

Agnes Grey

Anne Brontë

Chapter 11: The Cottagers

As I had now only one regular pupil—though she contrived to give me as much trouble as three or four ordinary ones, and though her sister still took lessons in German and drawing—I had considerably more time at my own disposal than I had ever been blessed with before, since I had taken upon me the governess's yoke; which time I devoted partly to correspondence with my friends, partly to reading, study, and the practice of music, singing, &c., partly to wandering in the grounds or adjacent fields, with my pupils if they wanted me, alone if they did not.

Often, when they had no more agreeable occupation at hand, the Misses Murray would amuse themselves with visiting the poor cottagers on their father's estate, to receive their flattering homage, or to hear the old stories or gossiping news of the garrulous old women; or, perhaps, to enjoy the purer pleasure of making the poor people happy with their cheering presence and their occasional gifts, so easily bestowed, so thankfully received. Sometimes, I was called upon to accompany one or both of the sisters in these visits; and sometimes I was desired to go alone, to fulfil some promise which they had been more ready to make than to perform; to carry some small donation, or read to one who was sick or seriously disposed: and thus I made a few acquaintances among the cottagers; and, occasionally, I went to see them on my own account.

I generally had more satisfaction in going alone than with either of the young ladies; for they, chiefly owing to their defective education, comported themselves towards their inferiors in a manner that was highly disagreeable for me to witness. They never, in thought, exchanged places with them; and, consequently, had no consideration for their feelings, regarding them as an order of beings entirely different from themselves. They would watch the poor creatures at their meals, making uncivil remarks about their food, and their manner of eating; they would laugh at their simple notions and provincial expressions, till some of them scarcely durst venture



to speak; they would call the grave elderly men and women old fools and silly old blockheads to their faces: and all this without meaning to offend. I could see that the people were often hurt and annoyed by such conduct, though their fear of the ‘grand ladies’ prevented them from testifying any resentment; but THEY never perceived it. They thought that, as these cottagers were poor and untaught, they must be stupid and brutish; and as long as they, their superiors, condescended to talk to them, and to give them shillings and half-crowns, or articles of clothing, they had a right to amuse themselves, even at their expense; and the people must adore them as angels of light, condescending to minister to their necessities, and enlighten their humble dwellings.

I made many and various attempts to deliver my pupils from these delusive notions without alarming their pride—which was easily offended, and not soon appeased—but with little apparent result; and I know not which was the more reprehensible of the two: Matilda was more rude and boisterous; but from Rosalie’s womanly age and lady-like exterior better things were expected: yet she was as provokingly careless and inconsiderate as a giddy child of twelve.

One bright day in the last week of February, I was walking in the park, enjoying the threefold luxury of solitude, a book, and pleasant weather; for Miss Matilda had set out on her daily ride, and Miss Murray was gone in the carriage with her mamma to pay some morning calls. But it struck me that I ought to leave these selfish pleasures, and the park with its glorious canopy of bright blue sky, the west wind sounding through its yet leafless branches, the snow-wreaths still lingering in its hollows, but melting fast beneath the sun, and the graceful deer browsing on its moist herbage already assuming the freshness and verdure of spring—and go to the cottage of one Nancy Brown, a widow, whose son was at work all day in the fields, and who was afflicted with an inflammation in the eyes; which had for some time incapacitated her from reading: to her own great grief, for she was a woman of a serious, thoughtful turn of mind. I accordingly went, and found her alone, as usual, in her little, close, dark cottage, redolent of smoke and confined air, but as tidy and clean as she could make it. She was seated beside her little fire (consisting of a few red cinders and a bit of stick), busily knitting, with a small sackcloth cushion at her feet, placed for the accommodation of her gentle friend the cat, who was seated thereon, with her long tail half encircling her velvet paws, and her half-closed eyes dreamily gazing on the low, crooked fender.

‘Well, Nancy, how are you to-day?’

‘Why, middling, Miss, i’ myseln—my eyes is no better, but I’m a deal easier i’ my mind nor I have been,’ replied she, rising to welcome me with a contented smile; which



I was glad to see, for Nancy had been somewhat afflicted with religious melancholy. I congratulated her upon the change. She agreed that it was a great blessing, and expressed herself ‘right down thankful for it’; adding, ‘If it please God to spare my sight, and make me so as I can read my Bible again, I think I shall be as happy as a queen.’

‘I hope He will, Nancy,’ replied I; ‘and, meantime, I’ll come and read to you now and then, when I have a little time to spare.’

With expressions of grateful pleasure, the poor woman moved to get me a chair; but, as I saved her the trouble, she busied herself with stirring the fire, and adding a few more sticks to the decaying embers; and then, taking her well-used Bible from the shelf, dusted it carefully, and gave it me. On my asking if there was any particular part she should like me to read, she answered—

‘Well, Miss Grey, if it’s all the same to you, I should like to hear that chapter in the First Epistle of St. John, that says, “God is love, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.”’

With a little searching, I found these words in the fourth chapter. When I came to the seventh verse she interrupted me, and, with needless apologies for such a liberty, desired me to read it very slowly, that she might take it all in, and dwell on every word; hoping I would excuse her, as she was but a ‘simple body.’

‘The wisest person,’ I replied, ‘might think over each of these verses for an hour, and be all the better for it; and I would rather read them slowly than not.’

Accordingly, I finished the chapter as slowly as need be, and at the same time as impressively as I could; my auditor listened most attentively all the while, and sincerely thanked me when I had done. I sat still about half a minute to give her time to reflect upon it; when, somewhat to my surprise, she broke the pause by asking me how I liked Mr. Weston?

‘I don’t know,’ I replied, a little startled by the suddenness of the question; ‘I think he preaches very well.’

‘Ay, he does so; and talks well too.’

‘Does he?’

‘He does. Maybe, you haven’t seen him—not to talk to him much, yet?’

‘No, I never see any one to talk to—except the young ladies of the Hall.’

‘Ah; they’re nice, kind young ladies; but they can’t talk as he does.’

‘Then he comes to see you, Nancy?’

‘He does, Miss; and I’se thankful for it. He comes to see all us poor bodies a deal oftener nor Maister Bligh, or th’ Rector ever did; an’ it’s well he does, for he’s always



welcome: we can't say as much for th' Rector—there is 'at says they're fair feared on him. When he comes into a house, they say he's sure to find summut wrong, and begin a-calling 'em as soon as he crosses th' doorstuns: but maybe he thinks it his duty like to tell 'em what's wrong. And very oft he comes o' purpose to reprove folk for not coming to church, or not kneeling an' standing when other folk does, or going to the Methody chapel, or summut o' that sort: but I can't say 'at he ever fund much fault wi' me. He came to see me once or twice, afore Maister Weston come, when I was so ill troubled in my mind; and as I had only very poor health besides, I made bold to send for him—and he came right enough. I was sore distressed, Miss Grey— thank God, it's owered now—but when I took my Bible, I could get no comfort of it at all. That very chapter 'at you've just been reading troubled me as much as aught—"He that loveth not, knoweth not God." It seemed fearsome to me; for I felt that I loved neither God nor man as I should do, and could not, if I tried ever so. And th' chapter afore, where it says,—"He that is born of God cannot commit sin." And another place where it says,—"Love is the fulfilling of the Law." And many, many others, Miss: I should fair weary you out, if I was to tell them all. But all seemed to condemn me, and to show me 'at I was not in the right way; and as I knew not how to get into it, I sent our Bill to beg Maister Hatfield to be as kind as look in on me some day and when he came, I telled him all my troubles.'

'And what did he say, Nancy?'

'Why, Miss, he seemed to scorn me. I might be mista'en—but he like gave a sort of a whistle, and I saw a bit of a smile on his face; and he said, "Oh, it's all stuff! You've been among the Methodists, my good woman." But I telled him I'd never been near the Methodies. And then he said,—"Well," says he, "you must come to church, where you'll hear the Scriptures properly explained, instead of sitting poring over your Bible at home."

'But I telled him I always used coming to church when I had my health; but this very cold winter weather I hardly durst venture so far—and me so bad wi' th' rheumatic and all.

'But he says, "It'll do your rheumatiz good to hobble to church: there's nothing like exercise for the rheumatiz. You can walk about the house well enough; why can't you walk to church? The fact is," says he, "you're getting too fond of your ease. It's always easy to find excuses for shirking one's duty."

'But then, you know, Miss Grey, it wasn't so. However, I telled him I'd try. "But please, sir," says I, "if I do go to church, what the better shall I be? I want to have my



sins blotted out, and to feel that they are remembered no more against me, and that the love of God is shed abroad in my heart; and if I can get no good by reading my Bible an' saying my prayers at home, what good shall I get by going to church?"

"The church," says he, "is the place appointed by God for His worship. It's your duty to go there as often as you can. If you want comfort, you must seek it in the path of duty,"—an' a deal more he said, but I cannot remember all his fine words. However, it all came to this, that I was to come to church as oft as ever I could, and bring my prayer-book with me, an' read up all the sponser after the clerk, an' stand, an' kneel, an' sit, an' do all as I should, and take the Lord's Supper at every opportunity, an' hearken his sermons, and Maister Bligh's, an' it 'ud be all right: if I went on doing my duty, I should get a blessing at last.

"But if you get no comfort that way," says he, "it's all up."

"Then, sir," says I, "should you think I'm a reprobate?"

"Why," says he—he says, "if you do your best to get to heaven and can't manage it, you must be one of those that seek to enter in at the strait gate and shall not be able."

'An' then he asked me if I'd seen any of the ladies o' th' Hall about that mornin'; so I telled him where I had seen the young misses go on th' Moss Lane;—an' he kicked my poor cat right across th' floor, an' went after 'em as gay as a lark: but I was very sad. That last word o' his fair sunk into my heart, an' lay there like a lump o' lead, till I was weary to bear it.

'Howsever, I follered his advice: I thought he meant it all for th' best, though he HAD a queer way with him. But you know, Miss, he's rich an' young, and such like cannot right understand the thoughts of a poor old woman such as me. But, howsever, I did my best to do all as he bade me—but maybe I'm plaguing you, Miss, wi' my chatter.'

'Oh, no, Nancy! Go on, and tell me all.'

'Well, my rheumatiz got better—I know not whether wi' going to church or not, but one frosty Sunday I got this cold i' my eyes. Th' inflammation didn't come on all at once like, but bit by bit— but I wasn't going to tell you about my eyes, I was talking about my trouble o' mind;—and to tell the truth, Miss Grey, I don't think it was anyways eased by coming to church—nought to speak on, at least: I like got my health better; but that didn't mend my soul. I hearkened and hearkened the ministers, and read an' read at my prayer-book; but it was all like sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal: the sermons I couldn't understand, an' th' prayer-book only served to show me how wicked I was, that I could read such good words an' never be no better for it, and oftens



feel it a sore labour an' a heavy task beside, instead of a blessing and a privilege as all good Christians does. It seemed like as all were barren an' dark to me. And then, them dreadful words, "Many shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able." They like as they fair dried up my sperrit.

'But one Sunday, when Maister Hatfield gave out about the sacrament, I noticed where he said, "If there be any of you that cannot quiet his own conscience, but requireth further comfort or counsel, let him come to me, or some other discreet and learned minister of God's word, and open his grief!" So next Sunday morning, afore service, I just looked into the vestry, an' began a-talking to th' Rector again. I hardly could fashion to take such a liberty, but I thought when my soul was at stake I shouldn't stick at a trifle. But he said he hadn't time to attend to me then.

"And, indeed," says he, "I've nothing to say to you but what I've said before. Take the sacrament, of course, and go on doing your duty; and if that won't serve you, nothing will. So don't bother me any more."

'So then, I went away. But I heard Maister Weston—Maister Weston was there, Miss—this was his first Sunday at Horton, you know, an' he was i' th' vestry in his surplice, helping th' Rector on with his gown—'

'Yes, Nancy.'

'And I heard him ask Maister Hatfield who I was, an' he says, "Oh, she's a canting old fool."

'And I was very ill grieved, Miss Grey; but I went to my seat, and I tried to do my duty as aforetime: but I like got no peace. An' I even took the sacrament; but I felt as though I were eating and drinking to my own damnation all th' time. So I went home, sorely troubled.

'But next day, afore I'd gotten fettled up—for indeed, Miss, I'd no heart to sweeping an' fettling, an' washing pots; so I sat me down i' th' muck—who should come in but Maister Weston! I started siding stuff then, an' sweeping an' doing; and I expected he'd begin a-calling me for my idle ways, as Maister Hatfield would a' done; but I was mista'en: he only bid me good-mornin' like, in a quiet dacent way. So I dusted him a chair, an' fettled up th' fireplace a bit; but I hadn't forgotten th' Rector's words, so says I, "I wonder, sir, you should give yourself that trouble, to come so far to see a 'canting old fool,' such as me."

'He seemed taken aback at that; but he would fain persuade me 'at the Rector was only in jest; and when that wouldn't do, he says, "Well, Nancy, you shouldn't think so much about it: Mr. Hatfield was a little out of humour just then: you know we're none of us



perfect—even Moses spoke unadvisedly with his lips. But now sit down a minute, if you can spare the time, and tell me all your doubts and fears; and I'll try to remove them."

'So I sat me down anent him. He was quite a stranger, you know, Miss Grey, and even YOUNGER nor Maister Hatfield, I believe; and I had thought him not so pleasant-looking as him, and rather a bit crossish, at first, to look at; but he spake so civil like—and when th' cat, poor thing, jumped on to his knee, he only stroked her, and gave a bit of a smile: so I thought that was a good sign; for once, when she did so to th' Rector, he knocked her off, like as it might be in scorn and anger, poor thing. But you can't expect a cat to know manners like a Christian, you know, Miss Grey.'

'No; of course not, Nancy. But what did Mr. Weston say then?'

'He said nought; but he listened to me as steady an' patient as could be, an' never a bit o' scorn about him; so I went on, an' telled him all, just as I've telled you—an' more too.

"Well," says he, "Mr. Hatfield was quite right in telling you to persevere in doing your duty; but in advising you to go to church and attend to the service, and so on, he didn't mean that was the whole of a Christian's duty: he only thought you might there learn what more was to be done, and be led to take delight in those exercises, instead of finding them a task and a burden. And if you had asked him to explain those words that trouble you so much, I think he would have told you, that if many shall seek to enter in at the strait gate and shall not be able, it is their own sins that hinder them; just as a man with a large sack on his back might wish to pass through a narrow doorway, and find it impossible to do so unless he would leave his sack behind him. But you, Nancy, I dare say, have no sins that you would not gladly throw aside, if you knew how?"

"Indeed, sir, you speak truth," said I.

"Well," says he, "you know the first and great commandment—and the second, which is like unto it—on which two commandments hang all the law and the prophets? You say you cannot love God; but it strikes me that if you rightly consider who and what He is, you cannot help it. He is your father, your best friend: every blessing, everything good, pleasant, or useful, comes from Him; and everything evil, everything you have reason to hate, to shun, or to fear, comes from Satan—HIS enemy as well as ours. And for THIS cause was God manifest in the flesh, that He might destroy the works of the Devil: in one word, God is LOVE; and the more of love we have within us, the nearer we are to Him and the more of His spirit we possess."

"Well, sir," I said, "if I can always think on these things, I think I might well love God: but how can I love my neighbours, when they vex me, and be so contrary and sinful as some on 'em is?"



“It may seem a hard matter,” says he, “to love our neighbours, who have so much of what is evil about them, and whose faults so often awaken the evil that lingers within ourselves; but remember that HE made them, and HE loves them; and whosoever loveth him that begat, loveth him that is begotten also. And if God so loveth us, that He gave His only begotten Son to die for us, we ought also to love one another. But if you cannot feel positive affection for those who do not care for you, you can at least try to do to them as you would they should do unto you: you can endeavour to pity their failings and excuse their offences, and to do all the good you can to those about you. And if you accustom yourself to this, Nancy, the very effort itself will make you love them in some degree—to say nothing of the goodwill your kindness would beget in them, though they might have little else that is good about them. If we love God and wish to serve Him, let us try to be like Him, to do His work, to labour for His glory—which is the good of man—to hasten the coming of His kingdom, which is the peace and happiness of all the world: however powerless we may seem to be, in doing all the good we can through life, the humblest of us may do much towards it: and let us dwell in love, that He may dwell in us and we in Him. The more happiness we bestow, the more we shall receive, even here; and the greater will be our reward in heaven when we rest from our labours.” I believe, Miss, them is his very words, for I’ve thought ‘em ower many a time. An’ then he took that Bible, an’ read bits here and there, an’ explained ‘em as clear as the day: and it seemed like as a new light broke in on my soul; an’ I felt fair aglow about my heart, an’ only wished poor Bill an’ all the world could ha’ been there, an’ heard it all, and rejoiced wi’ me.

‘After he was gone, Hannah Rogers, one o’ th’ neighbours, came in and wanted me to help her to wash. I telled her I couldn’t just then, for I hadn’t set on th’ potaties for th’ dinner, nor washed up th’ breakfast stuff yet. So then she began a–calling me for my nasty idle ways. I was a little bit vexed at first, but I never said nothing wrong to her: I only telled her like all in a quiet way, ‘at I’d had th’ new parson to see me; but I’d get done as quick as ever I could, an’ then come an’ help her. So then she softened down; and my heart like as it warmed towards her, an’ in a bit we was very good friends. An’ so it is, Miss Grey, “a soft answer turneth away wrath; but grievous words stir up anger.” It isn’t only in them you speak to, but in yourself.’

‘Very true, Nancy, if we could always remember it.’

‘Ay, if we could!’

‘And did Mr. Weston ever come to see you again?’



‘Yes, many a time; and since my eyes has been so bad, he’s sat an’ read to me by the half-hour together: but you know, Miss, he has other folks to see, and other things to do—God bless him! An’ that next Sunday he preached SUCH a sermon! His text was, “Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,” and them two blessed verses that follows. You wasn’t there, Miss, you was with your friends then—but it made me SO happy! And I AM happy now, thank God! an’ I take a pleasure, now, in doing little bits o’ jobs for my neighbours—such as a poor old body ‘at’s half blind can do; and they take it kindly of me, just as he said. You see, Miss, I’m knitting a pair o’ stockings now;— they’re for Thomas Jackson: he’s a queerish old body, an’ we’ve had many a bout at threaping, one anent t’other; an’ at times we’ve differed sorely. So I thought I couldn’t do better nor knit him a pair o’ warm stockings; an’ I’ve felt to like him a deal better, poor old man, sin’ I began. It’s turned out just as Maister Weston said.’

‘Well, I’m very glad to see you so happy, Nancy, and so wise: but I must go now; I shall be wanted at the Hall,’ said I; and bidding her good-bye, I departed, promising to come again when I had time, and feeling nearly as happy as herself.

At another time I went to read to a poor labourer who was in the last stage of consumption. The young ladies had been to see him, and somehow a promise of reading had been extracted from them; but it was too much trouble, so they begged me to do it instead. I went, willingly enough; and there too I was gratified with the praises of Mr. Weston, both from the sick man and his wife. The former told me that he derived great comfort and benefit from the visits of the new parson, who frequently came to see him, and was ‘another guess sort of man’ to Mr. Hatfield; who, before the other’s arrival at Horton, had now and then paid him a visit; on which occasions he would always insist upon having the cottage-door kept open, to admit the fresh air for his own convenience, without considering how it might injure the sufferer; and having opened his prayer-book and hastily read over a part of the Service for the Sick, would hurry away again: if he did not stay to administer some harsh rebuke to the afflicted wife, or to make some thoughtless, not to say heartless, observation, rather calculated to increase than diminish the troubles of the suffering pair.

‘Whereas,’ said the man, ‘Maister Weston ‘ull pray with me quite in a different fashion, an’ talk to me as kind as owt; an’ oft read to me too, an’ sit beside me just like a brother.’

‘Just for all the world!’ exclaimed his wife; ‘an’ about a three wik sin’, when he seed how poor Jem shivered wi’ cold, an’ what pitiful fires we kept, he axed if wer



stock of coals was nearly done. I telled him it was, an' we was ill set to get more: but you know, mum, I didn't think o' him helping us; but, howsever, he sent us a sack o' coals next day; an' we've had good fires ever sin': and a great blessing it is, this winter time. But that's his way, Miss Grey: when he comes into a poor body's house a-seein' sick folk, he like notices what they most stand i' need on; an' if he thinks they can't readily get it therseln, he never says nowt about it, but just gets it for 'em. An' it isn't everybody 'at 'ud do that, 'at has as little as he has: for you know, mum, he's nowt at all to live on but what he gets fra' th' Rector, an' that's little enough they say.'

I remembered then, with a species of exultation, that he had frequently been styled a vulgar brute by the amiable Miss Murray, because he wore a silver watch, and clothes not quite so bright and fresh as Mr. Hatfield's.

In returning to the Lodge I felt very happy, and thanked God that I had now something to think about; something to dwell on as a relief from the weary monotony, the lonely drudgery, of my present life: for I WAS lonely. Never, from month to month, from year to year, except during my brief intervals of rest at home, did I see one creature to whom I could open my heart, or freely speak my thoughts with any hope of sympathy, or even comprehension: never one, unless it were poor Nancy Brown, with whom I could enjoy a single moment of real social intercourse, or whose conversation was calculated to render me better, wiser, or happier than before; or who, as far as I could see, could be greatly benefited by mine. My only companions had been unamiable children, and ignorant, wrong-headed girls; from whose fatiguing folly, unbroken solitude was often a relief most earnestly desired and dearly prized. But to be restricted to such associates was a serious evil, both in its immediate effects and the consequences that were likely to ensue. Never a new idea or stirring thought came to me from without; and such as rose within me were, for the most part, miserably crushed at once, or doomed to sicken or fade away, because they could not see the light.

Habitual associates are known to exercise a great influence over each other's minds and manners. Those whose actions are for ever before our eyes, whose words are ever in our ears, will naturally lead us, albeit against our will, slowly, gradually, imperceptibly, perhaps, to act and speak as they do. I will not presume to say how far this irresistible power of assimilation extends; but if one civilised man were doomed to pass a dozen years amid a race of intractable savages, unless he had power to improve them, I greatly question whether, at the close of that period, he would not have become, at least, a barbarian himself. And I, as I could not make my young companions better,



feared exceedingly that they would make me worse—would gradually bring my feelings, habits, capacities, to the level of their own; without, however, imparting to me their lightheartedness and cheerful vivacity.

Already, I seemed to feel my intellect deteriorating, my heart petrifying, my soul contracting; and I trembled lest my very moral perceptions should become deadened, my distinctions of right and wrong confounded, and all my better faculties be sunk, at last, beneath the baneful influence of such a mode of life. The gross vapours of earth were gathering around me, and closing in upon my inward heaven; and thus it was that Mr. Weston rose at length upon me, appearing like the morning star in my horizon, to save me from the fear of utter darkness; and I rejoiced that I had now a subject for contemplation that was above me, not beneath. I was glad to see that all the world was not made up of Bloomfields, Murrays, Hatfields, Ashbys, &c.; and that human excellence was not a mere dream of the imagination. When we hear a little good and no harm of a person, it is easy and pleasant to imagine more: in short, it is needless to analyse all my thoughts; but Sunday was now become a day of peculiar delight to me (I was now almost broken-in to the back corner in the carriage), for I liked to hear him—and I liked to see him, too; though I knew he was not handsome, or even what is called agreeable, in outward aspect; but, certainly, he was not ugly.

In stature he was a little, a very little, above the middle size; the outline of his face would be pronounced too square for beauty, but to me it announced decision of character; his dark brown hair was not carefully curled, like Mr. Hatfield's, but simply brushed aside over a broad white forehead; the eyebrows, I suppose, were too projecting, but from under those dark brows there gleamed an eye of singular power, brown in colour, not large, and somewhat deep-set, but strikingly brilliant, and full of expression; there was character, too, in the mouth, something that bespoke a man of firm purpose and an habitual thinker; and when he smiled—but I will not speak of that yet, for, at the time I mention, I had never seen him smile: and, indeed, his general appearance did not impress me with the idea of a man given to such a relaxation, nor of such an individual as the cottagers described him. I had early formed my opinion of him; and, in spite of Miss Murray's objurgations: was fully convinced that he was a man of strong sense, firm faith, and ardent piety, but thoughtful and stern: and when I found that, to his other good qualities, was added that of true benevolence and gentle, considerate kindness, the discovery, perhaps, delighted me the more, as I had not been prepared to expect it.

