

KRISTINA MCGRATH

*In Her Days as a Gentleman
A Decline & Rise in Humours & Fortunes*

I confess a relish of complaint & rue a Scribbler's life

MY FREQUENT COMPLAINTS: A DIARY'S CATALOG

These summer months at Huddlesfield Parish, I pace the floor & do not put a pen to paper but slubberingly. My essays of dissent are failing; they do not make one bit of sense. I am like the Moth who natters at the flame, only to be caught in the stump by morning.

Now I've yet to put myself to bed but reserve these early hours for my diary, long neglected since late winter last. Even the spring has escaped me. I do not recall one blossom, though vaguely I remember a vapour transpiring through the trees.

A sullen March.

A meager May.

Whole months proceed by salty murmur & sigh, succumbing as I have to the temptations of complaint.

I adore complaint, so long as it is mine:

Monday 1st. The roof is faulty, allowing in all manner of rain.

I am quite chilled by the window; I am over-heated in the nook; depending where I sit.

Ill-fitting clothes: too tight, too loose, too long, too short; depending.

Tues 2nd. A meal I can no longer remember, only the faint humming of a roast on a spit in someone else's life.

And if there should be a little bone that's left, frail from some winged thing, I would dare to crack & eat it, & then lament I'd not a leg or thigh.

Wed 3rd. By now the milk is bingy; I turn sulky with no butter for my bread.

When at last I obtain some asparagus for my dinner: its woodiness, its meager girth.

Thurs 4th. No apples, no cranberries; the fields are nettled & the bog has dried.

Only a coughing from the pump; tea-water is dusty: dripped from the roof & fetched from a rainwater tub.

Saturday 6th. No suffrage; no escape; the depot is a rain of cinder & ash; & the streets are filled with noise. I rush back inside, but the clomp & racket of the Hairpin Factory are within my very bones.

Sunday 7th. Plagued by my own fussiness, yet I pursue with vigour the failure of my studies (the paltry few I've managed to commit to paper), while my mind is busy at a 100 more.

Stories which have come my way:

women giving birth 3 to a bed in the midst of contagion, the dead & the dying;

bawling narrative of a child, Edward Thorncraft, at work from dawn till dusk at Millendresser's Factory;

a girl name of Mary Prescott, aged 11 yrs, gone into service, neighbouring shire, torn from her mother, who dwindled to the size of the girl's pinafore.

Monday, again. A woman, name of Margaret Hinge, known by a rusty umbrella, skeletal with snatch of cloth still left for shelter, sleeps on the lee side of Mrs Miller's boarding-house, motley jacket for her woolsack, grease pot afire at her feet.

The devil's "X" is scrawled on the asylum door, "Beware of Sin" chalked on the Poorhouse.

Iron mines in the North fill with water & collapse; houses lined along the shafts lean as if conversant. Chasms open in the streets, swallowing Horses, legs of houses—feet unearthed.

The body of the people: arms bitten by the black teeth of the mine, cheeks stippled with coal dust; hands cramped from twisting flax; fingers lost to whirling bobbins; lungs full of feathers from plucked cocks; ears boxed by the factory's din & clang, by the blows of the knappers breaking flint for roads.

...

Millendresser's Pin & Fasten has expanded by 2 fields. Black flakes of coal rain from the sky. Under the weather of the fiery furnace, the once-green ridge (a stand of ancient trees chopped down) is crowned by soot & intoxicating clouds from vats of glue. The hills are strewn with worker's houses, ill-made in the wilderness of the factory's rubble. Windows & beds, planks & pitchers of milk shiver in the grip of the machinery, in a terrible co-mingling with the whirling of engines & nodding of pistons. And for miles can be heard the back & forth of carts laden with metal & hairpin parts of bone; the regular *thud thud thud* of the Pearlsetters; the final shrieking of hairpins into a finished bin; then the somber *klomp klomp clomp* from a wagon-load of beautiful trifles down the merchant road.

Like Millendresser, I too have trifled for a penny, when in my feckless youth, I put my pen to tales of Gothic Terror, which I never cared for above half, & made my way through underground & twisted corridors of gabled mansions, under the leers of gargoyles, always on a stormy night with wraith or shade, or through a fiendish marsh, where vainly did I dwell upon a skeleton, thankful it was not I.

Then for a lark & an ample purse, I turned to naughty Sensation, a lightweight fare, under *nom de plume*, & qualified myself a scamp as Henry Age.

And it is true that I have spent my genius in sedulous accounts of modest sums: the rising cost of sugar, the price of smalls & cheap blue worsteds at which I've pinched & plied, thus passed the time with a Shop-girl's prodding as my only amusement.

Distracted from my writings, I have occupied myself in spying who has come for Tea on Sunday to the house across the way, thus have I built a life of distant observation, & occupied myself in matters useless to the ages.

A REPORT ON MARKET-DAY

Suddenly content to remain in my night-shirt for the better part of 3 months, I have turned to my work without distraction, under no cloud or veil. My pamphlet, now titled *A Woman Outside London*, falls page by page to the floor in a heap.

But today a Cat is sneezing in the street; a saucy Dog is yipping; someone steals a kiss in the shade of a crabapple tree; a Merchant has fainted, & as a prank little Mary Tingley has taken his shoes.

There is jostle & uproar at the public roasting of an Ox, penny-a-slice; barrels of beer rumble by in a squeaking cart; the minds of Mongrels are addled by passion; & I do not repent. My attention wanders where it must, to the queer thronged streets below:

Fishmongers selling tripe for breakfast.

Newsboys & Berry-hucksters.

Higglers with lettuces on their heads.

Hawkers of Dog-collars, lollipops, & gadgets for all reasons: peeling, chopping, & slicing.

Vendors of hot pies & marrowfat peas with salt.

Barelegged Pedlars of old clothes; & strapped to their backs are the leavings & candle-ends of what a life was once: laces, collars, cuffs, whalebone corsets, & a tottering pile of Moth-eaten hats.

A penny the lot!

Matches!

Twig-brooms & toys!

Want some pies? How about some pies then?

The shrill cry of tin whistles from the toy-stalls join an urchin's squeal of delight at stick & ball. And for miles can be heard the blowing of penny-trumpets, the clanging of pots & pans tied to the runaway mastiff of the solitary tinker.

But in my room above the streets, I am held apart from the arms of the fray. A mouth opens to speak in conversation, & I cannot hear. I can only sense the commotion of language, of commerce & barter, of argument & love. I watch the clock & think it shall never ding at the 2 ½ for dinner or tick round to make an end of day.

I have a cup of tea cooling in the window-well, a pan of broad beans warming on the grate. And though a cricketing sound may issue from a cobwebbed corner of my room & I am tempted to join it in earnest conversation, on impulse, I dash down the stairs, half-dressed, towards the laughter that rises from the Gin & Crown, where I have never eaten among the villagers & the red-nosed gentlemen, only loitered at my window to witness more than once a sated man, triumphant over a supper of potted beef, downing a tumbler of whiskey toddy in the street, which on market-day is open late & lit with flares.

THE RUMOURS THAT ENSUE

On an afternoon blissful but for chasms in the gutters, & despite a number of harmless bullies bearded only by the bushes, whose cheeks & fists are yet like peaches, I walk unbothered through the streets of Huddlesfield, fraternal in my greatcoat & hat. Unlike the widow & strumpet who brave a smile at me, I need not exceedingly beware, thanks to the ominous tapping of the point of my umbrella.

I venture out daily now, encumbered by my woolen stuff in summer & dressed some years behind my time. What matter is it to me? but with a certain murmuring, there are some who seem to pity me for my clothes, my trousers lamed by Moths & of a rusty colour.

Never without my lead pencil & pocket-book, I've become a curiosity as I stop to jot a note in a hectic shop, thus raising a stir, much talk & indignation, as if hat & pencil were hood & dagger. The Butcher Stickleford grows impatient behind his counter in a crowd as I weigh the consequences of a Bullock's foot, a scrag of mutton, a cheap neck for my soup. Only Mr Brown, Baker of Tarts, winks at me & does not grouse, not even at my debt.

There are those who quiz & tilt their heads. They look at me aslant. I pass by, steeped in a gossipy tea, shunned by those who once loved Henry.

"It's that one again, in a swither," they say.

"Up at all hours. Sees in the dark."

"A frilly little man."

"A shock to the ladies."

"Better kept indoors."

Recently on my trip to Town, a young drab in a gaudy dress was left in a state of bewildered alarm from the rebuke of laughter that uproared when she gave me her consideration, enquiring from her doorway, "Are you in need of a Sweetheart? Glass o' gin, p'raps?"

Now whenever I am briefly away, my Landlord, in a sneak, but for the jingle of his keys, overheard by the neighbour Minton, takes a sudden fancy to rifle through my premises in search of suspenders or lace, a bottle of a man's bay rum or a woman's dainties treasured up in a drawer. A Saratoga trunk of forgotten underthings has been more than once or twice left askew in the corner, a four-fingered grip emblazoned on its dusty top.

I am gaining a reputation in the neighbourhood as he who stumbles about & talks to himself in the dark.

After long hours at my table, when dressing full diligently for a stroll, it is true, I may leave the rain entirely out of my calculation & find myself taken unawares with no umbrella or my unthinking head without a hat.

It is because of the woman who passes by along the Baker's alley, her russet cape draped low & tight. Upon sight of her, I am sent adrift from the present moment, set loose like a schoolboy at noon, scattered like a Goose through the village, it is true, I sometimes am—my gait a hurried scribble over the crowded walks.

In any given moment, you may find me vigilant at a loose thread; captured by the slightest thing, an Insect with ink-pen legs scrawling up a trellis; distracted from a conversation by my pity for a Mongrel; muddled by a branch to whom I make my bow; or startled by a scrap of beef-bone I've mistaken for a Mouse—mortal remains on the cobbled street.

Dismiss all doubt. This is no romance. The dismal streets of Huddlesfield are littered with kitchen midden, bones & tins; refuse from the privies courses through the gutters; rivulets are running bitter with rubbish while the workings of the village pump only bedevil with a trickle. The meat is tainted at the Gin & Crown. And, it is rumoured, no happy ending: his grace the Duke has murdered his Wife.

With things not set to rights, this is no Romance. I am counting pennies via the pinching of my counsel Thomas Oldenfield of Oldenfield & Crumps, & with pockets vacant of my allowance, I trudge past the locked Sailmaker's shop that failed last winter, past frowzy tenement rows where Merchant Jones has come collecting under gathering clouds what he thinks his due, past the old Artist under the sputtering gaslight who sketches in the rain sodden clothes hanging out a window.

I return to my room, wet to the skin, & warm myself by the stove. In desiring a plate & a bath, my aim is direct—I know how to fix them, via stewing-pot & a kettle holding 8 quarts. And I know the directions to Burgate Road through Nonesuch Park, how to shift

for myself at the alehouse, to hesitate in a quandary, to vacillate in tenderness, or use the tap of my umbrella.

I have head & hunch enough to know that from an ordinary day may come the plot of a story, where plates must be washed & dinners cooked. In the story there is a Shop-girl from behind the counter, name of Mary Hood, you see, aged 36 & dressed in blue, in her row house by the river, where the lamps are being lit. In the story the old Artist shivers in the cold underneath her window. In the story there is a pantry; a line hung with her washing; a room filled with her history, her old brown shoes, her pens, her brushes, her books & her politics.

Notes

CHRONICON HENRICI KNIGHTON
(Chronicler of 14th-century England)

On the vices of women as a reason for the plague; from Knighton, a canon of St. Mary-of-the-Meadow Abbey in Leicester:

In those days, there was much talk and indignation among the people because, when tournaments were held, in almost every place, a band of women would arrive as if they had come to join the sport, dressed in a variety of the most sumptuous male costumes. They used to wear partly-coloured tunics . . . with short hoods and pendants like ropes wound round their necks, and belts thickly studded with gold and silver. They were even known to wear those knives which are called "daggers" in the vulgar tongue in pouches slung across their bodies; and thus they rode on choice war-horses or other splendid steeds to the place of tournament. There and thus they spent or, rather, squandered their possessions, and wearied their bodies with fooleries and wanton buffoonery. . . But God, in this matter, as in all others, brought marvellous remedy. . .

CHARLOTTE BRONTË

From "Reminiscences of Charlotte Brontë by 'a schoolfellow'"
[Ellen Nussey]:

When her companions were merry round the fire, or otherwise enjoying themselves during the twilight, which was always a precious time of relaxation, she would be kneeling close to the window busy with her studies, and this would last so long that she was accused of seeing in the dark. . .

JOHN RUSKIN

From his letters: [from Assisi]

[H]alf the country people are shepherds, but there's no mutton; half the old women walk about with a pig tied to their waists, but there's no pork; . . . there are no strawberries, no oranges, no melons, the cherries are as hard as their stones, the beans only good for horses, . . . and this is the size of the biggest asparagus—[illustration]

I live here in a narrow street ten feet wide only, winding up a hill, and it was full this morning of sheep as close as they could pack, at least a thousand, as far as the eye could reach,—tinkle tinkle, bleat bleat, for a quarter of an hour.

From *Praeterita*:

[A]t this time, I say, I was irrevocably sulky because George had not got me butter for my bread at Les Rousses.

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

Alcott, under male pseudonym of A.M. Barnard, wrote sensation stories, involving bigamy, gold-digging, transvestitism, hashish smoking, and feminism.

EDITH WHARTON

Woke at 6 a.m., wrote from her bed, with an ink-pot balanced on her knee, a dog beneath her elbow, and let her papers fall to the floor, to be gathered by the maid.

VIRGINIA WOOLF

From *A Room of One's Own*:

It was certainly an odd monster that one made up by reading the historians first and the poets afterwards—a worm winged like an eagle; the spirit of life and beauty in a kitchen chopping suet. . . [S]he is Mrs Martin, aged thirty-six, dressed in blue, wearing a black hat and brown shoes. . . a vessel in which all sorts of spirits and forces are coursing and flashing perpetually.

And there is the girl behind the counter too—I would as soon have her true history as the hundred and fiftieth life of Napoleon or seventieth study of Keats and his use of Miltonic inversion. . .