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CHRISTMAS-TIME

'So many men so many minds' has been a proverb long before our days, and will be to the end of time and human history; and uniformity of sentiment is the one thing which men need never hope to attain.

Christmas-time is one of these battle-fields of feeling. To some it is just the consecration of so many circumstances of torture; to others the meeting-point of so many facts of pleasure. From the conventional greeting to the orthodox dinner – from the 'seasonable gifts' that are more obligatory than voluntary, to the toast that heralds the punch, and the dreams that follow on that last glass – all is so much pain to the flesh and weariness to the spirit; and they wonder how any one can find it otherwise. What is there in Christmas-time to make it pleasurable? they say. The gathering together of the family? A lot of rough boys home from school, who spoil the furniture and tease the dogs, lame the horses and ravage the garden, make the servants cross, the girls rude, and the younger children insubordinate; who upset all the order of the house, destroy its comfort like its quiet, and to whose safe return to discipline and your own restoration to tranquillity you look forward with impatient longing from the first hour of their arrival to the last of their stay? Or the advent of your married daughter with her two spoilt babies, who cry if they are looked at and want everything that they see, and that very objectionable young man her husband, with his ultra opinions and passion for argument, whom she would marry in spite of all that you could say, but to whom you can scarcely force yourself to be decently civil, not to speak of cordial, and whose presence is a perpetual blister while it lasts? Is this the family gathering about which you are expected to gush? – this with the addition of your son's fine-lady wife who snubs his mother and sisters with as little breeding as reserve, finds nothing at your table that she can eat, lives with her smelling-bottle to her nose and propped up with cushions on the sofa, and gives you to understand that she considers herself humiliated by her association with your family, and your son as much exalted as she is degraded? This is the domestic aspect of Christmas-time which is to make you forget all the ordinary troubles of life, creating in their stead a Utopia where ill-feeling is as little known as *ennui*, and family jars are as impossible as personal discomfort and dissent. Holding this picture in your hand, you decline to subscribe your name to the Io pæan universally chanted in praise of Christmas, and wrap yourself up in sullen silence when your neighbour congratulates you on having all your family about you, and wishes you a merry Christmas as if he meant it.

If the domestic aspect is disagreeable, what is the social? – A round of dinners of which the *menu* is precisely the same from Alpha to Omega: – turbot and thick lobster-sauce; roast-beef and boiled turkey; indigestible plum-pudding and murderous mince-pies; with sour oranges and sweet sherry to keep the balance even, and by the creation of two acids perhaps neutralise each other and the third. This is the food set before unoffending citizens under the name and style of Christmas dinners for the month or six weeks during which the idiotic custom of Christmas dinners at all is supposed to last. You are expected to live in this monotony of dyspepsia and antipathetic diet till you loathe the very sight of the familiar food, and long for a change with a vehemence which makes you ashamed of yourself, and more than half afraid that you are developing into a gourmand of the worst kind.

As if your nights were not sufficiently broken by the horrible compounds which trouble your digestion and disturb your brain, torturers known as the 'waits' prowl through the streets from midnight

to dawn, causing you agonies beyond those which even the hurdy-gurdy men inflict. You are just falling to sleep – painfully courted and hardly won – when a hideous discord worse than the wailings of cats startles you into a nervous wakefulness which banishes all hope for that night. What can you do? They are too far off for that jug of water to take effect, and you must not fire; anathemas do not hurt them, and if said aloud only waken up your wife and make her cry if she does not preach. You have nothing for it then but to lie still and groan inwardly, devoting to the infernal gods all the idiotic circumstances by which your life is rendered wretched, and your health, already frail, set still further wrong. In the morning, when wearied and nervously feverish from want of sleep, you go into the garden for a little quiet and delectation, you find your greenhouses stripped of the flowers which you had been lovingly watching for weeks, and your evergreens as ridiculously cropped as a shaved poodle. This is the day for the decoration of the church, and you, having made an expensive hobby of your garden, have to contribute what has cost months and good money to rear, for the childish satisfaction of John and Joan, lasting just two hours and five minutes. Not only have you lost your flowers and your evergreens – that splendid holly, which yesterday glowed like a flame, today nothing but a bundle of chopped ends! – but you know that your favourite daughter is flirting with the curate, and that a great deal is going on under cover of wreaths and crosses, laurustinus and chrysanthemum, of which you strongly disapprove yet cannot check. It is Christmas-time; decorating the church has become in these later days a kind of religious duty; and as a conscript father of your village, you must not forbid your daughter this pious pleasure any more than you can refuse your costly contribution in kind.

Turn to the financial side of the time; and what have you? – bills coming in that you neither expected nor knew of, and every one looking for a Christmas-box, and insolent or irritated if they do not get it. The servants obsequious to the worth of half a sovereign – tradesmen and their lads punctual in anticipation of half-crowns – postmen levying blackmail, and watermen and dustmen demanding as their right that they should be fee'd for their persistent neglect of duty – every one making a dead set at your pocket and trying to get your money for themselves – the very children more caressing and affectionate because it is Christmas and papa always gives them something on Christmas-day: – You groan as you ask yourself where is disinterestedness on this earth? – and you groan still more as you draw your cheques and reduce your balance and wonder by what law of right it is that you should be the pipe by which other folks are to be supplied.

No; you see no good or pleasure in this boasted Christmas-time as we keep it up in our benighted country. Its mirth is a sham and its inflictions are only too real. A time of tumult and expense, of indigestion and discomfort, you wait, grimly or fretfully as your mood may be, till it has passed and the current of your life is allowed to flow evenly as before. When you hear people sing its praises you long to stop their mouths, as you longed to silence the waits who woke you up out of your first sleep and spoilt your rest for the night. What manner of men are these, you think, who can find cause of congratulation in so much absurdity, if the fun is real to them – so much dreary make-believe, if it is unreal? You despise your genial, laughing, merry-hearted neighbour who goes into everything *con amore*, and accepts it all, from forfeits and snapdragon to plum-pudding and Christmas-boxes, as if he really liked it. You think what a fool he must be to be pleased with a rattle, tickled with a straw like this. But for the most part you do not believe in his mirth; and then you despise him still more as a hypocrite as well. For a hypocrite shamming folly is an offender against reason as well as truth, whom you find it hard to forgive, let the motive of his mummery be what it may.

This is one side of the question; your neighbour takes the other.

Who on earth, he says with his hands in his pockets, his back to the fire and his kindly smiling face to the room, who on earth can grumble at the facts of Christmas-time? For his part he finds it the jolliest season of the year, and he finds each season as jolly as the other, and all perfect in their own appointed way. He is none of your crying philosophers who go through life bewailing its miseries and oppressed by its misfortunes. Not he! He thinks the earth beautiful, men and women pleasant, and

God very good; and of all occasions wherein he can transact his cheerful philosophy, Christmas is the best. The boys are home for their holidays; and it is a pleasure to him to take them out hunting and shooting, and initiate them into the personal circumstances belonging to English country gentlemen. He looks forward to the time when they will take his place and carry on the traditions of the family, and he wishes them to be worthy of their name and an honour to their country. He is not one of those nervous self-centred men who live by rule and measure and cannot have a line of the day's ordering disturbed. He likes his own way certainly; and he has it; but he can press his elbows to his sides on occasions, and give room for others to expand. He does not find it such an unbearable infliction that his boys should come home and racket about the place, even though they are a little upsetting, and do not leave everything quite as smooth and straight as they found it. He remembers his own youth and how happy it made him to come home and racket; and he supposes that his lads are very much the same as he was at their age. He thinks too that they do the girls good – wake them up a little – and while not making them rough or rude – the mother takes care of that – yet that they prevent them from becoming prim and missy, as girls are apt to be who have no brothers and are left too much to themselves. Certainly he does not approve of the flood of slang which is let loose in the house during their stay; but school-boy slang at the worst is not permanent, and in a week's time will be forgotten.

As for the married daughter's children, they are the merriest little rogues in the world; and his wife looks ten years younger since they came. She was always fond of babies; and her grandchildren seem to renew her own past nursery with all the pleasure and none of the anxiety of the olden time. He rather wonders at his girl's taste in the matter of her husband – most fathers do – and cannot for the life of him see what there is to love in him. But if not an Alcibiades he is a good fellow in the main, and makes his young wife happy; which is the principal thing. And if his daughter-in-law is a trifle stiff, and fond of giving herself fine-lady airs, he for his part never stands that kind of nonsense, and will laugh her out of it before she has been twenty-four hours in the house. He finds good-humour and taking no offence the best weapons in the world against folly and ill-temper; and prefers them as curative agents to any other. The girl is a nice girl enough, but she has been badly brought up – had a lot of false ideas instilled into her by a foolish mother – but when she has been away from the old influences, and associated with themselves for a little while, she will open her eyes and see things in their right light. Who indeed could resist the sweet sensible influence of his wife, her mother-in-law? – and are not his girls the very perfection of honest wholesome English ladies? It will all come right in time; he has no doubt of that; and meanwhile they must be patient and forbearing for Dick's sake, and not make matters worse than they are by their own want of self-control.

Then as to the Christmas-boxes and the tips sacred to the season – well! well! after all they do not amount to much in the year, and see what pleasure they give! A man must be but a poor-spirited surly kind of hound who does not like to see his fellow-creatures happy; and a very little kindness goes a great way in that direction. He takes care to live within his income, and therefore he has always a margin to go on; and he does not object to use it. The servants have been very good on the whole, and do their duty fairly enough. And when they fail – as they do at times – why, to fail is human, and are they alone of all mankind to be blameless and never swerving in the right way? And are they alone of all mankind to be judged of by their worst and not by their best? – to be blamed for failure, but not praised for well-doing? He does not think so; and not thinking this, his half-sovereigns are given freely without the grudging which makes them an ungracious tax instead of a kindly voluntary gift. The tradespeople, too, do fairly well, and – they must have their profit like any one else! Those Christmas-boxes to their lads may be the nest-eggs for future savings; and even if they do go in a little finery or personal pleasure instead – young people will be young, and his own boys are fond of being smart and amused: so why not these others? You grumble at the waits? If you in your warm bed, well fed, well clothed, prosperous altogether, fret at the loss of an hour's sleep, what must these poor fellows feel, out in the cold frosty night, with the wind blowing and the sleet falling fast, and they not half fed nor a quarter clothed? For his own part he would like to give them a glass of hot

grog all round; and as for grumbling at the few coppers which they brave all this physical discomfort to earn, he makes it shillings, and hopes it will do them good. We must live and let live, he says with his broad smile; and if we are sometimes a little inconvenienced by the efforts made by the poor to accomplish the art of living for their own parts – we must remember that our loss is their gain, and that they are men and women like ourselves – fathers of families who want to keep the pot boiling and the fire alight – mothers who love their children, and are anxious to do the best for them that nature and man will allow.

You complain of indigestion and grumble at the monotony of your Christmas fare? – That is strange! Who can grumble at good plain succulent meat? – and why do you eat the sweets if they disagree with you? Neither pudding nor mince-pie comes into the eternal necessities of things, and you would do very well if only you would refrain. He does not eat things that he cannot digest, and in consequence he sleeps well, and when he wakes has neither regret nor remorse. Surely that is not such a painful trial – to forbear eating what is hurtful to your health, and in touching your health corroding your happiness as well.

In a word, the whole difference of the spirit in which we meet the facts of Christmas depends on the good or ill humour with which we are naturally endowed, and which we have cultivated by common-sense on the one hand, or suffered to ride rough-shod over our reason on the other. If we are unselfish and sympathetic, Christmas-time is as pleasant to us as popular tradition would make it; if we are egotistical and peevish, it is a wearisome infliction and a sham which no honest man can pretend to believe in, nor any sensible one to admire.

For our own part we believe in Christmas, because we believe in the kindness of man to man, in genial good-humour, in unselfishness, and the liking of wholesome natures to give happiness; and so far as we have gone yet we have seen no reason to change our views. A merry Christmas then to you all, friends, readers, and countrymen; and a happy New Year to follow after; and may God bless the rich and care for the poor, and lead us all in the right way while the day lasts and before the night has come!

A CAST OF THE NET

THE STORY OF A DETECTIVE OFFICER

CHAPTER IV

Long after it had grown quite dark, all remained quiet, and at last I resolved upon making a move. I had determined upon fetching Peter Tilley. I had plenty of assistance, but I thought I should like to have Peter with me. So I went down to the ferry; a gas-light which burned at the corner shewed me before I left my post that the bony ferryman was not there; and choosing a pretty good boat, with a strong young fellow to pull, I got in. It was a most unpleasant night; as dark as pitch, which was bad enough, but every now and then it lightened, which was worse, as it dazzled my eyes, and made me think we were running smash on board some great vessel which I had not seen a moment before, and couldn't see a moment after. However, the boatman was used to all kinds of weather, I suppose, and knew the river thoroughly; so through the darkness and the rain, which never left off for a moment, we reached the other side.

I left the boat to wait for me, and ran up to the *Yarmouth Smack*. I looked in, and saw Peter leaning against the bar and smoking a short pipe, as a labourer ought to do; and he was talking in a friendly way to some rough-looking fellows. I slipped in, and using the name we had agreed upon, spoke to him. He knew my voice of course; but seeing me so changed, for my make-up was really splendid (it was, although I say so that shouldn't), it gave him such a shock that he was obliged to put the pewter down he was going to drink from and look steadily at me before he answered. 'I'm acoming,' he said at last, and we got outside; when, as we walked down to the ferry, I gave him a sort of idea of what was going on, and how I expected to make a great catch that night. Peter of course was very glad to be in for such a big thing as this, for he had never been mixed up with anything so important.

Not to trust the boatman too much, I kept Peter back a few yards from the water while I finished my story, standing a little on one side, so as to be out of the way of the people who came and went to and from the ferry. While I was talking to him, a wherry ran in; we heard her grate on the pebbles and the sculls rattle as the man laid 'em in; but that we had heard before. It's a part of my habit to notice little things however, and I looked to see who had come in by this boat. There was only one passenger, a woman, and she passed us walking quickly; but quick as she walked, I saw her, and she saw me. Blessed if it wasn't Miss Doyle! My being there was no odds to Miss Doyle, nor could it have signified to her if she had seen me fifty times; yet I felt I would rather not have met her just then; it looked unlucky, and she was such an uncommonly sharp one too. Sharp or not, I couldn't see what she could make out of my standing under a wall on a wet night talking to another labourer.

Having finished my explanation, we both got into the wherry, and I asked the man if he would like a good long job, which might perhaps last all night.

'The longer the better, governor,' he says, 'if the pay is accordin'.'

'The pay *will* be accordin',' I answered; 'and so you are engaged.'

The first thing I made him do was to row round that oyster-smack, for the tide had risen enough to take us round her. I shewed no light, but we went inside her twice; and the fellow on the watch was very sharp, so he was leaning over the side when we came round the second time, and I could say quite quiet-like: 'I am in this boat now – watch the river.' That was quite enough; he knew he would not now have to look to the *Anchor* for signals.

After this began what I believe was the most disagreeable sort of patrol I ever had. There was a time when I used to envy the Thames police; but I can't say I ever did after that night. We were obliged to be in motion almost continually, because we did not know from which side of the river the paper might come, and we weren't quite sure that it would come at all, especially on that night; and I don't know, speaking from my own experience, that there is anything more trying to the spirits than the pulling backwards and forwards and loitering about on the river Thames in a raw October night with a small thick rain falling. Twice we landed, and went once to the *Smack* and once to the

Anchor. I couldn't grudge the men a glass of hot grog; in fact I was obliged to have some myself, even if I missed my capture through it.

It grew later and later; the flashes of lightning still came at long intervals; but the lights on the shore went out, and excepting the gas-lamps which burnt at street-corners, ferries, and wharfs, all was dark. The traffic on the river had long ceased, no shouts or rattle of wheels came from the shore; and the rain still falling, it was, I give you my word, most horribly miserable, dull and sloppy beyond description. Twelve o'clock had struck, and one, and perhaps half an hour beyond it. I had cautioned my companions to speak very low; so the boatman only whispered when he said: 'It's as quiet as it is likely to be, governor, if you've got anything to run. I have just seen the police galley creep along on the other side; I see her under that lamp. Now's your time.'

He thought we were smugglers! Perhaps he didn't care if we were thieves. I told him to be patient; when at that very instant, just as we were creeping along under the lee of a coal-barge, a wherry shot very silently by, right in front of us, going across stream, and not six feet from our bows. In her sat the sulky ferryman; I knew him at a glance, dark as it was. 'Pull after that wherry,' I said.

'Peter Tilley, my lad,' I continued, turning to Peter, 'the time's acoming, I think.'

'I'm precious glad of it,' says Peter; 'for I'm catching a cold in my head every minute I sit in this confounded boat; and it's all soaking wet where I'm sitting.'

Our man pulled on; he was a very strong fellow, as I have said, and we could have overtaken the other boat directly; but this of course I did not want. I knew where to look for the old scamp; and sure enough, after a few strokes across stream, he bent to the left and ran under the bows of the Dutch trader.

All was dark and silent as the grave aboard the ship; but that didn't deceive the old boatman, nor did it deceive me. I stopped our man in the shade of the next vessel, if you can call anywhere a shade, when it was all pitch dark. We had not been there a minute before I heard a slight noise – it was impossible to see any one unless he stood between you and the sky – and then I could tell by the sound that a man had dropped into the wherry. There was no need to tell me what man it was. With an almost noiseless dip, the ferryman dropped his sculls into the river again and rowed on, we still after him. I took it for granted he was going to the other side of the ferry; but he suddenly bore off to the right, and rowed on for some little time, then striking in between two vessels, he went straight for the land.

'Where is he going to?' I whispered.

'To the landing at Byrle's wharf,' says the boatman in the same tone.

So he was; and it appeared this landing-place was at the farther side of the wharf; that is, lower down the river.

It was so dark we could hardly see them – for we could just make out there were now two persons in the boat – but as they reached the shore, a lamp that was burning on the wharf helped us a little. We could not clearly see what they were doing; but they certainly got out of the boat, and as certainly there were then more than two figures moving about, and seemingly engaged in placing parcels in the wherry. But it was very gloomy there; they were in the shade of the wharf, and the lamp glimmered weak and faint through the thick rain. It was the more difficult to see what was being done, because there were several boats tied up to the landing-place, making some confusion in the darkness. At last, however, we could see that they were pushing off from the shore; so it was time for us to move. We pulled back for a while (there was no doubt as to which way the others would come), and then sheering off, lay between two colliers until we saw the wherry we had watched go by, and then we once more pulled after them.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.