

THE
BESS *Time*

A decorative illustration of holly leaves and berries, rendered in a dark gray color, positioned above the end of the word "Time".

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To imagination...
Without it, where would we be?

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And to *my family and friends*, your interest and encouragement is appreciated.

The Bess Time

by Yvonne Pont

CHAPTER I



A host of small lights beckoned, a refuge from the storm. Bess looked through the rain-splattered window at the store's Christmas display. As the rain ran down the window obscuring her view, she moved in for a closer look. Her eyes beheld a magical village of long ago. Intricate, little buildings, artfully arranged along a cobblestone street, busy with miniature horse-drawn carriages, and people dressed in costumes of days gone by, seemed to come to life.

Just as Bess became mesmerized by this scene, reality brought her back with a large drop of cold rain water running down her neck. Shaking her head, she noticed a sign across the narrow street, printed in bold letters the word "LIBATEA," encircled by three teapots painted red, white and blue. Noticing a ladder leaning on the building in front of her, she decided to jaywalk rather than go under it to cross at the crosswalk. She sprinted across the street and entered the little tea shop. The warm air and the smell of fresh baking engulfed her.

A voice rang out, "Find a table, hon. I'll be with you in a moment."

Bess looked around the tiny room filled with three occupied and seven vacant tables. She chose a small, round one by the window. Taking off her wet coat and hat, she sat down and tried to fluff her flattened hair with her fingers. She saw her reflection in

the window. *Bess Turner, you must do something about all the grey that has invaded your blond locks*, she thought.

“Sorry, hon. I was just taking a fresh batch of scones out of the oven. We have a lovely selection of teas and pastries. I’ll leave the list with you. I’ll give you a couple of minutes to decide.” The waitress gave a friendly smile and went over to help two women, seated at a table in the corner.

Bess picked up the menu. The cover displayed the same colourful logo of three teapots encircling “LIBATEA” with four words written underneath: “The pursuit of happiness.” Bess smiled and opened the menu. She soon made her choice and waved at the waitress.

“I’ll have a pot of Buckingham Palace and a scone, please.”

“Good choice. I’ll be right back, and we’ll get you warmed up in no time. What a dreadful day out there. At least it’s not snowing.”

Bess looked out the window and thought *how true*. Across the street, she could see the lights of the window display. Just looking at them made her feel warmer and the rain less intrusive.

“Here you are, hon.” The waitress poured Bess a cup of steaming, hot tea. She put down the blue-flowered teapot and a large, inviting scone. Making room on the table, she placed a dish containing three compartments filled with clotted cream, lemon curd and strawberry jam. “If you want anything else, just wave or call me. My name’s Libby.”

As Bess sipped her tea, she looked out the lace-curtained window at the downpour. The cozy atmosphere inside warmed her soul. She noticed a lone runner dodge the rain. He passed under the old, wrought iron streetlamp with its two glass bulbs lighting his way. Seeing the lights on surprised Bess, being only two in the afternoon. On second thought, she realized the shortest day of the year was only a week away. Her thoughts brought her to Christmas, and ultimately the reason she ventured out on a day like today: Christmas shopping. She swallowed the last drop of

tea in the fine china cup and put it gently down on its saucer. Quickly putting on her red coat and matching hat, she searched through her purse for the red change purse. She left four quarters on the table, picked up the bill and made her way to the counter.

“Everything to your liking, hon?” Libby’s large, brown eyes searched Bess’s face for the expected approval. “Good, that will be five dollars. Thank you. Please come again.”

As Bess turned to leave, a chalkboard caught her eye:

“Enjoy life sip by sip, not gulp by gulp.”

Bess darted across the street, took one more look at the window display and decided to go into the store. Her hand grasped the handle. It would not turn. She tugged. It didn’t budge. In desperation, she looked around. Only then did she see a sign on the door window. It directed her around the corner to the front of the building. Once again avoiding the ominous ladder, she ventured out onto the street and skirted around it. As she turned the corner, a large sign over the door proclaimed, “Stewart’s Fine China & Gifts.”

Her hand opened the door on its first attempt. A bell jingled. She entered. Shaking the the water off her clothes, the tiny drops landed on a glass cabinet. Bess’s blue eyes lit up on discovering the interesting contents inside the rain-smearred cabinet. On one shelf, Dresden figurines vied for attention over their peasant countrymen, the Hummel family. Blanketing the shelf above, a kaleidoscope of colours emanated from the tiny Swarovski crystal figurines. Looking around, she found many such cabinets filled with beautiful pieces of artistry. *Oh my, I am a child in a candy shop, but darn, I cannot touch these precious sweets*, she sighed.

Seeing no assistant, she moved to the next room, a room of medium size, perhaps 20 feet by 30 feet. Each foot was filled with numerous things she could cross off her wish list. Moving her head to the right, Lilliput Lane beckoned her straight ahead. China teacups and pots whistled for her attention. To the left, shelves of exquisite linens begged a feel. Turning around, racks of stationery greeted her.

“Good afternoon. May I help you?” a soft voice echoed amongst the first row of cards.

Startled, Bess looked around. “Yes, aah --- Excuse me, but where are you?”

A rustling from the talking cards produced a petite woman. No wonder Bess missed seeing her when she entered the room.

“Sorry, I was restocking the Christmas cards. I must have just bent over to pick them out of the box when you entered.”

On closer inspection, Bess saw an attractive, middle-aged woman, smartly dressed in a pale-blue dress. Perfectly arranged, her salt and pepper hair enhanced her porcelain skin. She and the store’s contents complimented each other perfectly.

“Yes, I noticed your window display on the side street,” Bess looked around, “but, I don’t see it in your store.”

“They’re all in the back of the store.” The saleslady smiled. “Follow me.”

To Bess’s amazement, the saleslady took her through an opening. It looked like a storage area. Indeed, it was the stockroom. Floor to ceiling shelves full of unopened boxes of merchandise, bordered a narrow passageway. An opening on the right, exposed a small, cluttered office. An elderly man sat at the oversized wooden desk. As the two ladies passed by, he lifted his large head and gave a greeting.

Suddenly the magical room, Bess wanted to see, lay before her. Shelves, laden with more buildings and accessories she could imagine, filled her eyes with wonder.

“Oh my,” Bess could hardly speak, “this is fantastic.”

“Yes, we do have a good selection of the Dickens Village. Take your time. Mr. Stewart will be in shortly. It is his favourite room and he enjoys sharing it with others. I’ll just be out front if you need me,” the saleslady said.

Left alone in the room, Bess slowly made her way around the village displays. Now, she truly was in the candy store. If she dared to, she could touch everything. No one was around to chastise her.

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Oh, I must have this. What charming children sitting on a fence. The horses look so lifelike. I could just pet them. No Bess, keep your hands in your pockets. I love this antiquarian bookstore. What stories it could tell. Many thoughts raced through her head. She mentally calculated the price of each item and kept a running total. *Oops, this total is running away from me,* giggled Bess, as she picked up the boxed items, stacked under the shelves.

“Looks like you’re enjoying yourself,” the elderly man said as he shuffled into the room. “I love this room. It makes me feel so alive. Lord knows , I need all the help I can get,” he chuckled. “Can I help you with anything else? This starter kit gives you two houses, figurines and trees.” He picked up the large box to show her the inviting contents.

“No thanks, I think I’ve helped myself enough,” Bess said.

“Good choices. I’ll get Joyce to come and assist you.” He turned with the aid of his cane and made his way out. ”Joyce, the young lady needs some help back here.”

Bess smiled. *Young lady, eh? What a dear man.--- Okay, I’m a pushover. I’ll take the starter kit too.*

In the distance she heard the saleslady’s reply, “Yes, Mr. Stewart. I’ll be right there.”

Arms full and wallet empty, Bess headed for the front door.

“Let me get the door for you.” The saleslady rushed in front of her and opened the door. “Do come again.”

“Thank you. I’m sure I will.”

The door jingled and Bess stepped out into the late afternoon chill. Walking back to her car, she passed a second-hand bookstore. *Darn, I wanted to go in there,* she mused. *I’ll just have to come back another day, won’t I.* With as light a step she could muster, while laden down with a large shopping bag in each hand, Bess made her way down the street. Funny, she didn’t even notice the rain.