



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Seasonable Festivities

Unknown writer

It really is a great mistake, passing Christmas in the country; and I certainly will not do so any more. Why I should be supposed to wish to leave my comfortable fireside, in this severe weather, I can't imagine. Dinners and balls for a month, to which the shortest distance is ten miles. The Duke of Donkeyton's is five and twenty miles, at least — of course, we must go there. I have my house full of people; and, as I have chosen my own guests, we are a pleasant party enough. I have sent all the men out shooting. I don't go myself, for I don't see the fun of standing at the corner of a covert with my nose frozen and my hands and feet insensible, on the chance of shooting one of the many hundred pheasants I had down from town yesterday, because I won't be troubled with much preserving. So I have come into my den to have a quiet pipe, and a dip into a book, and a chat with my readers.

What a smell of mince pies and plum pudding all over the house! These are what are called seasonable festivities; with double numbers of illustrated papers, and robin redbreasts, and icicles, and Old Father Christmas, and punch, and snapdragon, and New Year's Day, and holly and mistletoe, and "A Merry Christmas to you" — which is frequently a horrible mockery to those to whom it is addressed: as, for instance, people who can't pay their bills, or who have death and sickness in the house. Depend upon it, there are a good many unreformed Scrooges in the world. Not that I am one. One hundred of the poor in my parish will dine tomorrow at my expense. The school children will be feasted, and all the old people will have a blanket given them, and a sackful of coals. Any wayfarer passing my lodge gates will be invited to partake of a hunch of bread and a mug of good October ale. This idea I have borrowed from the Hospital of St. Cross, near Winchester — and is, I flatter myself, a remarkably neat and effective plagiarism. Still, the whole thing is a bore. I have outlived all the gushing over it; and loathingly anticipate the lovely articles there'll be, no doubt, in the *Daily Telegraph* — starting with the Wise Men of the East, and ending up, apropos of pantomimes, with some remarks about the ballet dancers' legs, and how they are necessary to draw the foolish men of the West.

Then, what is there seasonable about ghosts? What connection is there between them and mince pies and plum pudding? Why shouldn't they be equally seasonable at Midsummer or Michaelmas? I never saw one, and don't wish to; but it would not be an agreeable companion at table, even if it were a festive

ghost. Yet everybody insists on hundreds of ghosts at Christmas — if we may judge from the volumes of literature devoted to their interests at that time.

Christmas and New Year festivities are only truly suitable to the very young or the very old. The former delight in all the old ritual of the season — the yule log, the wassail bowl, the carols, the mummers, and the rest. The liberty accorded to their gastronomic powers is the more appreciable, as it is accorded but once a year; and they are loaded with presents, more or less valuable, from friends and relatives, as their parents happen to be more or less wealthy. To them it is a poem: to many of us middle-aged people it is a disagreeable reality. The old people naturally like it. Their fading faculties are renewed by the good cheer and gaiety; and they can recall reminiscences of their early days which had been forgotten for a year. They look with pride on their children and grandchildren; and predict the Woolsack for Tommy, and — who knows? — a Prince of Royal blood for Sukey. They have done with the sternness of life, and can afford to indulge in those innocent dreams and speculations. But the melancholy of the subject is leading me on to drivel and to dote. We will leave it, if you please. The editor shall not have this paper. I will light my pipe with it, and compose myself in my warm armchair by the fire.

Believe in ghosts indeed! Benighted people. I suppose they will soon be back from shooting, as it's beginning to get dark. The fire makes me quite drowsy. Ghosts, indeed!

I wonder what has brought this back to me? A little child is looking out of the window, across a London square, where the snow is lying deep. There is a lurid glare in the sky, reflected on the snow beneath. The frightened child asks the lady standing by what it is. It is St. Peter's Church, in Eaton Square, which is burning fiercely; and the nursery-maid comes in at that moment and says they have succeeded in saving the altar-piece. He wants to be taken out to see it; but the lady reminds him that it is time to be dressed, as there is a Christmas party that night, and that he has to entertain his little friends. Surely I know that tall, graceful figure, though the face is turned away from me; and the child who is looking towards me — I do not recognise him. Yet it reminds me of a face I see sometimes: a face now grizzled and wrinkled, with lines upon it like the prints of little birds' feet in the snow — a face I see when I look in the glass. The lady is my mother, and the child myself.

I am arrayed in all my glory, and am taken downstairs to be admired and worshipped by uncles, aunts, and cousins, who all load me with praises, and kisses, and presents. For am I not the eldest, the hope and the pride of the family? — destined to win fame, either in "the court, camp, church, the vessel, or the mart," and achieve immortality. There is Cousin Bob, who is a thousand

years old, and who is alive to this day. He has two wonderful stories — one about a bull, who met him in a path and bowed gracefully to him, without proceeding to further extremities; and another about the varied and excellent properties of a certain well in Hyde Park. He dines with us every Sunday, and performs — for my benefit, when I come down to dessert — an admirable feat with an orange, which, cunningly fashioned into the counterfeit presentment of an old gentleman, he takes on board an imaginary ship, in an imaginary storm; and depicts, by means of squeezing him into a wine glass, the agonies which immediately ensue when, in real life, the steward and basin are summoned.

See the sports that are provided for us! What is that dangling from the ceiling? An inverted balloon, filled with bonbons. The children are blindfolded in turn, a stick put into their hands, and walked about in a maze until each one fancies himself underneath the cherished object — up goes the stick to hit the balloon, and the air alone is struck. The bandage is withdrawn, and the patient looks very foolish to find himself in a totally different part of the room to the one he expected. When the balloon is at last destroyed, all the bonbons fall to the floor and a general scramble ensues. A brave game, my masters! What have we here? A large dish full of flour, into which shillings and half-crowns have been dropped. We must dip our faces in and pick out the money. What shouts as we emerge, looking like Mr. Clown in the pantomime! Now is the time — when a dozen of us are so ornamented — for snapdragon.

"Bring it in, Thomas."

"I will, sir," as he always replied, with great emphasis.

There he is — the bandy-legged footman in livery, who is always at loggerheads with Growler the butler. Put out the lights!



Now, then! "Don't throw it about, Uncle Dick, it is dangerous." See how ghastly we all look with our white flour-dusted faces lit blue by the brandy flames. Ha! What is that? Aunt Rachel's dress has caught fire. Such a pretty girl she is. You wouldn't believe it now, would you? Never mind — it is all right. No harm done. The Reverend Snorter Hunks has squeezed it out, and looks as if he didn't object to the performance. Now, one glass of punch, and we little ones must be off to bed. I see my mother bending over my little bed, and kissing me, and hear her whisper —

"I hope you won't be tired, love."

The vision fades; but another yet succeeds. I see myself again, as a boy — home

from Harchester for the holidays. I left that seminary for sound and religious learning at the earliest moment after the "journey money" had been distributed by the head master, which was about seven in the morning. I therefore arrive home in time for breakfast. Early as it is, there are the dear arms open to receive me, and the welcome smiles on that beautiful face. She, dear soul, is for providing nothing but amusements for the boys; but the "governor" is firm. Holiday tasks must be allotted: from ten till twelve, Mr. Homfray; from four till six, Mr. Locke.

Mr. Homfray is engaged for writing, drawing, and arithmetic. Poor old Homfray! There he is — the very image of Tom Pinch, long before Tom Pinch was born: so patient, hard-working, simple, and so poor. See the old grey trousers, with straps more like stirrups than what they are meant to be! When we crept underneath the table and succeeded in cutting them, his trousers flew up his legs as if they had been launched from one of those modern slings of India-rubber. The dreadful practical jokes he had to submit to! "Arthur, Arthur! mind what you are doing," he says to my brother, who has taken the opportunity, while stooping over one of our works of art, to drop a large door-key down his neck, which perambulates his back till it emerges at his feet after the strap has been undone. And those two young scamps, my brothers, have been eating sweets all morning, against Mr. Homfray's express wishes. My father requires the results of the morning's work in tabulated form — which is, in this instance, as follows:

"Masters Tom and Harry: Application — Far from what could be wished. Progress — In the retrograde direction. Conduct — Insubordinate and rude; personal inconvenience incurred through introduction of a foreign body down the spinal region. General remarks — Both, during studies, partaking freely of confectionery."

Mr. Locke was a young barrister newly called to the bar, who received a certain stipend for keeping my memory green as to the merits of the Greek particle *an*, and the vicissitudes of that confounded woman and her family — Alcestis, who was mixed up in the killing of her father — a deed perfectly unintelligible to a schoolboy who had not yet encountered Lemprière's Classical Dictionary. Why do those dreary speeches of that windbag Admetus recur to me now, when I vow I haven't opened my Euripides for thirty years? There is Mr. Locke, as plain as a pikestaff, with his seedy tail-coat and plaid trousers, his spectacles, and his long nose within range of the choice odour of raw onions — stolen from the larder — with which I used to perfume my breath, hoping to keep him at bay. Where is he now? — as he fades away into dreamland.

Again the boy returns — now a young man — for the Christmas holidays, to the paternal roof. He is clad in black. The loving eyes are closed; the fond arms lie

still by her side in her shroud; the voice that might have warned him from many a temptation is hushed for ever. He returns to find old Growler looking blacker than ever, and the maids, in their neat mourning dresses, dropping sympathetic curtsies. He is the young lord for the time being. The affairs of the nation — which could not halt for births, marriages, or deaths — had summoned the father to his post; and the now desolate room, every keepsake of which recalls some reminiscence of that tender love which had watched over his childhood, is tenanted by those well-meaning purveyors of condolence whose sympathy is like the moaning of waves on a wreck stranded on the bar.

The pipe has fallen from my mouth, and smashed on the floor. Pooh. This chair is very snug, but I'll try the other arm.

A mist succeeds. The youth wakes one morning to be told he has recovered from a serious illness. The faces around him are familiar; but he misses one, and asks for it.

"My dear Gorham, you are weak, you know."

"Yes. I remember now" — and he turns his face back into his pillow.

Somehow, at the same time, I see a little child, with a wan face and pale hand, put up a feverish little mouth to be kissed, and say, "Mamma, I'll be very good."

But young Gorham recovers at last, and is greeted by his temporary guardian, the Reverend Mr. Gunch. Gunch first taught him to smoke, by puffing into his face when he was of tender years. Gunch was the greatest consumer of tobacco in England: in all its forms it was acceptable. Cigars, pipes, snuff-boxes — he possessed them in countless numbers. He never had a pipe or cigar out of his mouth; and the housemaid used to say that he took snuff to bed with him loose, and stowed it under the pillow for nocturnal enjoyment. Where art thou now, O Gunch, with all thy smoking apparatus?

Gunch evaporates; and I see a large party assembled at breakfast in a country house. The snow lies lightly on the ground; the river which runs through the park sparkles and dances in the sunbeams. Everything is cheerful and glad under the influence of Christmas and the genial weather. There is the boy — now arrived at his early manhood — in the house of an Oxford friend, whose father, the dear old Squire, is presiding over an enormous round of beef; while his good mother, who has the most marvellous instinct for inventing new dishes expressly for breakfast, is busy amongst the cups and saucers. It is a shooting morning, and the Squire is chaffing Gorham about the number of pheasants he is not going to hit. Gorham is not a celebrated shot; but he can fire off his gun with tolerable safety to himself and others. Later in the morning, the Squire — who has come

out on purpose to see him shoot — watches him aim at a tremendous rocketeer, which, to the Squire's amazement, comes crashing to his feet through the branches of the firs.

"Bravo, bravo!" says the Squire. "Never saw anything better done. We shall make something of you yet. There's the keeper's cottage — I'll trot on, and see that all is ready for you."

Fortunately, it was luncheon time; and the Squire had no opportunity of witnessing what he missed afterwards.

Then there was the return home by five o'clock, and the glass of good old home-brewed, well earned. Then the pipe, Nature's great restorer — the bath, and the dinner. There were the bright eyes reassembled that we had not seen since breakfast; and with something like skill, we always found ourselves seated next to those we cared for most. Then the songs, the dances, and the music; and always, on Christmas Eve, the quaint mummers, whose dialect, fortunately for delicate ears, rendered what they said charmingly unintelligible. Then more smoking, and to bed, just as the bells from the church in the park proclaim the advent of another Christmas morning.

Oh, happy, blessed time — warming all hearts with love and happiness! Your memories never fade; and he who cannot enjoy the spirit of the season, and reviles its conventionalities, is a cynic and a fool.

Where am I now? In the Folkestone boat, crossing the Channel. I am the only passenger. The snow is falling so thickly that we can hardly see before us. I am sitting in the little cabin by the stern, calmly awaiting a collision. I am about to spend Christmas with my beloved, and obtain some fresh sea air. I am a bit lame now — it is absurd to confess that I have just recovered from a severe fit of gout. And to be laid up with that disease in the Temple for six weeks, with no one but an elderly laundress to nurse you, naturally turns a young man's fancies strongly toward love.

The ship cleaves merrily through the wintry sea; the snow has ceased; and the white dome of the Cathedral looms into view, and the familiar lighthouses, and the Hotel — Imperial? National? Republican? Royal? It was hard to keep up with French political regimes. Here we are, moored alongside.

There she is, with her dear little face all muffled up. Look at the pretty foot, just peeping from the red petticoat! I leave my keys with Hannen, the commissionaire of the Hôtel des Bains where I am staying; and a few seconds after I have her round arm locked in mine. As I limp along, she pretends to support me — little goose! — and looks at me wonderingly with her great brown eyes, which are like a love song of Gounod's — so soft, so true, so beautiful.

Here we are at Lucy's mother's house; and I fear mamma doesn't look so pleased to see me as I could wish. I shall take her daughter away from her in a few months; and who could welcome the invader who robs her of such a pearl?

Now I am being divested of my travelling clothes, which is a process of some time, as it is impossible to avoid a certain liberty with those pretty hands when they approach the patient too nearly; and a chair is brought for my foot, and a glass of warm brandy and water is insisted upon — I must be so cold — and, in short, she is bent on nursing the sick, which she does beautifully.

It is Christmas Day, and we go to church together; and in the afternoon walk on the ramparts to enjoy the keen, frosty air. The ravishing little coquette tries all her arts upon me — as if she could make me love her one whit the more — and the staid young barrister, just called to the bar, has to affect a certain dignity in response. In the evening, we dine at the house of a friend; and Lucy is radiant in a white dress with sprigs of holly about it, and a wreath of holly in her thick brown hair. She looks like a daughter of Father Christmas himself. There are several old French fathers of families there, who nod and smile approvingly at us whispering nonsense in each other's ears. One old gentleman leans over to me and says, "You 'ave ze chance, monsieur! Truly, you 'ave ze chance." The real *père de famille* is not at all like what Sardou and Dumas represent him on the stage. He is generally a simple, warm-hearted old fellow — not particularly overburdened with worldly wisdom, perhaps, but not deficient in love of his family.

And all the merry season we have balls, and routs, and dinner parties, and theatricals, and one quarrel only — because Lucy would dance a waltz with a young French officer whom I thought far too good-looking. And the cruel days flew by so quickly; and that horrible date was approaching, marked in the calendar with black chalk: *Hil. Term begins*. Westminster Hall was to resound with my eloquence; attorneys were waiting with bags of enormous briefs; I was to be a great barrister; and then we could buy a nice house, and be married so soon — could we not? — and the delightful vision changes to what a different scene.

A woman is seated in a poorly furnished room; but a scanty fire in the grate; the wind beating sleet against the window panes. Sounds of merriment and revel come up from the street — for it is Christmas Eve — and the woman looks toward them with an anxious face, for she has a sick child on her lap. Her eyes are red from weeping over the sufferings of her little one. A footstep is heard on the stairs, and something like a smile lights up her wan face. A man enters.

"The doctor will come, Lucy dear; but he has a party tonight. Is the child better, poor little fellow?"

"Hardly, I fear, darling. His cough is so troublesome. You will send my dinner up to me, won't you? — for I don't like to leave him."

"Oh, Lucy, what a Christmas! What a contrast to the happy ones of years gone by! And all my fault, too. Curse those scoundrels and swindlers! And no chance that I see of recovering what they took. I don't know what we are to do. I think the only chance is to go away and hunt for some employment."

"Oh, no, darling; anything but that."

"Well, there is Flesher pressing for his bill; and all the rest of them will speedily follow. I suppose I shall pass next Christmas in gaol. There's someone coming to the door now — who can it be, I wonder?"

"Oh, Gorham, darling — it can't be those horrid men, surely. Oh, hide yourself — quick! Hark! They're knocking."

"Beg your pardon, sir, for disturbing of you; but Mr. Lackington's compliments, and he 'ave just returned from shooting, very tired, and can he 'ave a pint of champagne afore dinner?"

"A pint! Good gracious, yes — a dozen, if he likes. It was that infernal beef at lunch, I suppose. Here, wait! Bring a bottle here directly; and — and — tell Mrs. Gadabout I wish to speak to her."

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