Christmas Storms and Sunshine

Elizabeth Gaskell

Table of Contents

Christmas Storms and Sunshine

Elizabeth Gaskell

In the town of —— (no matter where) there circulated two local newspapers (no matter when). Now the Flying Post was long established and respectable — alias bigoted and Tory; the Examiner was spirited and intelligent — alias new−fangled and democratic. Every week these newspapers contained articles abusing each other; as cross and peppery as articles could be, and evidently the production of irritated minds, although they seemed to have one stereotyped commencement, — 'Though the article appearing in last week's Post (or Examiner) is below contempt, yet we have been induced,' &c., &c., and every Saturday the Radical shopkeepers shook hands together, and agreed that the Post was done for, by the slashing, clever Examiner; while the more dignified Tories began by regretting that Johnson should think that low paper, only read by a few of the vulgar, worth wasting his wit upon; however the Examiner was at its last gasp.

It was not though. It lived and flourished; at least it paid its way, as one of the heroes of my story could tell. He was chief compositor, or whatever title may be given to the head−man of the mechanical part of a newspaper. He hardly confined himself to that department. Once or twice, unknown to the editor, when the manuscript had fallen short, he had filled up the vacant space by compositions of his own; announcements of a forthcoming crop of green peas in December; a grey thrush having been seen, or a white hare, or such interesting phenomena; invented for the occasion, I must confess; but what of that? His wife always knew when to expect a little specimen of her husband's literary talent by a peculiar cough, which served as prelude; and, judging from this encouraging sign, and the high−pitched and emphatic voice in which he read them, she was inclined to think, that an 'Ode to an early Rose−bud,' in the corner devoted to original poetry, and a letter in the correspondence department, signed 'Pro Bono Publico,' were her husband's writing, and to hold up her head accordingly.

I never could find out what it was that occasioned the Hodgsons to lodge in the same house as the Jenkinses. Jenkins held the same office in the Tory paper as Hodgson did in the Examiner, and, as I said before, I leave you to give it a name. But Jenkins had a proper sense of his position, and a proper reverence for all in authority, from the king down to the editor and sub−editor. He would as soon have thought of borrowing the king's crown for a nightcap, or the king's sceptre for a walking−stick, as he would have thought of filling up any spare corner with any production of his own; and I think it would have even added to his contempt of Hodgson (if that were possible), had he known of the 'productions of his brain,' as the latter fondly alluded to the paragraphs he inserted, when speaking to his wife..

Jenkins had his wife too. Wives were wanting to finish the completeness of the quarrel, which existed one memorable Christmas week, some dozen years ago, between the two neighbours, the two compositors. And with wives, it was a very pretty, a very complete quarrel. To make the opposing parties still more equal, still more well−matched, if the Hodgsons had a baby ('such a baby! — a poor, puny little thing'), Mrs Jenkins had a cat ('such a cat! a great, nasty, miowling tom−cat, that was always stealing the milk put by for little Angel's supper'). And now, having matched Greek with Greek, I must proceed to the tug of war. It was the day before Christmas; such a cold east wind! such an inky sky! such a blue−black look in people's faces, as they were driven out more than usual, to complete their purchases for the next day's festival.

Before leaving home that morning, Jenkins had given some money to his wife to buy the next day's dinner.

'My dear, I wish for turkey and sausages. It may be a weakness, but I own I am partial to sausages. My deceased mother was. Such tastes are hereditary. As to the sweets — whether plum−pudding or mince−pies — I leave such considerations to you; I only beg you not. to mind expense. Christmas comes but once a year.'

And again he had called out from the bottom of the first flight of stairs, just close to the Hodgsons' door ('such ostentatiousness,' as Mrs Hodgson observed), 'You will not forget the sausages, my dear?'

'I should have liked to have had something above common, Mary,' said Hodgson, as they too made their plans for the next day, 'but I think roast beef must do for us. You see, love, we've a family.'

'Only one, Jem! I don't want more than roast beef though, I'm sure. Before I went to service, mother and me would have thought roast beef a very fine dinner.'

'Well, let's settle it then, roast beef and a plum−pudding; and now, good−by. Mind and take care of little Tom. I thought he was a bit hoarse this morning.'

And off he went to his work.

Now, it was a good while since Mrs Jenkins and Mrs Hodgson had spoken to each other, although they were quite as much in possession of the knowledge of events and opinions as though they did. Mary knew that Mrs Jenkins despised her for not having a real lace cap, which Mrs Jenkins had; and for having been a servant, which Mrs Jenkins had not; and the little occasional pinchings which the Hodgsons were obliged to resort to, to make both ends meet, would have been very patiently endured by Mary, if she had not winced under Mrs Jenkins's knowledge of such economy. But she had her revenge. She had a child, and Mrs Jenkins had none. To have had a child, even such a puny baby as little Tom, Mrs Jenkins would have worn commonest caps, and cleaned grates, and drudged her fingers to the bone. The great unspoken disappointment of her life soured her temper, and turned her thoughts inward, and made her morbid and selfish.

'Hang that cat! he's been stealing again! he's gnawed the cold mutton in his nasty mouth till it's not fit to set before a Christian; and I've nothing else for Jem's dinner. But I'll give it him now I've caught him, that I will!'

So saying, Mary Hodgson caught up her husband's Sunday cane, and despite pussy's cries and scratches, she gave him such a heating as she hoped might cure him of his thievish propensities; when lo! and behold, Mrs Jenkins stood at the door with a face of bitter wrath.

'Aren't you ashamed of yourself ma'am, to abuse a poor dumb animal, ma'am, as knows no better than to take food when he sees it, ma'am? He only follows the nature which God has given, ma'am; and it's a pity your nature, ma'am, which I've heard, is of the stingy saving species, does not make you shut your cupboard−door a little closer. There is such a thing as law for brute animals. I'll ask Mr Jenkins, but I don't think them Radicals has done away with that law yet, for all their Reform Bill, ma'am. My poor precious love of a Tommy, is he hurt? and is his leg broke for taking a mouthful of scraps, as most people would give away to a beggar, — if he'd take 'em?' wound up Mrs Jenkins, casting a contemptuous look on the remnant of a scrag end of mutton.

Mary felt very angry and very guilty. For she really pitied the poor limping animal as he crept up to his mistress, and there lay down to bemoan himself she wished she had not beaten him so hard, for it certainly was her own careless way of never shutting the cupboard−door that had tempted him to his fault. But the sneer at her little bit of mutton turned her penitence to fresh wrath, and she shut the door in Mrs Jenkins's face, as she stood caressing her cat in the lobby, with such a bang, that it wakened little Tom, and he began to cry.

Everything was to go wrong with Mary to−day. Now baby was awake, who was to take her husband's dinner to the office? She took the child in her arms, and tried to hush him off to sleep again, and as she sung she cried, she could hardly tell why, — a sort of reaction from her violent angry feelings. She wished she had never beaten the poor cat; she wondered if his leg was really broken. What would her mother say if she knew how cross and cruel her little Mary was getting? If she should live to beat her child in one of her angry fits?

It was of no use lullabying while she sobbed so; it must be given up, and she must just carry her baby in her arms, and take him with her to the office, for it was long past dinner−time. So she pared the mutton carefully, although by so doing she reduced the meat to an infinitesimal quantity, and taking the baked potatoes out of the oven, she popped them piping hot into her basket with the et−ceteras of plate, butter, salt, and knife and fork.

It was, indeed, a bitter wind. She bent against it as she ran, and the flakes of snow were sharp and cutting as ice. Baby cried all the way, though she cuddled him up in her shawl. Then her husband had made his appetite up for a potato pie, and (literary man as he was) his body got so much the better of his mind, that he looked rather black at the cold mutton. Mary had no appetite for her own dinner when she arrived at home again. So, after she had tried to feed baby, and he had fretfully refused to take his bread and milk, she laid him down as usual on his quilt, surrounded by play−things, while she sided away, and chopped suet for the next day's pudding. Early in the afternoon a parcel came, done up first in brown paper, then in such a white, grass−bleached, sweet−smelling towel, and a note from her dear, dear mother; in which quaint writing she endeavoured to tell her daughter that she was not forgotten at Christmas time; but that learning that Farmer Burton was killing his pig, she had made interest for some of his famous pork, out of which she had manufactured some sausages, and flavoured them just as Mary used to like when she lived at home.

'Dear, dear mother!' said Mary to herself. 'There never was any one like her for remembering other folk. What rare sausages she used to make! Home things have a smack with 'em, no bought things can ever have. Set them up with their sausages! I've a notion if Mrs Jenkins had ever tasted mother's she'd have no fancy for them town−made things Fanny took in just now.'

And so she went on thinking about home, till the smiles and the dimples came out again at the remembrance of that pretty cottage, which would look green even now in the depth of winter, with its pyracanthus, and its holly−bushes, and the great Portugal laurel that was her mother's pride. And the back path through the orchard to Farmer Burton's; how well she remembered it. The bushels of unripe apples she had picked up there, and distributed among his pigs, till he had scolded her for giving them so much green trash.

She was interrupted — her baby (I call him a baby, because his father and mother did, and because he was so little of his age, but I rather think he was eighteen months old) had fallen asleep some time before among his playthings; an uneasy, restless sleep; but of which Mary had been thankful, as his morning's nap had been too short, and as. she was so busy. But now he began to make such a strange crowing noise, just like a chair drawn heavily and gratingly along a kitchen−floor! His eyes were open, but expressive of nothing but pain.

'Mother's darling!' said Mary, in terror, lifting him up. 'Baby, try not to make that noise. Hush, hush, darling; what hurts him?' But the noise came worse and worse.

'Fanny! Fanny!' Mary called in mortal fright, for her baby was almost black with his gasping breath, and she had no one to ask for aid or sympathy but her landlady's daughter, a little girl of twelve or thirteen, who attended to the house in her mother's absence, as daily cook in gentlemen's families. Fanny was more especially considered the attendant of the upstairs lodgers (who paid for the use of the kitchen, 'for Jenkins could not abide the smell of meat cooking'), but just now she was fortunately sitting at her afternoon's work of darning stockings, and hearing Mrs Hodgson's cry of terror, she ran to her sitting−room, and understood the case at a glance.

'He's got the croup! Oh, Mrs Hodgson, he'll die as sure as fate. Little brother had it, and he died in no time. The doctor said he could do nothing for him — it had gone too far. He said if we'd put him in a warm bath at first, it might have saved him; but, bless you! he was never half so bad as your baby.' Unconsciously there mingled in her statement some of a child's love of producing an effect; but the increasing danger was clear enough.

'Oh, my baby! my baby! Oh, love, love! don't look so ill; I cannot bear it. And my fire so low! There, I was thinking of home, and picking currants, and never minding the fire. Oh, Fanny! what is the fire like in the kitchen? Speak.'

'Mother told me to screw it up, and throw some slack on as soon as Mrs Jenkins had done with it, and so I did. It's very low and black. But, oh, Mrs Hodgson! let me run for the doctor — I cannot abear to hear him, it's so like little brother.'

Through her streaming tears Mary motioned her to go; and trembling, sinking, sick at heart, she laid her boy in his cradle, and ran to fill her kettle.

Mrs Jenkins, having cooked her husband's snug little dinner, to which he came home; having told him her story of pussy's beating, at which he was justly and dignifiedly (?) indignant, saying it was all of a piece with that abusive Examiner; having received the sausages, and turkey, and mince pies, which her husband had ordered; and cleaned up the room, and prepared everything for tea, and coaxed and duly bemoaned her cat (who had pretty nearly forgotten his beating, but very much enjoyed the petting); having done all these and many other things, Mrs Jenkins sat down to get up the real lace cap. Every thread was pulled out separately, and carefully stretched: when, what was that? Outside, in the street, a chorus of piping children's voices sang the old carol she had heard a hundred times in the days of her youth: —

As Joseph was a walking he heard an angel sing, 'This night shall be born our heavenly King. He neither shall be born in housen nor in hall, Nor in the place of Paradise, but in an ox's stall. He neither shall be clothed in purple nor in pall, But all in fair linen, as were babies all: He neither shall be rocked in silver nor in gold, But in a wooden cradle that rocks on the mould,'

She got up and went to the window. There, below, stood the group of grey black little figures, relieved against the snow, which now enveloped everything. 'For old sake's sake,' as she phrased it, she counted out a halfpenny apiece for the singers, out of the copper bag, and threw them down below.

The room had become chilly while she had been counting out and throwing down her money, so she stirred her already glowing fire, and sat down right before it — but not to stretch her lace; like Mary Hodgson, she began

to think over long−past days, on softening remembrances of the dead and gone, on words long forgotten, on holy stories heard at her mother's knee.

'I cannot think what's come over me to−night,' said she, half aloud, recovering herself by the sound of her own voice from her train of thought — 'My head goes wandering on them old times. I'm sure more texts have come into my head with thinking on my mother within this last half hour, than I've thought on for years and years. I hope I'm not going to die. Folks say, thinking too much on the dead betokens we're going to join 'em; I should be loth to go just yet — such a fine turkey as we've got for dinner to−morrow, too!'

Knock, knock, knock, at the door, as fast as knuckles could go. And then, as if the comer could not wait, the door was opened, and Mary Hodgson stood there as white as death.

'Mrs Jenkins! — oh, your kettle is boiling, thank God! Let me have the water for my baby, for the love of God! He's got croup, and is dying!'

Mrs Jenkins turned on her chair with a wooden inflexible look on her face, that (between ourselves) her husband knew and dreaded for all his pompous dignity.

'I'm sorry I can't oblige you, ma'am; my kettle is wanted for my husband's tea. Don't be afeared, Tommy, Mrs Hodgson won t venture to intrude herself where she's not desired. You'd better send for the doctor, ma'am, instead of wasting your time in wringing your hands, ma'am — my kettle is engaged.'

Mary clasped her hands together with passionate force, but spoke no word of entreaty to that wooden face — that sharp, determined voice; but, as she turned away, she prayed for strength to bear the coming trial, and strength to forgive Mrs Jenkins.

Mrs Jenkins watched her go away meekly, as one who has no hope, and then she turned upon herself as sharply as she ever did on any one else.

'What a brute I am, Lord forgive me! What's my husband's tea to a baby's life? In croup, too, where time is everything. You crabbed old vixen, you! — any one may know you never had a child!'

She was down stairs (kettle in hand) before she had finished her self−upbraiding; and when in Mrs Hodgson's room, she rejected all thanks (Mary had not the voice for many words), saying, stiffly, 'I do it for the poor babby's sake, ma'am, hoping he may live to have mercy to poor dumb beasts, if he does forget to lock his cupboards.'

But she did everything, and more than Mary, with her young inexperience, could have thought of. She prepared the warm bath, and tried it with her husband's own thermometer (Mr Jenkins was as punctual as clockwork in noting down the temperature of every day). She let his mother place her baby in the tub, still preserving the same rigid, affronted aspect, and then she went upstairs without a word. Mary longed to ask her to stay, but dared not; though, when she left the room, the tears chased each other down her cheeks faster than ever. Poor young mother! how she counted the minutes till the doctor should come. But, before he came, down again stalked Mrs Jenkins, with something in her hand.

'I've seen many of these croup−fits, which, I take it, you've not, ma am. Mustard plaisters is very sovereign, put on the throat; I've been up and made one, ma'am, and, by your leave, I'll put it on the poor little fellow.'

Mary could not speak, but she signed her grateful assent.

It began to smart while they still kept silence; and he looked up to his mother as if seeking courage from her looks to bear the stinging pain; but she was softly crying, to see him suffer, and her want of courage reacted upon him, and he began to sob aloud. Instantly Mrs Jenkins's apron was up, hiding her face: 'Peep−bo, baby,' said she, as merrily as she could. His little face brightened, and his mother having once got the cue, the two women kept the little fellow amused, until his plaister had taken effect.

'He's better, — oh, Mrs Jenkins, look at his eyes! how different! And he breathes quite softly — '

As Mary spoke thus, the doctor entered. He examined his patient. Baby was really better.

'It has been a sharp attack, but the remedies you have applied have been worth all the Pharmacopoeia an hour later. — I shall send a powder,'

Mrs Jenkins stayed to hear this opinion; and (her heart wonderfully more easy) was going to leave the room, when Mary seized her hand and kissed it; she could not speak her gratitude. Mrs Jenkins looked affronted and awkward, and as if she must go upstairs and wash her hand directly.

But, in spite of these sour looks, she came softly down an hour or so afterwards to see how baby was.

The little gentleman slept well after the fright he had given his friends; and on Christmas morning, when Mary awoke and looked at the sweet little pale face lying on her arm, she could hardly realize the danger he had been

in.

When she came down (later than usual), she found the household in a commotion. What do you think had happened? Why, pussy had been a traitor to his best friend, and eaten up some of Mr Jenkins's own especial sausages; and gnawed and tumbled the rest so, that they were not fit to be eaten! There were no bounds to that cat's appetite! he would have eaten his own father if he had been tender enough. And now Mrs Jenkins stormed and cried — 'Hang the cat!'

Christmas Day, too! and all the shops shut! 'What was turkey without sausages?' gruffly asked Mr Jenkins.

'Oh, Jem!' whispered Mary, 'hearken what a piece of work he's making about sausages, — I should like to take Mrs Jenkins up some of mother's; they're twice as good as bought sausages.'

'I see no objection, my dear. Sausages do not involve intimacies, else his politics are what I can no ways respect.'

'But, oh, Jem, if you had seen her last night about baby! I'm sure she may scold me for ever, and I'll not answer. I'd even make her cat welcome to the sausages.' The tears gathered to Mary's eyes as she kissed her boy.

'Better take 'em upstairs, my dear, and give them to the cat's mistress.' And Jem chuckled at his saying.

Mary put them on a plate, but still she loitered.

'What must I say, Jem? I never know.'

'Say — I hope you'll accept of these sausages, as my mother — no, that's not grammar; — say what comes uppermost, Mary, it will be sure to be right.'

So Mary carried them upstairs and knocked at the door; and when told to 'come in,' she looked very red, but went up to Mrs Jenkins, saying, 'Please take these. Mother made them.' And was away before an answer could be given.

Just as Hodgson was ready to go to church, Mrs Jenkins came downstairs, and called Fanny. In a minute, the latter entered the Hodgsons' room, and delivered Mr and Mrs Jenkins's compliments and they would be particular glad if Mr and Mrs Hodgson would eat their dinner with them.

'And carry baby upstairs in a shawl, be sure,' added Mrs Jenkins's voice in the passage, close to the door, whither she had followed her messenger. There was no discussing the matter, with the certainty of every word being overheard.

Mary looked anxiously at her husband. She his saying he did not approve of Mr Jenkins's politics.

'Do you think it would do for baby?' asked he.

'Oh, yes,' answered she, eagerly; 'I would wrap him up so warm.'

'And I've got our room up to sixty−five already, for all it's so frosty,' added the voice outside.

Now, how do you think they settled the matter? The very best way in the world. Mr and Mrs Jenkins came down into the Hodgsons' room, and dined there. Turkey at the top, roast beef at the bottom, sausages at one side, potatoes at the other. Second course, plum−pudding at the top, and mince pies at the bottom.

And after dinner, Mrs Jenkins would have baby on her knee; and he seemed quite to take to her; she declared he was admiring the real lace on her cap, but Mary thought (though she did not say so) that he was pleased by her kind looks and coaxing words. Then he was wrapped up and carried carefully upstairs to tea, in Mrs Jenkins's room. And after tea, Mrs Jenkins, and Mary, and her husband, found out each other's mutual liking for music, and sat singing old glees and catches, till I don't know what o'clock, without one word of politics or newspapers.

Before they parted, Mary had coaxed pussy on to her knee; for Mrs Jenkins would not part with baby, who was sleeping on her lap.

'When you're busy, bring him to me. Do, now, it will be a real favour. I know you must have a deal to do, with another coming; let him come up to me. I'll take the greatest of cares of him; pretty darling, how sweet he looks when he's asleep!'

When the couples were once more alone, the husbands unburdened their minds to their wives.

Mr Jenkins said to his — 'Do you know, Burgess tried to make me believe Hodgson was such a fool as to put paragraphs into the Examiner now and then; but I see he knows his place, and has got too much sense to do any such thing.'

Hodgson said — 'Mary, love, I almost fancy from Jenkins's way of speaking (so much civiler than I expected), he guesses I wrote that "Pro Bono" and the "Rose−bud," — at any rate, I've no objection to your naming it, if the subject should come uppermost; I should like him to know I'm a literary man.'

Well! I've ended my tale; I hope you don't think it too long; but, before I go, just let me say one thing.

If any of you have any quarrels, or misunderstandings, or coolnesses, or cold shoulders, or shynesses, or tiffs, or miffs, or huffs, with any one else, just make friends before Christmas, — you will be so much merrier if you do.

I ask it of you for the sake of that old angelic song, heard so many years ago by the shepherds, keeping watch by night, on Bethlehem Heights.