

Blow, Blow, Thou Winter Wind

By Sydney F. Grey © 2023

Sally held tightly to her green poke bonnet as she walked briskly down the steep street of Boroughgate to St. Anne's Almshouses, a place built in 1651 by the late Lady Anne Clifford for widows to find a decent home at a time when widows were often left without. Now in 1845, the mission was still in place, and many a widow had found hope and comfort there. Sally's dear friend Lillian, who had loved her mother and helped look after her parents before they died, had just moved in after losing her beloved Vincent not but two weeks thence.

The "Helm Wind" threatened to push Sally over and tugged at her skirts and basket of provisions as if it were hungry for the fresh bread and cheese it held and wished to snatch the humble offering for itself. Her gray cape flapped around her, and she was glad when she gained the arched entrance to the courtyard and paused inside the stone passageway to catch her breath. If her heart were not full of compassion for her old friend, she would not have come out on such a rude day.

Clutching her cape around her, she dashed into the quaint courtyard, still cheery in the bleakness of winter despite the central flower garden gone brown since late Autumn. The cobble stones and brightly painted red doors always made a visitor feel welcome. Sally took her middle name from the revered patron of the place and had been acquainted with it since she was a child. Knocking on one of the doors nearest the corner chapel, she was soon greeted by a tiny woman with the creases of many smiles worn into her dainty face.

"Goodness, Sally Anne! I prayed you would not come out today in this wretched weather!" exclaimed Lillian, escorting Sally to the fire. "I still have plenty of soup left over from what you brought yesterday and could have managed nicely without you traipsing over here from the farm in this wind!"

"Oh Lily, I wouldn't dream of staying away if I could help it. Besides, I made an extra loaf, and it would have gone stale with no one to eat it but me and Fred." Sally took the basket to the tiny kitchen and unloaded the food, along with the box of tea Fred had purchased for Lillian the day before when he traded a bag of grain with Mr. Stephenson, the grocer. "Now, dear, let us have a cup and we can finish mending that set of bed linens Reverend Hayes brought you last week."

“You are such a dear, Sally Anne. Your mother would be so proud of the kindly woman you have grown into, God rest her soul.” Lillian dashed at a tear. “I find such comfort knowing my Vincent was greeted by your sweet parents when he stepped into heaven.”

Sally took Lillian into her arms and rested her cheek against her white lace cap. She smelled of rosemary and lavender. “I am comforted by the vision as well,” she said wistfully. “Perhaps he and father are fishing together in some peaceful place by the river of life, like they did so many times by the River Eden.”

Lillian patted Sally’s cheek, and a wistful smile graced her thin lips. “Now that’s a lovely thought too, my girl,” and with a little chuckle she turned to put the kettle on the little stove. The wind whisked around the courtyard and battered the mullioned windows of the Almshouses as the ladies sat by the little coal fire drinking their tea. Lillian, who had been a cobbler’s wife, did not own many books, but Sally had tucked a small copy of Shakespeare’s poems into her pocket, for she knew how much Lillian liked to be read to.

“Here’s an appropriate verse,” said Sally as she turned the pages looking for a poem they had yet to discuss. “Blow, Blow, Thou Winter Wind! Isn’t that just perfect for a day like this?”

Lillian nodded with a sigh. “I am so glad you have thought to read to me today, Sally. It gives me something to think about when the loneliness visits me in the night.”

“It is my pleasure, my friend. Shall I begin?” Sally asked softly.

Nodding again, Lillian sat back in her rocking chair and stared into the fire, listening intently.

Sally read stoutly at first, but by the end of the second verse, her tone shrank, as if the chill of the words and the day penetrated her deeply.

“Blow, blow, thou winter wind,

Thou art not so unkind

As man’s ingratitude.

Thy tooth is not so keen,

Because thou art not seen,

Although thy breath be rude.

Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky,

That dost not bite so nigh

As benefits forgot:

Though thou the waters warp,
Thy sting is not so sharp
As friend remembered not.”

Closing the book roughly, Sally frowned down at it in her hands, then set it on the little table as if it were uncomfortable to hold.

Her eyes moistened with tears, and she reluctantly met Lillian’s gaze. “Oh, Lillian, I am so sorry. I had no idea -----“

“There, there, my girl. I am not offended in the least,” said the old woman, laying her thin hand on Sally’s. “I know, it is still very painful, I must admit, but I am determined to put those thoughts away from me and be done with it. They are not worth holding onto, and God would have us both forgive for our own wellbeing, even to forgive those who do not seek forgiveness.” Lillian sighed and rose to refill Sally’s cup from the painted teapot. Sally held her cup and saucer in slightly trembling hands as her heart squeezed.

“But how could my own aunt treat you so terribly?” Sally cried. “How can I forgive her and my uncle for how they took advantage of you?”

With a heavy sigh, Lillian sat and tilted her head. “Now, now, little one. If I am not holding on to the pain of ill treatment, then you should not hold onto it for me. I know, you love me and hate to see others ill-used because your heart is pure and kind, but God must have known all along that there are some people, as the poem says, who’s hearts are ingrateful and whose friendship is only a farce.”

Sally took a deep breath and considered her friend’s words carefully. “Yes, I know you are right, and that holding on to a grudge does more harm to the holder than the one it is held against, but they are my own family, Lillian. I am so ashamed of how they’ve acted, what they said —“

Lillian held up her hand and interrupted. “Now, child, if you go on reliving it, it will never loose it’s sting.” Standing, she held out her hand to her young friend and urged her to her feet. “Come, let us mend sheets and let it go!”

Sally stayed but an hour more, then bundled up, fighting the wind that blew directly in her face on her way back up the street and nearly knocked her over on the bridge crossing the river. All the while the words of Shakespeare’s poem haunted her, the truth of them unearthing

the layers of pain and grief she felt for her friend, and the shame and anger she felt towards her aunt and uncle.

She remembered the day when Lillian's husband first fell ill. Her Aunt Rebecca and Lillian had been friends, and Sally was there when her aunt and uncle came to call at Vincent's cobbler shop. They asked what would become of the business if something should prevent Vincent from returning to work, a question Sally thought was ill timed. Her aunt and uncle expressed their interest in buying the shop if such a thing came to pass. It made Sally uneasy, as she knew her aunt and uncle had an unfortunate tendency to take advantage of deals too good to be proper.

Lillian put them off politely, but as Vincent's condition deteriorated, her aunt and uncle persisted in their pursuit, telling Lillian they would make sure the business would continue as a legacy for the childless couple, who had no heir. Sally was annoyed for her friend, but Lillian took it all in stride and would speak no ill about her relatives.

Perhaps it is best, thought Sally at the time, for if they did buy the shop, then Lillian would have something to keep her if Vincent passed, and she gave her trust over to the plan, convinced that Aunt Rebecca's longtime friendship with Lillian was strong enough to see it through.

But Sally tasted again the bitterness of unheeding her first instincts when the plan turned out to be false, for when Aunt Rebecca and Uncle David came to see Lillian just days before Vincent took his last painful breath, they accused her of misleading them, of having lied to them about giving them the shop, that they had never said they would pay her anything, and that they were so hurt by her deception they wanted to end their association with her forever.

Sally paused out of the wind beside the barn as she neared the tiny farmhouse, her heart bursting again with anger. "How could they have played such an underhanded game with Lillian, a near widow who they knew would have nothing if the business went unsold before Vincent's death? She had even promised she would sell it to them before anyone else and held off entertaining other offers because she trusted them, until it was too late."

The frigid gusts fought their way around the corner of the barn to strike Sally, rousing her from her memories. She pulled her bonnet close and ducked her head against the onslaught, finally reaching her kitchen door.

That night, sleep would not come for Sally, and at last, she rose, leaving her snoring husband in peace, and tracked into the kitchen to light the stove. Her head ached from her ruminating, and she felt as though all her prayers for justice went only as far as the ceiling, that God was not interested in setting things right for her friend. Then her anger turned on God for allowing such people to take advantage of the vulnerable and her prayers fell shorter still, the howling of the wind the only reply.

By the time the thin light of dawn crept weakly through the clouds, Sally made up her mind to brave the dreadful weather again, not only to see about Lillian, but also to go to the cobbler's shop, swindled away from Lillian by some trick of inheritance law by her aunt and uncle, and confront them in spite of her friend's request that she let the matter be.

Not one breath of the gale lessened as she made her way back to town and struggled down Boroughgate, and if it weren't for the faint notes of the chapel organ floating out of the arched entrance of the Almshouses, Sally would not have stopped there first. She would have gone straight ahead with her mission to the cobbler's shop.

But the hint of music called to her, and an especially mighty gust pushed her into the shelter of the archway. Panting, she pictured Lillian, seated quietly in the tiny chapel with the other residents, her head bowed in prayer.

Sally's heart bit down hard on the rock of bitterness that was growing by the hour, protesting the nudging of her spirit to join her friend in the peace of the chapel.

Dear, sweet, faithful Lillian, my friend and confidant, my second mother, she thought, as the music faintly echoed on the stone walls surrounding her. It was then that Sally saw a picture of herself in contrast, a frowning, angry young woman, ready to march down the street and give two pitiless people a piece of her mind.

But was that the kind of woman she wanted to be? She moaned to herself. No, she thought, shaking her head, leaning against the cold stone. No, indeed. She always wanted to be just like Lillian, who's faith and grace made her the precious woman Sally respected with all her heart.

Slowly, as the hymn ended, Sally allowed her feet to turn into the courtyard and cross over the cobblestones to the chapel door. Lifting the latch as silently as she could, she stepped into the small vestibule and peeked in. To her great confusion, no one was inside.

No one sat at the little organ, or in the two facing rows of pews lining the walls. Sally stood in the middle of the room in awe edged with questions and a touch of fear. *How could this be?* she asked herself, then her attention was caught by the utter stillness of the room. Looking through the window on the far side at the trees behind the building, not a branch was swaying, not a blade of brown grass was quivering. The wind had ceased, suddenly and completely.

Sally stood transfixed as the holy hush enveloped her. It silenced the voices of anger and commanded her to surrender her right to harbor her bitterness, right then and now. As she knelt and obeyed, offering forgiveness whilst being forgiven herself, a heavy weight was lifted from her heart and at once she was free. Tears of reverent gratitude and joy spilled over, and her gaze fell on one of the many scriptures painted on the walls.

“The sting of death is sin, the strength of sin is the Law, but thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

She gasped at the words, just as the door opened and a small figure walked in. “Oh Lillian!” Sally cried, tears still streaming down her face. “You have no idea —“ her voice caught as her emotions overtook her.

Lillian sat down with her on the pew and reached for her hands. “But I do know, my child. I have been on my knees praying for you all morning, and finally the Lord gave me a vision of you here, just as I have found you.”

The two friends cried over each other and marveled at the work of God’s mercy and love. And in the end, they were the free ones, the victorious ones, for they laid all the others in God’s providential hands and left them there.

THE END



St. Anne's Almshouses still exist in Appleby, UK, and to this day, it serves as a place of refuge for widows and women in need.