'I'm not sure what's going on but you might need to check the rest of your stock...'

PC Hobbs reached into his pocket. He took out a Pickles Militaria tag and another item. He handed them to him.

Sidney gasped. He placed the tag on the counter and with his fingertips felt the weight and shape of the remaining object.

A lump rose in his throat as he gazed at the Victoria Cross in his hand. The door bell tinkled. Both he and P C Hobbs looked up.

But no one was there.

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