



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Cold Out of Doors, and Cold In-Doors

Unknown writer

Tom Smithers was a member of the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple. We needn't say how it came about, but on Christmas Day, 184—, Tom found himself with no invitation to dinner, not a rap in his pocket, and not so much as a mutton chop in the cupboard of the laundress's den he called a pantry, in his four-pair back in Elm Court. People may scoff at my story for its improbability. A student of an inn of court, without friends to ask him to a Christmas dinner, without money, without credit? Preposterous!

All I can say is, it is not only possible but true; and Tom Smithers told me so, and is living, and has got into practice, and is a leader of his sessions at this day to corroborate me.

What was to be done? "Confound it!" thought Tom. "There must be someone hanging out on a Christmas Day. Some of them *might* have asked me, though. Let's see—" and he ran over on his fingers the names of the people he was in the habit of dining with. "I'll be hanged if I don't go and ask the Reddies to take me in." Resolved, and done. Tom dressed and sallied out of the Temple.

It was six o'clock: the Strand was almost deserted; first-floor windows over shops gleamed redly; and, as he drew westwards, there was light in drawing-rooms, and down on area walls the kitchen firelight danced promisingly, and Tom felt there was dinner in the land for everybody but him. The Reddies lived in — street, — square. There was no light in their kitchen window, and their drawing-room was dark. Tom's heart sank within him.

"They're dining out," sighed Tom. "I can't call at this time of day, and dressed too. The servants would twig I was sponging for a dinner. Can't stand that, either. Let's see — who is there hereabouts I know? Oh, the Tiptons! Yes, there's Fred Tipton who has asked me to come a hundred times; and I know they make a rule of having a family party on Christmas Day. They can't refuse to take a poor devil in who has no family to go to."

And, made bold by the very sense of his own homelessness and hopelessness, Tom made the best of his way to the stately portico of the Tiptons. They had crept nearer to the square and were, in fact, just shouldering it. Their ambition was to be in it — and into it they were safe to get, sooner or later, for they had set their hearts on it.

There was light enough in the kitchen there, and brilliant was the range of drawing-room windows; and there was a warm glow through the chink of the dining-room shutters, which bespoke wax-lights and plate, and red curtains and fire, and all the other luxuries of the season. Tom's heart yearned to it all; not so much for the warmth and good fare and wine and other creature comforts, as for the sense of cosy family gathering it suggested.

"I will, by Jove!" he said, at last, after a pause to screw his courage to the sticking-place; and rat-tat rat-a-tat-tat went the knocker, and the gorgeous footman opened the door, and in walked Tom, as bold as if he had been an invited guest.



"Mr. Smithers!" roared the gorgeous footman. "Mr. Smithers!" repeated the other gorgeous footman on the first landing. "Mr. Smithers!" firmly and sonorously uttered the gentleman in black, who threw open for him the drawing-room door.

Tom's heart sank within him as his name fell on the blank and dreary circle.

In spite of lustres and lamps and mirrors and curtains and sofas and ottomans, and a roaring fire in the grate, and all other appliances of ease and wealth and warmth, there was a cold, icy chill nipped every look and cramped every movement of every soul in the room.

Mr. Tipton, a magnificent man in a stiff white cravat, advanced in a stately manner, his eyebrows raised in a way that expressed distinctly to Tom Smithers: "What the deuce brought *you* here?" Mrs. Tipton, a thin lady with a general hungriness of aspect, reared herself bolt upright if possible, and repeated Mr. Tipton's look. The poor Miss Tiptons shrank into their shoes and seemed to grow visibly chillier; and even Tom's friend Fred, who passed for "a devilish good fellow," seemed to have lost all his natural elasticity under the influence of this family vault of a drawing-room.

Tom couldn't make his heart up to tell the truth, so he stammered out something about a "late call." He felt he had got into the house where you ought *not* to dine on a Christmas Day — the house where they make a duty of every pleasure, and, among others of these painful duties, duly observe the tradition of a family dinner at Christmas. Not that it isn't a capital custom when the family feeling crowns and inspires the gathering. But here it was the magnificent Mr. Tipton, whose selfishness was so far narrower than most men's that it seemed hardly to extend beyond himself to his family; and frozen Mrs. Tipton, who never betrayed, by a spark in her eye, the presence of any warmth whatever in her heart; the poor girls, who, between the father's magnificence and the mother's chilliness, had subsided into dreary social machines; the son, who felt papa, mamma,

sisters, and family party "a confounded bore," as he didn't scruple to tell Tom Smithers when they got five minutes' confidential communication; an elderly aunt, from whom they had expectations, and who, being of the same kidney as themselves, knew that they had them, and was perpetually letting them know that she knew it, to have the pleasure of making them uncomfortable; a deaf uncle, who was a rival for a good place in the will of the rich aunt, and whom it was necessary to ask, lest he should steal a march on the family. Then there were two poor relations, for whom Tom Smithers's heart bled — a poor young girl, and a sort of decayed and seedy-looking man, of indescribable age, one of the men who are always living from one agency to another, who diverge from "a snug little bottle-ale business" into "a fine opening in the coal trade, on commission."

Tom didn't envy them their family party, though he heard a good many hints given them while he was there of "the great pleasure it was to Mr. Tipton to meet them as members of the family," and so on; which they meekly and uncomfortably acknowledged — the poor girl, because suffering had made her meek and uncomplaining; and the seedy man, because Mr. Tipton overpowered him.

There was no move to ask Tom to dinner, and he felt grateful for it before he had been ten minutes there. He tried to converse, to sentimentalize, to argue, to rattle — it was in vain. Every subject dropped dead as soon as it was started — ideas could not live in that atmosphere — it was too grand and genteel for anything.

At last, driven to desperation, Tom sprang up; and, just as the gentlemanly man in black opened the door to announce "Dinner," Tom made a bolt, and escaped from the numbing, freezing house, into the less numbing, freezing cold without, leaving the Tiptons equally scandalized by his unseasonable entrance and abrupt departure.

As he rushes past the Reddies' on his way back to Chambers, he casts up a disconsolate glance at the house — Can it be? There is light in the kitchen — there is light in the drawing-room! "Huzza! They *are* at home!" And he knew them of old — the best people alive; and their house he knows for a house where reign truth, kindness, and a hearty welcome, without ostentation; and which is warmed by that best of Christmas fires, the warmth of honest and loving hearts: and before the ice of the Tiptons has thawed well off him, Tom Smithers is shaking hands with a bluff and genial host and a bright-eyed and cordial hostess, in the house where you ought to dine on a Christmas day.

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