

# THE CHRISTMAS FIREPLACE

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Tea for Three Studios

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The events of the story take place roughly two years after *Regency Love*,  
and seven months after *Lady Lavender*.



MRS NORRIS WAS down to her last piece of firewood on Christmas Day. Dressed in her Sunday best, she sat in the largest room of her small house and wondered how long the log would last.

‘I wonder how long the log would last,’ she said to the picture above the cold fireplace. ‘We won’t need a fire until one o’clock at the very least, and possibly not till later if it warms up outside.’

She looked out to the street, where the sleet fell in heavy sheets.

‘Well, it mightn’t warm up outside, but there’s no harm in hoping now is there, Mr Norris?’

The man in the pictured smiled, as he had done for the last twelve years.

‘Oh yes, Mr Norris, that is a very fair point – Mr Digby will be at church, and I could always ask for his assistance. Such a sensible, reliable young man, that Mr Digby – I do wonder why he’s not yet entered into a match. He is the most eligible gentleman in Darlington, you know – and as you said so yourself, he really is the most well-behaved, the most handsome. He carries himself very well indeed – and his sense of fashion! Why, Mr Digby truly is the nonpareil of gentlemen not just in Darlington, but in all of Hertfordshire! What an excellent young man he is – though of course you know all this, my dear Mr Norris – you were always his greatest champion long before I’d discovered his best qualities!’

Mrs Norris chuckled, and was pleased when Mr Norris smiled back at her.

‘You’re absolutely right, Mr Norris – there is no need to worry. We can surely depend on Mr Digby! Right, now what do you think about *my* attire, Mr Norris? Yes, I’ve had the same outfit the last thirteen Christmases, but it is quite a fetching colour, and it *does* suit me, you know. And you were *very* partial to it indeed, Mr Norris – oh, don’t make me blush, my dear Mr Norris! You are quite fortunate we are alone – you’d give poor Jane a fright if she were here, bless that soul! Now *she* is quite a dear, always stopping by to read to me or bring me some soup – I’ve told you about her soups, haven’t I? Oh, Mr Norris, I do know how much you enjoyed your soups, and your roasts, and your sweets, and your brandies – but of course you never overindulged, my dear, and always let me take as much as I’d wanted, which was often not very much, but just enough, and certainly a good amount to prevent you from overindulging, wouldn’t you agree?’

Mr Norris smiled, silent and steady as always.

Mrs Norris smiled back at him.



MR DIGBY WAS not at church. Mrs Norris discovered this from Mrs Stevens, who had heard from Miss Murray, who had overheard from Miss Earlwood, who had heard Mr Digby coughing through the entire midnight service. Of course, Mrs Norris was aghast: if Mr Digby was ill enough to disrupt the praise of the good Lord on Christmas Eve, then he must be very ill indeed! And it would be Mrs Norris’s duty to call on him, and bring *him* some soup and fruit cake!

Alas, the sleet had only grown fiercer during the service, and by the time she’d finished informing the congregation that Mr Digby’s absence was on account of him being *very ill indeed*, it became impossible for her to make the mile-long journey on foot. Having no carriage of her own and no Mr Norris to procure one for her, Mrs Norris stood at the west door of the church and shared her distress about the weather.

‘I am very distressed about the weather,’ she said to the heavens. ‘How am I to call on Mr Digby without catching a chill myself?’

She was more than a little surprised when a deep voice sounded behind her, almost making her startle.

‘A fair question indeed, ma’am. Perhaps Mrs Curtis and I could be of assistance.’

Mrs Norris turned to regard Mr Curtis with some suspicion. She had not said the kindest words about the gentleman when he occupied Bradley House two years ago, and she had certainly frowned upon his venture with Lampton Hall, which he’d

turned into a school for *all* children. Even the thought made her shudder – mixing boys *and* girls in a schoolroom? teaching Greek and Latin to *farmers'* children? – but Mrs Norris was well-practised in masking her reactions. It would simply not do for her to be thought of as discourteous, of all things! Besides, regardless of how she felt about Mr Curtis and his wife – going all the way to Yorkshire *unaccompanied* last year?! – Mrs Norris knew she wouldn't be able to visit Mr Digby without their assistance.

'I wouldn't be able to visit Mr Digby without your assistance,' she said, 'so it's very, *very* kind of you to offer. But we must set out immediately – he has great need of these throat lozenges – my mother's secret recipe, you know, and I always have them with me during winter, and sometimes into the spring as well – and once I'm assured he is resting as he should, I must bring him some soup and hot elderberry wine, for it *is* Christmas Day! So we must not delay any longer!'



MR CURTIS WAS a prudent man. Mrs Norris discovered this when he checked the harnesses himself and instructed the driver to take extra precaution before they set off in his carriage. Given his scandalous liaison with Mrs Curtis before they were even engaged, Mrs Norris had rather expected the older gentleman to be rash and full of fancies.

'I had rather expected you to be rash and full of fancies,' she said to him, 'but you have surprised me, Mr Curtis – and I daresay that happens very infrequently. I'd thought a gentleman of your standing would care little about the particulars – of course, my Mr Norris was all about the particulars, and he took great care with our horse Sam, but he is of a much humbler stock than you, and it was as much his character as his responsibility to ensure everything was just so.'

Mr Curtis made no reply, but his wife said: 'My husband has a keen eye for detail – it's one of his most admirable qualities, though not without its cost. I've often awoken to an empty bed in the middle of the night, only to discover he'd been overseeing the finances, or checking the curriculum at Lampton, or working on his treatise on political governance. He works *much* too hard.'

Mrs Norris only nodded, looking away from their indecent display of affection. How licentious it was to speak so openly about their marital bed – and of sharing the same chambers! Mr and Mrs Norris had maintained separate rooms in their humble home, and they had been married almost forty years!

Mrs Norris's distress turned into astonishment when, upon reaching Mr Digby's house, they discovered the gentleman was at Thornleigh Abbey, home of Mr Ashcroft. Mrs Norris kept her alarm to herself as they set out for their new destination: although she had thought Mr Ashcroft dependable, he was *very* unconventional in being on such familiar terms with his *natural*-born half-sibling. Fortunately, Mrs Norris consoled herself on the journey, with the younger 'Ashcroft' away in the regiment, she had no need of forming an acquaintance with such questionable company.



MR ASHCROFT WAS not at home, but Ensign Ashcroft was. The trio discovered this when they were shown to the drawing room where Ensign Ashcroft and another man were playing chess.

'What a pleasant surprise, Mr and Mrs Curtis!' said Ensign Ashcroft, who had all the civility of a proper gentleman. 'And you must be Mrs Norris – it is so lovely to meet you properly! Happy Christmas!'

Mrs Norris was seated and served refreshments with such rapidity that she had little time to object to the younger Ashcroft's presence or her new association with him.

'I hope you'll all allow me to introduce my friend, Lieutenant Graham.'

'A pleasure,' the young man said, his smile rather charming – though, naturally, Mrs Norris was wholly immune to such displays. 'Mr and Mrs Curtis, Richard pointed you out in church, but we thought we'd call on you tomorrow. My congratulations to you both on your happy news – Mrs Curtis, please do take a seat!'

They exchanged more pleasantries, the contents of which would have scandalised Mrs Norris had she not been so concerned about Mr Digby

'I'm concerned about Mr Digby,' she said, 'and I want to know where he is. His butler said he was at Thornleigh with Mr Ashcroft, yet I see no sign of him! Is he terribly ill? Have we come too late? Oh, oh *my*, it cannot be! We cannot lose Mr Digby too – he was the only young man my dear Mr Norris commended! No, we *must not* lose Mr Digby, or there would be no respectable gentleman left in Darlington!'

The group fretted over Mrs Norris and suggested she recline on a chaise, but she waved them away. 'None of that now – I'm not so fragile, you know! But do tell me plainly: where is Mr Digby?'

Ensign Ashcroft replied: 'Why, I thought you knew, Mrs Norris – he is calling on you with Marcus, Ellie, and Aubrey – Lord Sutton, that is – he's my new brother-in-

law! The lieutenant and I stayed behind because we weren't certain about our welcome.'

'Nonsense!' Mrs Norris declared. If this natural-born young man was decent enough to carry the Ashcroft name, address her with such courtesy, and befriend a respectable lieutenant in the British Army, then it was not for her to judge him further. 'Now that we are acquainted at last, you must call on me whenever you are in Darlington!'

Within a few minutes, the Ashcroft carriages were also called out, and the party of five set out to Mrs Norris's humble abode. It was only when they were on their way that Mrs Norris remembered she had a single piece of firewood, barely enough tables and seats, and *one* pot of soup, *six* slices of cold cuts, and a *small* fruit loaf to serve her *eight* guests.



MRS NORRIS WAS met with a merry fire and a Christmas feast in her front room. All the tables and chairs had been gathered from the other two rooms, and new beeswax candles were lit across the tables. The crockery and cutlery were mismatched – as was the rest of the furniture – but for once, Mrs Norris did not fault the arrangement.

'Oh my!' she said instead, glancing from the tables to the dishes to all the people in their Sunday best gathered in her small house. 'Oh my!'

Mr Digby, who'd been seated, rose at her arrival. 'Happy Christmas, Mrs Norris! We were afraid that you were – that you had been caught in the snow!'

She looked outside the window and saw the morning sleet had turned into flurries of snow.

'Mr Digby!' she exclaimed. 'I was quite worried about you – hadn't you collapsed in church last night? Oh my, if only I had been there – I'd attended every midnight service with Mr Norris, you know, but in these last few years I really must go to bed at nine o'clock, or no later than ten o'clock.'

Mr Digby coughed for a few moments and required a glass of brandy. 'I was a little ill,' he said, 'but Mr Ashcroft invited me to stay at Thornleigh after the service. I needed some firewood, you see, and Mr Ashcroft kindly offered – he has a lot of stock!'

Lord Sutton, the viscount Mrs Norris had only met twice before, seemed to find this particularly amusing. Mrs Norris, however, was very distressed to discover Mr Digby was also low on firewood.

‘I’m very distressed to discover you are also low on firewood,’ she said. ‘I would happily share *my* firewood, but...’

She grew silent as she look beside the fireplace and saw the firewood piled high.

‘Mr Digby was worrying himself sick,’ said Mr Ashcroft. ‘He knew you didn’t have enough wood to last you through Christmas, but he was in no condition to gather any himself. We thought it best to take in Mr Digby for the night so he could recover by midday, if not for the morning service, and then we would stop by.’

‘But then it wasn’t right to send Mr Digby here alone with *just* the firewood,’ Ensign Ashcroft added. ‘Thornleigh is prepared for quite a feast this year, and it was only right to share it with you and Mr Digby. It was Ellie’s idea.’

Mrs Norris looked at Miss Ashcroft – nay, *Lady Sutton* – and thought her shy smile most demure.

Someone’s stomach grumbled, which was shortly followed by laughter. Even Mrs Norris, who disapproved of such uncouth behaviour, did not have the heart to criticise the offender.

‘Mrs Norris?’ asked Mr Digby. ‘Shall we?’

He pulled out the chair at the makeshift head of the table and waited. Mrs Norris looked up at Mr Norris, who was smiling down at her. Of all the youth in Darlington, he had only singled out Mr Digby for praise – but perhaps if Mr Norris had lived long enough to know these other young people, he would have thought highly of them, too.

Mrs Norris smiled back at Mr Norris, as she always did, and always will.

And this time, she also smiled back at the rest of the room.

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