

# Christmas Day In The Workhouse - song lyrics

American Old-time song lyrics from [www.traditionalmusic.co.uk](http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk)

Christmas Day in the Workhouse.

By George R. Sims

It is Christmas day in the workhouse, and the cold, bare walls are bright  
With garlands of green and holly, and the place is a pleasant sight:  
For with clean-washed hands and faces, in a long and hungry line,  
The paupers sit at the tables, for this is the hour they dine.

And the guardians and their ladies, although the wind is east,  
Have come in their furs and wrappers to watch their charges feast;  
To smile and be condescending, put pudding on painter plates,  
To be hosts at the workhouse banquet they've paid for-with the rates.

Oh, the paupers are meek and lowly with their "Thankee kindly, mum's;"  
So long as they fill their stomachs, what matters it whence it comes!  
But one of the old men mutters and pushes his plate aside:  
"Great God!" he cries; "but it chokes me! For this is the day she died."

The guardians gazed in horror, the master's face went white.  
"Did a pauper refuse their pudding!" "Could their ears believe aright!"  
Then the ladies clutched their husbands, thinking the man would die,  
Struck by a bolt, or something, by the outraged One on high.

But the pauper sat for a moment, then rose 'mid a silence grim.  
For the others had ceased to chatter, and trembled in every limb:  
He looked at the guardians' ladies, then, eyeing their lords, he said:  
"I eat not the food of villains, whose hands are foul and red;

"Whose victims cry for vengeance from their dank, unhal'owed graves "  
"He's drunk!" said the workhouse master, "or else he's mad and raves."  
"Not drunk or mad," cried the pauper, "but only a hunted beast,  
Who, torn by the hounds and mangled, declines the vulture's feast.

"I care not a curse for the guardians, and I won't be dragged away.  
Just let me have the fit out, it's only on Christmas day  
That the black past comes to goad me and prey on my burning brain;  
I'll tell you the rest in a whisper-I swear I won't shout again.

"Keep your hands off me, curse you! Hear me right out to the end.  
You come here to see how paupers the season of Christmas spend;  
You come here to watch us feeding, as they watch the captured beast;  
Rear why a penniless pauper spits on your paltry feast.

"Do you think I will take your bounty, and let you smile and think  
You're doing a noble action with the parish's meat And drink!  
Where is my wife, you traitors-the poor old wife you slew?  
Yes, by the God above us, my Nance was killed by you!

"Last winter my wife lay dying, starved in a filthy den;  
I had never been to the parish-I came to the parish then.  
I swallowed my pride in coming, for, ere the ruin came,  
I held up my head as a trader, And I bore a spotless name.

"I came to the parish, craving bread for a starving wife-  
Bread for the woman who'd loved me through fifty years of life;  
And what do you think they told me, mocking my awful grief?  
That 'the house' was open to us, but they wouldn't give 'out relief.'

"I slunk to the filthy alley-'twas a cold, raw Christmas eve-  
And the bakers' shops were open, tempting a man to thief;  
But I clenched my fists together, holding my head awry;  
So I came to her empty-handed, And mournfully told her why.

"Then I told her 'the house' was open; she had heard of the ways of that.  
For her bloodless Cheeks went crimson, and up in her rags she sat,  
Crying, 'Bide the Christmas here, John, we've never had one apart;  
I think I can bear the hunger, the other would break my heart.'

From the music archive at [www.traditionalmusic.co.uk](http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk)

"All through that eve I watched her, holding her hand in mine,  
Praying the Lord and weeping, till my lips were salt as brine.  
I asked her once if she hungered, and as she answered ' No,'  
The moon shone in at the window, set in a wreath of snow.

"Then the room was bathed in glory, and I saw in my darling's eyes  
The far-away look of wonder that comes when the spirit flies;  
And her lips were parched and parted, and her reason came and went,  
For she raved of our home in Devon where our happiest years were spent.

"And the accents, long forgotten, came back to the tongue once more,  
For she talked like the country lassie I woo'd by the Devon shore.  
Then she rose to her feet and trembled, and fell on the rags and moaned,  
And, 'Give me a crust-I'm famished-for the love of God!' she groaned.

"I rushed from the room like a madman, and flew to the workhouse gate,  
Crying, 'Food for a dying woman!' And the answer came, 'Too late.'  
They drove me away with curses; then I fought with a dog in the street,  
And tore from the mongrel's clutches a crust he was trying to eat.

"Back, through the filthy by-lanes; back, through the trampled slush;  
Up to the crazy garret, wrapped in an awful hush.  
My heart sank down at the threshold, and I paused with a sudden thrill,  
For there, in the silv'ry moonlight, my Nance lay cold and still.

"Up to the blackened ceiling the sunken eyes were cast;  
I knew on those lips, all bloodless, my name had been the last.  
She'd called for her absent husband -oh, God! had I but known!-  
Had called in vain and, in anguish, had died in that den-alone.

"Yes, there, in a land of plenty, lay a loving woman dead.  
Cruelly starved and murdered for a loaf of the parish bread.  
At yonder gate, last Christmas, I craved for a human life:  
You, who would feast us paupers, what of my murdered wife?

"There, get ye gone to your dinners; don't mind me in the least;  
Think of the happy paupers eating your Christmas feast.  
And when you recount their blessings, in your smug parochial way,  
Say what you did for me, too, only last Christmas day."