

Agnes Grey

Anne Brontë

Chapter 18: Mirth and Mourning

The 1st of June arrived at last: and Rosalie Murray was transmuted into Lady Ashby. Most splendidly beautiful she looked in her bridal costume. Upon her return from church, after the ceremony, she came flying into the schoolroom, flushed with excitement, and laughing, half in mirth, and half in reckless desperation, as it seemed to me.

‘Now, Miss Grey, I’m Lady Ashby!’ she exclaimed. ‘It’s done, my fate is sealed: there’s no drawing back now. I’m come to receive your congratulations and bid you good-by; and then I’m off for Paris, Rome, Naples, Switzerland, London—oh, dear! what a deal I shall see and hear before I come back again. But don’t forget me: I shan’t forget you, though I’ve been a naughty girl. Come, why don’t you congratulate me?’

‘I cannot congratulate you,’ I replied, ‘till I know whether this change is really for the better: but I sincerely hope it is; and I wish you true happiness and the best of blessings.’

‘Well, good-by, the carriage is waiting, and they’re calling me.’

She gave me a hasty kiss, and was hurrying away; but, suddenly returning, embraced me with more affection than I thought her capable of evincing, and departed with tears in her eyes. Poor girl! I really loved her then; and forgave her from my heart all the injury she had done me—and others also: she had not half known it, I was sure; and I prayed God to pardon her too.

During the remainder of that day of festal sadness, I was left to my own devices. Being too much unhinged for any steady occupation, I wandered about with a book in my hand for several hours, more thinking than reading, for I had many things to think about. In the evening, I made use of my liberty to go and see my old friend Nancy once again; to apologize for my long absence (which must have seemed so neglectful and unkind) by telling her how busy I had been; and to talk, or read, or work for her, whichever might be most acceptable, and also, of course, to tell her the news



of this important day: and perhaps to obtain a little information from her in return, respecting Mr. Weston's expected departure. But of this she seemed to know nothing, and I hoped, as she did, that it was all a false report. She was very glad to see me; but, happily, her eyes were now so nearly well that she was almost independent of my services. She was deeply interested in the wedding; but while I amused her with the details of the festive day, the splendours of the bridal party and of the bride herself, she often sighed and shook her head, and wished good might come of it; she seemed, like me, to regard it rather as a theme for sorrow than rejoicing. I sat a long time talking to her about that and other things—but no one came.

Shall I confess that I sometimes looked towards the door with a half-expectant wish to see it open and give entrance to Mr. Weston, as had happened once before? and that, returning through the lanes and fields, I often paused to look round me, and walked more slowly than was at all necessary—for, though a fine evening, it was not a hot one—and, finally, felt a sense of emptiness and disappointment at having reached the house without meeting or even catching a distant glimpse of any one, except a few labourers returning from their work?

Sunday, however, was approaching: I should see him then: for now that Miss Murray was gone, I could have my old corner again. I should see him, and by look, speech, and manner, I might judge whether the circumstance of her marriage had very much afflicted him. Happily I could perceive no shadow of a difference: he wore the same aspect as he had worn two months ago—voice, look, manner, all alike unchanged: there was the same keen-sighted, unclouded truthfulness in his discourse, the same forcible clearness in his style, the same earnest simplicity in all he said and did, that made itself, not marked by the eye and ear, but felt upon the hearts of his audience.

I walked home with Miss Matilda; but HE DID NOT JOIN US. Matilda was now sadly at a loss for amusement, and wofully in want of a companion: her brothers at school, her sister married and gone, she too young to be admitted into society; for which, from Rosalie's example, she was in some degree beginning to acquire a taste—a taste at least for the company of certain classes of gentlemen; at this dull time of year—no hunting going on, no shooting even—for, though she might not join in that, it was SOMETHING to see her father or the gamekeeper go out with the dogs, and to talk with them on their return, about the different birds they had bagged. Now, also, she was denied the solace which the companionship of the coachman, grooms, horses, greyhounds, and pointers might have afforded; for her



mother having, notwithstanding the disadvantages of a country life, so satisfactorily disposed of her elder daughter, the pride of her heart had begun seriously to turn her attention to the younger; and, being truly alarmed at the roughness of her manners, and thinking it high time to work a reform, had been roused at length to exert her authority, and prohibited entirely the yards, stables, kennels, and coach-house. Of course, she was not implicitly obeyed; but, indulgent as she had hitherto been, when once her spirit was roused, her temper was not so gentle as she required that of her governesses to be, and her will was not to be thwarted with impunity. After many a scene of contention between mother and daughter, many a violent outbreak which I was ashamed to witness, in which the father's authority was often called in to confirm with oaths and threats the mother's slighted prohibitions—for even HE could see that 'Tilly, though she would have made a fine lad, was not quite what a young lady ought to be'—Matilda at length found that her easiest plan was to keep clear of the forbidden regions; unless she could now and then steal a visit without her watchful mother's knowledge.

Amid all this, let it not be imagined that I escaped without many a reprimand, and many an implied reproach, that lost none of its sting from not being openly worded; but rather wounded the more deeply, because, from that very reason, it seemed to preclude self-defence. Frequently, I was told to amuse Miss Matilda with other things, and to remind her of her mother's precepts and prohibitions. I did so to the best of my power: but she would not be amused against her will, and could not against her taste; and though I went beyond mere reminding, such gentle remonstrances as I could use were utterly ineffectual.

'DEAR Miss Grey! it is the STRANGEST thing. I suppose you can't help it, if it's not in your nature—but I WONDER you can't win the confidence of that girl, and make your society at LEAST as agreeable to her as that of Robert or Joseph!'

'They can talk the best about the things in which she is most interested,' I replied.

'Well! that is a strange confession, HOWEVER, to come from her GOVERNESS! Who is to form a young lady's tastes, I wonder, if the governess doesn't do it? I have known governesses who have so completely identified themselves with the reputation of their young ladies for elegance and propriety in mind and manners, that they would blush to speak a word against them; and to hear the slightest blame imputed to their pupils was worse than to be censured in their own persons—and I really think it very natural, for my part.'



‘Do you, ma’am?’

‘Yes, of course: the young lady’s proficiency and elegance is of more consequence to the governess than her own, as well as to the world. If she wishes to prosper in her vocation she must devote all her energies to her business: all her ideas and all her ambition will tend to the accomplishment of that one object. When we wish to decide upon the merits of a governess, we naturally look at the young ladies she professes to have educated, and judge accordingly. The JUDICIOUS governess knows this: she knows that, while she lives in obscurity herself, her pupils’ virtues and defects will be open to every eye; and that, unless she loses sight of herself in their cultivation, she need not hope for success. You see, Miss Grey, it is just the same as any other trade or profession: they that wish to prosper must devote themselves body and soul to their calling; and if they begin to yield to indolence or self-indulgence they are speedily distanced by wiser competitors: there is little to choose between a person that ruins her pupils by neglect, and one that corrupts them by her example. You will excuse my dropping these little hints: you know it is all for your own good. Many ladies would speak to you much more strongly; and many would not trouble themselves to speak at all, but quietly look out for a substitute. That, of course, would be the EASIEST plan: but I know the advantages of a place like this to a person in your situation; and I have no desire to part with you, as I am sure you would do very well if you will only think of these things and try to exert yourself a LITTLE more: then, I am convinced, you would SOON acquire that delicate tact which alone is wanting to give you a proper influence over the mind of your pupil.’

I was about to give the lady some idea of the fallacy of her expectations; but she sailed away as soon as she had concluded her speech. Having said what she wished, it was no part of her plan to await my answer: it was my business to hear, and not to speak.

However, as I have said, Matilda at length yielded in some degree to her mother’s authority (pity it had not been exerted before); and being thus deprived of almost every source of amusement, there was nothing for it but to take long rides with the groom and long walks with the governess, and to visit the cottages and farmhouses on her father’s estate, to kill time in chatting with the old men and women that inhabited them. In one of these walks, it was our chance to meet Mr. Weston. This was what I had long desired; but now, for a moment, I wished either he or I were away: I felt my heart throb so violently that I dreaded lest some outward



signs of emotion should appear; but I think he hardly glanced at me, and I was soon calm enough. After a brief salutation to both, he asked Matilda if she had lately heard from her sister.

‘Yes,’ replied she. ‘She was at Paris when she wrote, and very well, and very happy.’

She spoke the last word emphatically, and with a glance impertinently sly. He did not seem to notice it, but replied, with equal emphasis, and very seriously—

‘I hope she will continue to be so.’

‘Do you think it likely?’ I ventured to inquire: for Matilda had started off in pursuit of her dog, that was chasing a leveret.

‘I cannot tell,’ replied he. ‘Sir Thomas may be a better man than I suppose; but, from all I have heard and seen, it seems a pity that one so young and gay, and—and interesting, to express many things by one word—whose greatest, if not her only fault, appears to be thoughtlessness—no trifling fault to be sure, since it renders the possessor liable to almost every other, and exposes him to so many temptations—but it seems a pity that she should be thrown away on such a man. It was her mother’s wish, I suppose?’

‘Yes; and her own too, I think, for she always laughed at my attempts to dissuade her from the step.’

‘You did attempt it? Then, at least, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that it is no fault of yours, if any harm should come of it. As for Mrs. Murray, I don’t know how she can justify her conduct: if I had sufficient acquaintance with her, I’d ask her.’

‘It seems unnatural: but some people think rank and wealth the chief good; and, if they can secure that for their children, they think they have done their duty.’

‘True: but is it not strange that persons of experience, who have been married themselves, should judge so falsely?’ Matilda now came panting back, with the lacerated body of the young hare in her hand.

‘Was it your intention to kill that hare, or to save it, Miss Murray?’ asked Mr. Weston, apparently puzzled at her gleeful countenance.

‘I pretended to want to save it,’ she answered, honestly enough, ‘as it was so glaringly out of season; but I was better pleased to see it loll. However, you can both witness that I couldn’t help it: Prince was determined to have her; and he clutched her by the back, and killed her in a minute! Wasn’t it a noble chase?’

‘Very! for a young lady after a leveret.’



There was a quiet sarcasm in the tone of his reply which was not lost upon her; she shrugged her shoulders, and, turning away with a significant ‘Humph!’ asked me how I had enjoyed the fun. I replied that I saw no fun in the matter; but admitted that I had not observed the transaction very narrowly.

‘Didn’t you see how it doubled—just like an old hare? and didn’t you hear it scream?’

‘I’m happy to say I did not.’

‘It cried out just like a child.’

‘Poor little thing! What will you do with it?’

‘Come along—I shall leave it in the first house we come to. I don’t want to take it home, for fear papa should scold me for letting the dog kill it.’

Mr. Weston was now gone, and we too went on our way; but as we returned, after having deposited the hare in a farm-house, and demolished some spice-cake and currant-wine in exchange, we met him returning also from the execution of his mission, whatever it might be. He carried in his hand a cluster of beautiful bluebells, which he offered to me; observing, with a smile, that though he had seen so little of me for the last two months, he had not forgotten that bluebells were numbered among my favourite flowers. It was done as a simple act of goodwill, without compliment or remarkable courtesy, or any look that could be construed into ‘reverential, tender adoration’ (vide Rosalie Murray); but still, it was something to find my unimportant saying so well remembered: it was something that he had noticed so accurately the time I had ceased to be visible.

‘I was told,’ said he, ‘that you were a perfect bookworm, Miss Grey: so completely absorbed in your studies that you were lost to every other pleasure.’

‘Yes, and it’s quite true!’ cried Matilda.

‘No, Mr. Weston: don’t believe it: it’s a scandalous libel. These young ladies are too fond of making random assertions at the expense of their friends; and you ought to be careful how you listen to them.’

‘I hope THIS assertion is groundless, at any rate.’

‘Why? Do you particularly object to ladies studying?’

‘No; but I object to anyone so devoting himself or herself to study, as to lose sight of everything else. Except under peculiar circumstances, I consider very close and constant study as a waste of time, and an injury to the mind as well as the body.’

‘Well, I have neither the time nor the inclination for such transgressions.’

We parted again.



Well! what is there remarkable in all this? Why have I recorded it? Because, reader, it was important enough to give me a cheerful evening, a night of pleasing dreams, and a morning of felicitous hopes. Shallow-brained cheerfulness, foolish dreams, unfounded hopes, you would say; and I will not venture to deny it: suspicions to that effect arose too frequently in my own mind. But our wishes are like tinder: the flint and steel of circumstances are continually striking out sparks, which vanish immediately, unless they chance to fall upon the tinder of our wishes; then, they instantly ignite, and the flame of hope is kindled in a moment.

But alas! that very morning, my flickering flame of hope was dismally quenched by a letter from my mother, which spoke so seriously of my father's increasing illness, that I feared there was little or no chance of his recovery; and, close at hand as the holidays were, I almost trembled lest they should come too late for me to meet him in this world. Two days after, a letter from Mary told me his life was despaired of, and his end seemed fast approaching. Then, immediately, I sought permission to anticipate the vacation, and go without delay. Mrs. Murray stared, and wondered at the unwonted energy and boldness with which I urged the request, and thought there was no occasion to hurry; but finally gave me leave: stating, however, that there was 'no need to be in such agitation about the matter—it might prove a false alarm after all; and if not—why, it was only in the common course of nature: we must all die some time; and I was not to suppose myself the only afflicted person in the world;' and concluding with saying I might have the phaeton to take me to O—. 'And instead of REPINING, Miss Grey, be thankful for the PRIVILEGES you enjoy. There's many a poor clergyman whose family would be plunged into ruin by the event of his death; but you, you see, have influential friends ready to continue their patronage, and to show you every consideration.'

I thanked her for her 'consideration,' and flew to my room to make some hurried preparations for my departure. My bonnet and shawl being on, and a few things hastily crammed into my largest trunk, I descended. But I might have done the work more leisurely, for no one else was in a hurry; and I had still a considerable time to wait for the phaeton. At length it came to the door, and I was off: but, oh, what a dreary journey was that! how utterly different from my former passages homewards! Being too late for the last coach to —, I had to hire a cab for ten miles, and then a car to take me over the rugged hills.

It was half-past ten before I reached home. They were not in bed.

My mother and sister both met me in the passage—sad—silent—pale! I was so much shocked and terror-stricken that I could not speak, to ask the information I so much longed yet dreaded to obtain.



‘Agnes!’ said my mother, struggling to repress some strong emotion.

‘Oh, Agnes!’ cried Mary, and burst into tears.

‘How is he?’ I asked, gasping for the answer.

‘Dead!’

It was the reply I had anticipated: but the shock seemed none the less tremendous.

