

Agnes Grey

Anne Brontë

Chapter 17: Confessions

As I am in the way of confessions I may as well acknowledge that, about this time, I paid more attention to dress than ever I had done before. This is not saying much—for hitherto I had been a little neglectful in that particular; but now, also, it was no uncommon thing to spend as much as two minutes in the contemplation of my own image in the glass; though I never could derive any consolation from such a study. I could discover no beauty in those marked features, that pale hollow cheek, and ordinary dark brown hair; there might be intellect in the forehead, there might be expression in the dark grey eyes, but what of that?—a low Grecian brow, and large black eyes devoid of sentiment would be esteemed far preferable. It is foolish to wish for beauty. Sensible people never either desire it for themselves or care about it in others. If the mind be but well cultivated, and the heart well disposed, no one ever cares for the exterior. So said the teachers of our childhood; and so say we to the children of the present day. All very judicious and proper, no doubt; but are such assertions supported by actual experience?

We are naturally disposed to love what gives us pleasure, and what more pleasing than a beautiful face—when we know no harm of the possessor at least? A little girl loves her bird—Why? Because it lives and feels; because it is helpless and harmless? A toad, likewise, lives and feels, and is equally helpless and harmless; but though she would not hurt a toad, she cannot love it like the bird, with its graceful form, soft feathers, and bright, speaking eyes. If a woman is fair and amiable, she is praised for both qualities, but especially the former, by the bulk of mankind: if, on the other hand, she is disagreeable in person and character, her plainness is commonly inveighed against as her greatest crime, because, to common observers, it gives the greatest offence; while, if she is plain and good, provided she is a person of retired manners and secluded life, no one ever knows of her goodness, except her immediate connections. Others, on the contrary, are disposed to form unfavourable opinions



of her mind, and disposition, if it be but to excuse themselves for their instinctive dislike of one so unfavoured by nature; and visa versa with her whose angel form conceals a vicious heart, or sheds a false, deceitful charm over defects and foibles that would not be tolerated in another. They that have beauty, let them be thankful for it, and make a good use of it, like any other talent; they that have it not, let them console themselves, and do the best they can without it: certainly, though liable to be over-estimated, it is a gift of God, and not to be despised. Many will feel this who have felt that they could love, and whose hearts tell them that they are worthy to be loved again; while yet they are debarred, by the lack of this or some such seeming trifle, from giving and receiving that happiness they seem almost made to feel and to impart. As well might the humble glowworm despise that power of giving light without which the roving fly might pass her and repass her a thousand times, and never rest beside her: she might hear her winged darling buzzing over and around her; he vainly seeking her, she longing to be found, but with no power to make her presence known, no voice to call him, no wings to follow his flight;—the fly must seek another mate, the worm must live and die alone.

Such were some of my reflections about this period. I might go on prosing more and more, I might dive much deeper, and disclose other thoughts, propose questions the reader might be puzzled to answer, and deduce arguments that might startle his prejudices, or, perhaps, provoke his ridicule, because he could not comprehend them; but I forbear.

Now, therefore, let us return to Miss Murray. She accompanied her mamma to the ball on Tuesday; of course splendidly attired, and delighted with her prospects and her charms. As Ashby Park was nearly ten miles distant from Horton Lodge, they had to set out pretty early, and I intended to have spent the evening with Nancy Brown, whom I had not seen for a long time; but my kind pupil took care I should spend it neither there nor anywhere else beyond the limits of the schoolroom, by giving me a piece of music to copy, which kept me closely occupied till bed-time. About eleven next morning, as soon as she had left her room, she came to tell me her news. Sir Thomas had indeed proposed to her at the ball; an event which reflected great credit on her mamma's sagacity, if not upon her skill in contrivance. I rather incline to the belief that she had first laid her plans, and then predicted their success. The offer had been accepted, of course, and the bridegroom elect was coming that day to settle matters with Mr. Murray.

Rosalie was pleased with the thoughts of becoming mistress of Ashby Park; she was elated with the prospect of the bridal ceremony and its attendant splendour



and eclat, the honeymoon spent abroad, and the subsequent gaieties she expected to enjoy in London and elsewhere; she appeared pretty well pleased too, for the time being, with Sir Thomas himself, because she had so lately seen him, danced with him, and been flattered by him; but, after all, she seemed to shrink from the idea of being so soon united: she wished the ceremony to be delayed some months, at least; and I wished it too. It seemed a horrible thing to hurry on the inauspicious match, and not to give the poor creature time to think and reason on the irrevocable step she was about to take. I made no pretension to ‘a mother’s watchful, anxious care,’ but I was amazed and horrified at Mrs. Murray’s heartlessness, or want of thought for the real good of her child; and by my unheeded warnings and exhortations, I vainly strove to remedy the evil. Miss Murray only laughed at what I said; and I soon found that her reluctance to an immediate union arose chiefly from a desire to do what execution she could among the young gentlemen of her acquaintance, before she was incapacitated from further mischief of the kind. It was for this cause that, before confiding to me the secret of her engagement, she had extracted a promise that I would not mention a word on the subject to any one. And when I saw this, and when I beheld her plunge more recklessly than ever into the depths of heartless coquetry, I had no more pity for her. ‘Come what will,’ I thought, ‘she deserves it. Sir Thomas cannot be too bad for her; and the sooner she is incapacitated from deceiving and injuring others the better.’

The wedding was fixed for the first of June. Between that and the critical ball was little more than six weeks; but, with Rosalie’s accomplished skill and resolute exertion, much might be done, even within that period; especially as Sir Thomas spent most of the interim in London; whither he went up, it was said, to settle affairs with his lawyer, and make other preparations for the approaching nuptials. He endeavoured to supply the want of his presence by a pretty constant fire of billets-doux; but these did not attract the neighbours’ attention, and open their eyes, as personal visits would have done; and old Lady Ashby’s haughty, sour spirit of reserve withheld her from spreading the news, while her indifferent health prevented her coming to visit her future daughter-in-law; so that, altogether, this affair was kept far closer than such things usually are.

Rosalie would sometimes show her lover’s epistles to me, to convince me what a kind, devoted husband he would make. She showed me the letters of another individual, too, the unfortunate Mr. Green, who had not the courage, or, as she expressed it, the ‘spunk,’ to plead his cause in person, but whom one denial would



not satisfy: he must write again and again. He would not have done so if he could have seen the grimaces his fair idol made over his moving appeals to her feelings, and heard her scornful laughter, and the opprobrious epithets she heaped upon him for his perseverance.

‘Why don’t you tell him, at once, that you are engaged?’ I asked.

‘Oh, I don’t want him to know that,’ replied she. ‘If he knew it, his sisters and everybody would know it, and then there would be an end of my—ahem! And, besides, if I told him that, he would think my engagement was the only obstacle, and that I would have him if I were free; which I could not bear that any man should think, and he, of all others, at least. Besides, I don’t care for his letters,’ she added, contemptuously; ‘he may write as often as he pleases, and look as great a calf as he likes when I meet him; it only amuses me.’

Meantime, young Meltham was pretty frequent in his visits to the house or transits past it; and, judging by Matilda’s execrations and reproaches, her sister paid more attention to him than civility required; in other words, she carried on as animated a flirtation as the presence of her parents would admit. She made some attempts to bring Mr. Hatfield once more to her feet; but finding them unsuccessful, she repaid his haughty indifference with still loftier scorn, and spoke of him with as much disdain and detestation as she had formerly done of his curate. But, amid all this, she never for a moment lost sight of Mr. Weston. She embraced every opportunity of meeting him, tried every art to fascinate him, and pursued him with as much perseverance as if she really loved him and no other, and the happiness of her life depended upon eliciting a return of affection. Such conduct was completely beyond my comprehension. Had I seen it depicted in a novel, I should have thought it unnatural; had I heard it described by others, I should have deemed it a mistake or an exaggeration; but when I saw it with my own eyes, and suffered from it too, I could only conclude that excessive vanity, like drunkenness, hardens the heart, enslaves the faculties, and perverts the feelings; and that dogs are not the only creatures which, when gorged to the throat, will yet gloat over what they cannot devour, and grudge the smallest morsel to a starving brother.

She now became extremely beneficent to the poor cottagers. Her acquaintance among them was more widely extended, her visits to their humble dwellings were more frequent and excursive than they had ever been before. Hereby, she earned among them the reputation of a condescending and very charitable young lady; and their encomiums were sure to be repeated to Mr. Weston: whom also she had thus a



daily chance of meeting in one or other of their abodes, or in her transits to and fro; and often, likewise, she could gather, through their gossip, to what places he was likely to go at such and such a time, whether to baptize a child, or to visit the aged, the sick, the sad, or the dying; and most skilfully she laid her plans accordingly. In these excursions she would sometimes go with her sister—whom, by some means, she had persuaded or bribed to enter into her schemes—sometimes alone, never, now, with me; so that I was debarred the pleasure of seeing Mr. Weston, or hearing his voice even in conversation with another: which would certainly have been a very great pleasure, however hurtful or however fraught with pain. I could not even see him at church: for Miss Murray, under some trivial pretext, chose to take possession of that corner in the family pew which had been mine ever since I came; and, unless I had the presumption to station myself between Mr. and Mrs. Murray, I must sit with my back to the pulpit, which I accordingly did.

Now, also, I never walked home with my pupils: they said their mamma thought it did not look well to see three people out of the family walking, and only two going in the carriage; and, as they greatly preferred walking in fine weather, I should be honoured by going with the seniors. ‘And besides,’ said they, ‘you can’t walk as fast as we do; you know you’re always lagging behind.’ I knew these were false excuses, but I made no objections, and never contradicted such assertions, well knowing the motives which dictated them. And in the afternoons, during those six memorable weeks, I never went to church at all. If I had a cold, or any slight indisposition, they took advantage of that to make me stay at home; and often they would tell me they were not going again that day, themselves, and then pretend to change their minds, and set off without telling me: so managing their departure that I never discovered the change of purpose till too late. Upon their return home, on one of these occasions, they entertained me with an animated account of a conversation they had had with Mr. Weston as they came along. ‘And he asked if you were ill, Miss Grey,’ said Matilda; ‘but we told him you were quite well, only you didn’t want to come to church—so he’ll think you’re turned wicked.’

All chance meetings on week-days were likewise carefully prevented; for, lest I should go to see poor Nancy Brown or any other person, Miss Murray took good care to provide sufficient employment for all my leisure hours. There was always some drawing to finish, some music to copy, or some work to do, sufficient to incapacitate me from indulging in anything beyond a short walk about the grounds, however she or her sister might be occupied.



One morning, having sought and waylaid Mr. Weston, they returned in high glee to give me an account of their interview. ‘And he asked after you again,’ said Matilda, in spite of her sister’s silent but imperative intimation that she should hold her tongue. ‘He wondered why you were never with us, and thought you must have delicate health, as you came out so seldom.’

‘He didn’t Matilda—what nonsense you’re talking!’

‘Oh, Rosalie, what a lie! He did, you know; and you said—Don’t, Rosalie—hang it!—I won’t be pinched so! And, Miss Grey, Rosalie told him you were quite well, but you were always so buried in your books that you had no pleasure in anything else.’

‘What an idea he must have of me!’ I thought.

‘And,’ I asked, ‘does old Nancy ever inquire about me?’

‘Yes; and we tell her you are so fond of reading and drawing that you can do nothing else.’

‘That is not the case though; if you had told her I was so busy I could not come to see her, it would have been nearer the truth.’

‘I don’t think it would,’ replied Miss Murray, suddenly kindling up; ‘I’m sure you have plenty of time to yourself now, when you have so little teaching to do.’

It was no use beginning to dispute with such indulged, unreasoning creatures: so I held my peace. I was accustomed, now, to keeping silence when things distasteful to my ear were uttered; and now, too, I was used to wearing a placid smiling countenance when my heart was bitter within me. Only those who have felt the like can imagine my feelings, as I sat with an assumption of smiling indifference, listening to the accounts of those meetings and interviews with Mr. Weston, which they seemed to find such pleasure in describing to me; and hearing things asserted of him which, from the character of the man, I knew to be exaggerations and perversions of the truth, if not entirely false—things derogatory to him, and flattering to them—especially to Miss Murray—which I burned to contradict, or, at least, to show my doubts about, but dared not; lest, in expressing my disbelief, I should display my interest too. Other things I heard, which I felt or feared were indeed too true: but I must still conceal my anxiety respecting him, my indignation against them, beneath a careless aspect; others, again, mere hints of something said or done, which I longed to hear more of, but could not venture to inquire. So passed the weary time. I could not even comfort myself with saying, ‘She will soon be married; and then there may be hope.’



Soon after her marriage the holidays would come; and when I returned from home, most likely, Mr. Weston would be gone, for I was told that he and the Rector could not agree (the Rector's fault, of course), and he was about to remove to another place.

No—besides my hope in God, my only consolation was in thinking that, though he know it not, I was more worthy of his love than Rosalie Murray, charming and engaging as she was; for I could appreciate his excellence, which she could not: I would devote my life to the promotion of his happiness; she would destroy his happiness for the momentary gratification of her own vanity. 'Oh, if he could but know the difference!' I would earnestly exclaim. 'But no! I would not have him see my heart: yet, if he could but know her hollowness, her worthless, heartless frivolity, he would then be safe, and I should be—ALMOST happy, though I might never see him more!'

I fear, by this time, the reader is well nigh disgusted with the folly and weakness I have so freely laid before him. I never disclosed it then, and would not have done so had my own sister or my mother been with me in the house. I was a close and resolute dissembler—in this one case at least. My prayers, my tears, my wishes, fears, and lamentations, were witnessed by myself and heaven alone.

When we are harassed by sorrows or anxieties, or long oppressed by any powerful feelings which we must keep to ourselves, for which we can obtain and seek no sympathy from any living creature, and which yet we cannot, or will not wholly crush, we often naturally seek relief in poetry—and often find it, too—whether in the effusions of others, which seem to harmonize with our existing case, or in our own attempts to give utterance to those thoughts and feelings in strains less musical, perchance, but more appropriate, and therefore more penetrating and sympathetic, and, for the time, more soothing, or more powerful to rouse and to unburden the oppressed and swollen heart. Before this time, at Wellwood House and here, when suffering from home-sick melancholy, I had sought relief twice or thrice at this secret source of consolation; and now I flew to it again, with greater avidity than ever, because I seemed to need it more. I still preserve those relics of past sufferings and experience, like pillars of witness set up in travelling through the vale of life, to mark particular occurrences. The footsteps are obliterated now; the face of the country may be changed; but the pillar is still there, to remind me how all things were when it was reared. Lest the reader should be curious to see any of these effusions, I will favour him with one short specimen: cold and languid as the lines may seem, it was almost a passion of grief to which they owed their being:—



Oh, they have robbed me of the hope My spirit held so dear; They will not let me hear that voice My soul delights to hear.

They will not let me see that face I so delight to see; And they have taken all thy smiles, And all thy love from me.

Well, let them seize on all they can;— One treasure still is mine,— A heart that loves to think on thee, And feels the worth of thine.

Yes, at least, they could not deprive me of that: I could think of him day and night; and I could feel that he was worthy to be thought of. Nobody knew him as I did; nobody could appreciate him as I did; nobody could love him as I—could, if I might: but there was the evil. What business had I to think so much of one that never thought of me? Was it not foolish? was it not wrong? Yet, if I found such deep delight in thinking of him, and if I kept those thoughts to myself, and troubled no one else with them, where was the harm of it? I would ask myself. And such reasoning prevented me from making any sufficient effort to shake off my fetters.

But, if those thoughts brought delight, it was a painful, troubled pleasure, too near akin to anguish; and one that did me more injury than I was aware of. It was an indulgence that a person of more wisdom or more experience would doubtless have denied herself. And yet, how dreary to turn my eyes from the contemplation of that bright object and force them to dwell on the dull, grey, desolate prospect around: the joyless, hopeless, solitary path that lay before me. It was wrong to be so joyless, so desponding; I should have made God my friend, and to do His will the pleasure and the business of my life; but faith was weak, and passion was too strong.

In this time of trouble I had two other causes of affliction. The first may seem a trifle, but it cost me many a tear: Snap, my little dumb, rough-visaged, but bright-eyed, warm-hearted companion, the only thing I had to love me, was taken away, and delivered over to the tender mercies of the village rat-catcher, a man notorious for his brutal treatment of his canine slaves. The other was serious enough; my letters from home gave intimation that my father's health was worse. No boding fears were expressed, but I was grown timid and despondent, and could not help fearing that some dreadful calamity awaited us there. I seemed to see the black clouds gathering round my native hills, and to hear the angry muttering of a storm that was about to burst, and desolate our hearth.

