

Agnes Grey

Anne Brontë

Chapter 15: The Walk

‘Oh, dear! I wish Hatfield had not been so precipitate!’ said Rosalie next day at four P.M., as, with a portentous yawn, she laid down her worsted-work and looked listlessly towards the window. ‘There’s no inducement to go out now; and nothing to look forward to. The days will be so long and dull when there are no parties to enliven them; and there are none this week, or next either, that I know of.’

‘Pity you were so cross to him,’ observed Matilda, to whom this lamentation was addressed. ‘He’ll never come again: and I suspect you liked him after all. I hoped you would have taken him for your beau, and left dear Harry to me.’

‘Humph! my beau must be an Adonis indeed, Matilda, the admired of all beholders, if I am to be contented with him alone. I’m sorry to lose Hatfield, I confess; but the first decent man, or number of men, that come to supply his place, will be more than welcome. It’s Sunday to-morrow—I do wonder how he’ll look, and whether he’ll be able to go through the service. Most likely he’ll pretend he’s got a cold, and make Mr. Weston do it all.’

‘Not he!’ exclaimed Matilda, somewhat contemptuously. ‘Fool as he is, he’s not so soft as that comes to.’

Her sister was slightly offended; but the event proved Matilda was right: the disappointed lover performed his pastoral duties as usual. Rosalie, indeed, affirmed he looked very pale and dejected: he might be a little paler; but the difference, if any, was scarcely perceptible. As for his dejection, I certainly did not hear his laugh ringing from the vestry as usual, nor his voice loud in hilarious discourse; though I did hear it uplifted in rating the sexton in a manner that made the congregation stare; and, in his transits to and from the pulpit and the communion-table, there was more of solemn pomp, and less of that irreverent, self-confident, or rather self-delighted imperiousness with which he usually swept along—that air that seemed to say, ‘You all reverence and adore me, I know; but if anyone does not, I defy him to the teeth!’



But the most remarkable change was, that he never once suffered his eyes to wander in the direction of Mr. Murray's pew, and did not leave the church till we were gone.

Mr. Hatfield had doubtless received a very severe blow; but his pride impelled him to use every effort to conceal the effects of it. He had been disappointed in his certain hope of obtaining not only a beautiful, and, to him, highly attractive wife, but one whose rank and fortune might give brilliance to far inferior charms: he was likewise, no doubt, intensely mortified by his repulse, and deeply offended at the conduct of Miss Murray throughout. It would have given him no little consolation to have known how disappointed she was to find him apparently so little moved, and to see that he was able to refrain from casting a single glance at her throughout both services; though, she declared, it showed he was thinking of her all the time, or his eyes would have fallen upon her, if it were only by chance: but if they had so chanced to fall, she would have affirmed it was because they could not resist the attraction. It might have pleased him, too, in some degree, to have seen how dull and dissatisfied she was throughout that week (the greater part of it, at least), for lack of her usual source of excitement; and how often she regretted having 'used him up so soon,' like a child that, having devoured its plumcake too hastily, sits sucking its fingers, and vainly lamenting its greediness.

At length I was called upon, one fine morning, to accompany her in a walk to the village. Ostensibly she went to get some shades of Berlin wool, at a tolerably respectable shop that was chiefly supported by the ladies of the vicinity: really—I trust there is no breach of charity in supposing that she went with the idea of meeting either with the Rector himself, or some other admirer by the way; for as we went along, she kept wondering 'what Hatfield would do or say, if we met him,' &c. &c.; as we passed Mr. Green's park-gates, she 'wondered whether he was at home—great stupid blockhead'; as Lady Meltham's carriage passed us, she 'wondered what Mr. Harry was doing this fine day'; and then began to abuse his elder brother for being 'such a fool as to get married and go and live in London.'

'Why,' said I, 'I thought you wanted to live in London yourself.'

'Yes, because it's so dull here: but then he makes it still duller by taking himself off: and if he were not married I might have him instead of that odious Sir Thomas.'

Then, observing the prints of a horse's feet on the somewhat miry road, she 'wondered whether it was a gentleman's horse,' and finally concluded it was, for the impressions were too small to have been made by a 'great clumsy cart-horse'; and then she 'wondered who the rider could be,' and whether we should meet him



coming back, for she was sure he had only passed that morning; and lastly, when we entered the village and saw only a few of its humble inhabitants moving about, she ‘wondered why the stupid people couldn’t keep in their houses; she was sure she didn’t want to see their ugly faces, and dirty, vulgar clothes—it wasn’t for that she came to Horton!’

Amid all this, I confess, I wondered, too, in secret, whether we should meet, or catch a glimpse of somebody else; and as we passed his lodgings, I even went so far as to wonder whether he was at the window. On entering the shop, Miss Murray desired me to stand in the doorway while she transacted her business, and tell her if anyone passed. But alas! there was no one visible besides the villagers, except Jane and Susan Green coming down the single street, apparently returning from a walk.

‘Stupid things!’ muttered she, as she came out after having concluded her bargain. ‘Why couldn’t they have their dolt of a brother with them? even he would be better than nothing.’

She greeted them, however, with a cheerful smile, and protestations of pleasure at the happy meeting equal to their own. They placed themselves one on each side of her, and all three walked away chatting and laughing as young ladies do when they get together, if they be but on tolerably intimate terms. But I, feeling myself to be one too many, left them to their merriment and lagged behind, as usual on such occasions: I had no relish for walking beside Miss Green or Miss Susan like one deaf and dumb, who could neither speak nor be spoken to.

But this time I was not long alone. It struck me, first, as very odd, that just as I was thinking about Mr. Weston he should come up and accost me; but afterwards, on due reflection, I thought there was nothing odd about it, unless it were the fact of his speaking to me; for on such a morning and so near his own abode, it was natural enough that he should be about; and as for my thinking of him, I had been doing that, with little intermission, ever since we set out on our journey; so there was nothing remarkable in that.

‘You are alone again, Miss Grey,’ said he.

‘Yes.’

‘What kind of people are those ladies—the Misses Green?’

‘I really don’t know.’

‘That’s strange—when you live so near and see them so often!’

‘Well, I suppose they are lively, good-tempered girls; but I imagine you must know them better than I do, yourself, for I never exchanged a word with either of them.’



‘Indeed? They don’t strike me as being particularly reserved.’

‘Very likely they are not so to people of their own class; but they consider themselves as moving in quite a different sphere from me!’

He made no reply to this: but after a short pause, he said,—‘I suppose it’s these things, Miss Grey, that make you think you could not live without a home?’

‘Not exactly. The fact is I am too socially disposed to be able to live contentedly without a friend; and as the only friends I have, or am likely to have, are at home, if it—or rather, if they were gone—I will not say I could not live—but I would rather not live in such a desolate world.’

‘But why do you say the only friends you are likely to have? Are you so unsociable that you cannot make friends?’

‘No, but I never made one yet; and in my present position there is no possibility of doing so, or even of forming a common acquaintance. The fault may be partly in myself, but I hope not altogether.’

‘The fault is partly in society, and partly, I should think, in your immediate neighbours: and partly, too, in yourself; for many ladies, in your position, would make themselves be noticed and accounted of. But your pupils should be companions for you in some degree; they cannot be many years younger than yourself.’

‘Oh, yes, they are good company sometimes; but I cannot call them friends, nor would they think of bestowing such a name on me—they have other companions better suited to their tastes.’

‘Perhaps you are too wise for them. How do you amuse yourself when alone—do you read much?’

‘Reading is my favourite occupation, when I have leisure for it and books to read.’

From speaking of books in general, he passed to different books in particular, and proceeded by rapid transitions from topic to topic, till several matters, both of taste and opinion, had been discussed considerably within the space of half an hour, but without the embellishment of many observations from himself; he being evidently less bent upon communicating his own thoughts and predilections, than on discovering mine. He had not the tact, or the art, to effect such a purpose by skilfully drawing out my sentiments or ideas through the real or apparent statement of his own, or leading the conversation by imperceptible gradations to such topics as he wished to advert to: but such gentle abruptness, and such single-minded straightforwardness, could not possibly offend me.



‘And why should he interest himself at all in my moral and intellectual capacities: what is it to him what I think or feel?’ I asked myself. And my heart throbbed in answer to the question.

But Jane and Susan Green soon reached their home. As they stood parleying at the park-gates, attempting to persuade Miss Murray to come in, I wished Mr. Weston would go, that she might not see him with me when she turned round; but, unfortunately, his business, which was to pay one more visit to poor Mark Wood, led him to pursue the same path as we did, till nearly the close of our journey. When, however, he saw that Rosalie had taken leave of her friends and I was about to join her, he would have left me and passed on at a quicker pace; but, as he civilly lifted his hat in passing her, to my surprise, instead of returning the salute with a stiff, ungracious bow, she accosted him with one of her sweetest smiles, and, walking by his side, began to talk to him with all imaginable cheerfulness and affability; and so we proceeded all three together.

After a short pause in the conversation, Mr. Weston made some remark addressed particularly to me, as referring to something we had been talking of before; but before I could answer, Miss Murray replied to the observation and enlarged upon it: he rejoined; and, from thence to the close of the interview, she engrossed him entirely to herself. It might be partly owing to my own stupidity, my want of tact and assurance: but I felt myself wronged: I trembled with apprehension; and I listened with envy to her easy, rapid flow of utterance, and saw with anxiety the bright smile with which she looked into his face from time to time: for she was walking a little in advance, for the purpose (as I judged) of being seen as well as heard. If her conversation was light and trivial, it was amusing, and she was never at a loss for something to say, or for suitable words to express it in. There was nothing pert or flippant in her manner now, as when she walked with Mr. Hatfield, there was only a gentle, playful kind of vivacity, which I thought must be peculiarly pleasing to a man of Mr. Weston’s disposition and temperament.

When he was gone she began to laugh, and muttered to herself, ‘I thought I could do it!’

‘Do what?’ I asked.

‘Fix that man.’

‘What in the world do you mean?’

‘I mean that he will go home and dream of me. I have shot him through the heart!’

‘How do you know?’



‘By many infallible proofs: more especially the look he gave me when he went away. It was not an impudent look—I exonerate him from that—it was a look of reverential, tender adoration. Ha, ha! he’s not quite such a stupid blockhead as I thought him!’

I made no answer, for my heart was in my throat, or something like it, and I could not trust myself to speak. ‘O God, avert it!’ I cried, internally—’for his sake, not for mine!’

Miss Murray made several trivial observations as we passed up the park, to which (in spite of my reluctance to let one glimpse of my feelings appear) I could only answer by monosyllables. Whether she intended to torment me, or merely to amuse herself, I could not tell—and did not much care; but I thought of the poor man and his one lamb, and the rich man with his thousand flocks; and I dreaded I knew not what for Mr. Weston, independently of my own blighted hopes.

Right glad was I to get into the house, and find myself alone once more in my own room. My first impulse was to sink into the chair beside the bed; and laying my head on the pillow, to seek relief in a passionate burst of tears: there was an imperative craving for such an indulgence; but, alas! I must restrain and swallow back my feelings still: there was the bell—the odious bell for the schoolroom dinner; and I must go down with a calm face, and smile, and laugh, and talk nonsense—yes, and eat, too, if possible, as if all was right, and I was just returned from a pleasant walk.

