

Agnes Grey

Anne Brontë

Chapter 10: The Church

‘Well, Miss Grey, what do you think of the new curate?’ asked Miss Murray, on our return from church the Sunday after the recommencement of our duties.

‘I can scarcely tell,’ was my reply: ‘I have not even heard him preach.’

‘Well, but you saw him, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, but I cannot pretend to judge of a man’s character by a single cursory glance at his face.’

‘But isn’t he ugly?’

‘He did not strike me as being particularly so; I don’t dislike that cast of countenance: but the only thing I particularly noticed about him was his style of reading; which appeared to me good—ininitely better, at least, than Mr. Hatfield’s. He read the Lessons as if he were bent on giving full effect to every passage; it seemed as if the most careless person could not have helped attending, nor the most ignorant have failed to understand; and the prayers he read as if he were not reading at all, but praying earnestly and sincerely from his own heart.’

‘Oh, yes, that’s all he is good for: he can plod through the service well enough; but he has not a single idea beyond it.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Oh! I know perfectly well; I am an excellent judge in such matters. Did you see how he went out of church? stumping along—as if there were nobody there but himself—never looking to the right hand or the left, and evidently thinking of nothing but just getting out of the church, and, perhaps, home to his dinner: his great stupid head could contain no other idea.’

‘I suppose you would have had him cast a glance into the squire’s pew,’ said I, laughing at the vehemence of her hostility.

‘Indeed! I should have been highly indignant if he had dared to do such a thing!’ replied she, haughtily tossing her head; then, after a moment’s reflection, she added—



'Well, well! I suppose he's good enough for his place: but I'm glad I'm not dependent on HIM for amusement—that's all. Did you see how Mr. Hatfield hurried out to get a bow from me, and be in time to put us into the carriage?'

'Yes,' answered I; internally adding, 'and I thought it somewhat derogatory to his dignity as a clergyman to come flying from the pulpit in such eager haste to shake hands with the squire, and hand his wife and daughters into their carriage: and, moreover, I owe him a grudge for nearly shutting me out of it'; for, in fact, though I was standing before his face, close beside the carriage steps, waiting to get in, he would persist in putting them up and closing the door, till one of the family stopped him by calling out that the governess was not in yet; then, without a word of apology, he departed, wishing them good-morning, and leaving the footman to finish the business.

Nota bene.—Mr. Hatfield never spoke to me, neither did Sir Hugh or Lady Meltham, nor Mr. Harry or Miss Meltham, nor Mr. Green or his sisters, nor any other lady or gentleman who frequented that church: nor, in fact, any one that visited at Horton Lodge.

Miss Murray ordered the carriage again, in the afternoon, for herself and her sister: she said it was too cold for them to enjoy themselves in the garden; and besides, she believed Harry Meltham would be at church. 'For,' said she, smiling slyly at her own fair image in the glass, 'he has been a most exemplary attendant at church these last few Sundays: you would think he was quite a good Christian. And you may go with us, Miss Grey: I want you to see him; he is so greatly improved since he returned from abroad—you can't think! And besides, then you will have an opportunity of seeing the beautiful Mr. Weston again, and of hearing him preach.'

I did hear him preach, and was decidedly pleased with the evangelical truth of his doctrine, as well as the earnest simplicity of his manner, and the clearness and force of his style. It was truly refreshing to hear such a sermon, after being so long accustomed to the dry, prosy discourses of the former curate, and the still less edifying harangues of the rector. Mr. Hatfield would come sailing up the aisle, or rather sweeping along like a whirlwind, with his rich silk gown flying behind him and rustling against the pew doors, mount the pulpit like a conqueror ascending his triumphal car; then, sinking on the velvet cushion in an attitude of studied grace, remain in silent prostration for a certain time; then mutter over a Collect, and gabble through the Lord's Prayer, rise, draw off one bright lavender glove, to give the congregation the benefit of his sparkling rings, lightly pass his fingers through his well-curved hair, flourish a cambric handkerchief, recite a very short passage, or, perhaps, a mere phrase of



Scripture, as a head-piece to his discourse, and, finally, deliver a composition which, as a composition, might be considered good, though far too studied and too artificial to be pleasing to me: the propositions were well laid down, the arguments logically conducted; and yet, it was sometimes hard to listen quietly throughout, without some slight demonstrations of disapproval or impatience.

His favourite subjects were church discipline, rites and ceremonies, apostolical succession, the duty of reverence and obedience to the clergy, the atrocious criminality of dissent, the absolute necessity of observing all the forms of godliness, the reprehensible presumption of individuals who attempted to think for themselves in matters connected with religion, or to be guided by their own interpretations of Scripture, and, occasionally (to please his wealthy parishioners) the necessity of deferential obedience from the poor to the rich—supporting his maxims and exhortations throughout with quotations from the Fathers: with whom he appeared to be far better acquainted than with the Apostles and Evangelists, and whose importance he seemed to consider at least equal to theirs. But now and then he gave us a sermon of a different order—what some would call a very good one; but sunless and severe: representing the Deity as a terrible taskmaster rather than a benevolent father. Yet, as I listened, I felt inclined to think the man was sincere in all he said: he must have changed his views, and become decidedly religious, gloomy and austere, yet still devout. But such illusions were usually dissipated, on coming out of church, by hearing his voice in jocund colloquy with some of the Melthams or Greens, or, perhaps, the Murrays themselves; probably laughing at his own sermon, and hoping that he had given the rascally people something to think about; perchance, exulting in the thought that old Betty Holmes would now lay aside the sinful indulgence of her pipe, which had been her daily solace for upwards of thirty years: that George Higgins would be frightened out of his Sabbath evening walks, and Thomas Jackson would be sorely troubled in his conscience, and shaken in his sure and certain hope of a joyful resurrection at the last day.

Thus, I could not but conclude that Mr. Hatfield was one of those who ‘bind heavy burdens, and grievous to be borne, and lay them upon men’s shoulders, while they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers’; and who ‘make the word of God of none effect by their traditions, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.’ I was well pleased to observe that the new curate resembled him, as far as I could see, in none of these particulars.

‘Well, Miss Grey, what do you think of him now?’ said Miss Murray, as we took our places in the carriage after service.



‘No harm still,’ replied I.

‘No harm!’ repeated she in amazement. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, I think no worse of him than I did before.’

‘No worse! I should think not indeed—quite the contrary! Is he not greatly improved?’

‘Oh, yes; very much indeed,’ replied I; for I had now discovered that it was Harry Meltham she meant, not Mr. Weston. That gentleman had eagerly come forward to speak to the young ladies: a thing he would hardly have ventured to do had their mother been present; he had likewise politely handed them into the carriage. He had not attempted to shut me out, like Mr. Hatfield; neither, of course, had he offered me his assistance (I should not have accepted it, if he had), but as long as the door remained open he had stood smirking and chatting with them, and then lifted his hat and departed to his own abode: but I had scarcely noticed him all the time. My companions, however, had been more observant; and, as we rolled along, they discussed between them not only his looks, words, and actions, but every feature of his face, and every article of his apparel.

‘You shan’t have him all to yourself, Rosalie,’ said Miss Matilda at the close of this discussion; ‘I like him: I know he’d make a nice, jolly companion for me.’

‘Well, you’re quite welcome to him, Matilda,’ replied her sister, in a tone of affected indifference.

‘And I’m sure,’ continued the other, ‘he admires me quite as much as he does you; doesn’t he, Miss Grey?’

‘I don’t know; I’m not acquainted with his sentiments.’

‘Well, but he DOES though.’

‘My DEAR Matilda! nobody will ever admire you till you get rid of your rough, awkward manners.’

‘Oh, stuff! Harry Meltham likes such manners; and so do papa’s friends.’

‘Well, you MAY captivate old men, and younger sons; but nobody else, I am sure, will ever take a fancy to you.’

‘I don’t care: I’m not always grabbing after money, like you and mamma. If my husband is able to keep a few good horses and dogs, I shall be quite satisfied; and all the rest may go to the devil!’

‘Well, if you use such shocking expressions, I’m sure no real gentleman will ever venture to come near you. Really, Miss Grey, you should not let her do so.’

‘I can’t possibly prevent it, Miss Murray.’



‘And you’re quite mistaken, Matilda, in supposing that Harry Meltham admires you: I assure you he does nothing of the kind.’

Matilda was beginning an angry reply; but, happily, our journey was now at an end; and the contention was cut short by the footman opening the carriage-door, and letting down the steps for our descent.

