

Agnes Grey

Anne Brontë

Chapter 8: The 'Coming Out'

At eighteen, Miss Murray was to emerge from the quiet obscurity of the schoolroom into the full blaze of the fashionable world—as much of it, at least, as could be had out of London; for her papa could not be persuaded to leave his rural pleasures and pursuits, even for a few weeks' residence in town. She was to make her debut on the third of January, at a magnificent ball, which her mamma proposed to give to all the nobility and choice gentry of O—and its neighbourhood for twenty miles round. Of course, she looked forward to it with the wildest impatience, and the most extravagant anticipations of delight.

'Miss Grey,' said she, one evening, a month before the all-important day, as I was perusing a long and extremely interesting letter of my sister's—which I had just glanced at in the morning to see that it contained no very bad news, and kept till now, unable before to find a quiet moment for reading it,—'Miss Grey, do put away that dull, stupid letter, and listen to me! I'm sure my talk must be far more amusing than that.'

She seated herself on the low stool at my feet; and I, suppressing a sigh of vexation, began to fold up the epistle.

'You should tell the good people at home not to bore you with such long letters,' said she; 'and, above all, do bid them write on proper note-paper, and not on those great vulgar sheets. You should see the charming little lady-like notes mamma writes to her friends.'

'The good people at home,' replied I, 'know very well that the longer their letters are, the better I like them. I should be very sorry to receive a charming little lady-like note from any of them; and I thought you were too much of a lady yourself, Miss Murray, to talk about the "vulgarity" of writing on a large sheet of paper.'

'Well, I only said it to tease you. But now I want to talk about the ball; and to tell you that you positively must put off your holidays till it is over.'

'Why so?—I shall not be present at the ball.'

‘No, but you will see the rooms decked out before it begins, and hear the music, and, above all, see me in my splendid new dress. I shall be so charming, you’ll be ready to worship me—you really must stay.’

‘I should like to see you very much; but I shall have many opportunities of seeing you equally charming, on the occasion of some of the numberless balls and parties that are to be, and I cannot disappoint my friends by postponing my return so long.’

‘Oh, never mind your friends! Tell them we won’t let you go.’

‘But, to say the truth, it would be a disappointment to myself: I long to see them as much as they to see me—perhaps more.’

‘Well, but it is such a short time.’

‘Nearly a fortnight by my computation; and, besides, I cannot bear the thoughts of a Christmas spent from home: and, moreover, my sister is going to be married.’

‘Is she—when?’

‘Not till next month; but I want to be there to assist her in making preparations, and to make the best of her company while we have her.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me before?’

‘I’ve only got the news in this letter, which you stigmatize as dull and stupid, and won’t let me read.’

‘To whom is she to be married?’

‘To Mr. Richardson, the vicar of a neighbouring parish.’

‘Is he rich?’

‘No; only comfortable.’

‘Is he handsome?’

‘No; only decent.’

‘Young?’

‘No; only middling.’

‘Oh, mercy! what a wretch! What sort of a house is it?’

‘A quiet little vicarage, with an ivy-clad porch, an old-fashioned garden, and—’

‘Oh, stop!—you’ll make me sick. How CAN she bear it?’

‘I expect she’ll not only be able to bear it, but to be very happy. You did not ask me if Mr. Richardson were a good, wise, or amiable man; I could have answered Yes, to all these questions—at least so Mary thinks, and I hope she will not find herself mistaken.’

‘But—miserable creature! how can she think of spending her life there, cooped up with that nasty old man; and no hope of change?’



‘He is not old: he’s only six or seven and thirty; and she herself is twenty–eight, and as sober as if she were fifty.’

‘Oh! that’s better then—they’re well matched; but do they call him the “worthy vicar”?’

‘I don’t know; but if they do, I believe he merits the epithet.’

‘Mercy, how shocking! and will she wear a white apron and make pies and puddings?’

‘I don’t know about the white apron, but I dare say she will make pies and puddings now and then; but that will be no great hardship, as she has done it before.’

‘And will she go about in a plain shawl, and a large straw bonnet, carrying tracts and bone soup to her husband’s poor parishioners?’

‘I’m not clear about that; but I dare say she will do her best to make them comfortable in body and mind, in accordance with our mother’s example.’

