

Agnes Grey

Anne Brontë

Chapter 23: The Park

I came down a little before eight, next morning, as I knew by the striking of a distant clock. There was no appearance of breakfast. I waited above an hour before it came, still vainly longing for access to the library; and, after that lonely repast was concluded, I waited again about an hour and a half in great suspense and discomfort, uncertain what to do. At length Lady Ashby came to bid me good-morning. She informed me she had only just breakfasted, and now wanted me to take an early walk with her in the park. She asked how long I had been up, and on receiving my answer, expressed the deepest regret, and again promised to show me the library. I suggested she had better do so at once, and then there would be no further trouble either with remembering or forgetting. She complied, on condition that I would not think of reading, or bothering with the books now; for she wanted to show me the gardens, and take a walk in the park with me, before it became too hot for enjoyment; which, indeed, was nearly the case already. Of course I readily assented; and we took our walk accordingly.

As we were strolling in the park, talking of what my companion had seen and heard during her travelling experience, a gentleman on horseback rode up and passed us. As he turned, in passing, and stared me full in the face, I had a good opportunity of seeing what he was like. He was tall, thin, and wasted, with a slight stoop in the shoulders, a pale face, but somewhat blotchy, and disagreeably red about the eyelids, plain features, and a general appearance of languor and flatness, relieved by a sinister expression in the mouth and the dull, soulless eyes.

‘I detest that man!’ whispered Lady Ashby, with bitter emphasis, as he slowly trotted by.

‘Who is it?’ I asked, unwilling to suppose that she should so speak of her husband.

‘Sir Thomas Ashby,’ she replied, with dreary composure.

‘And do you DETEST him, Miss Murray?’ said I, for I was too much shocked to remember her name at the moment.

‘Yes, I do, Miss Grey, and despise him too; and if you knew him you would not blame me.’

‘But you knew what he was before you married him.’

‘No; I only thought so: I did not half know him really. I know you warned me against it, and I wish I had listened to you: but it’s too late to regret that now. And besides, mamma ought to have known better than either of us, and she never said anything against it—quite the contrary. And then I thought he adored me, and would let me have my own way: he did pretend to do so at first, but now he does not care a bit about me. Yet I should not care for that: he might do as he pleased, if I might only be free to amuse myself and to stay in London, or have a few friends down here: but HE WILL do as he pleases, and I must be a prisoner and a slave. The moment he saw I could enjoy myself without him, and that others knew my value better than himself, the selfish wretch began to accuse me of coquetry and extravagance; and to abuse Harry Meltham, whose shoes he was not worthy to clean. And then he must needs have me down in the country, to lead the life of a nun, lest I should dishonour him or bring him to ruin; as if he had not been ten times worse every way, with his betting—book, and his gaming—table, and his opera—girls, and his Lady This and Mrs. That—yes, and his bottles of wine, and glasses of brandy—and—water too! Oh, I would give ten thousand worlds to be Mss Murray again! It is TOO bad to feel life, health, and beauty wasting away, unfelt and unenjoyed, for such a brute as that!’ exclaimed she, fairly bursting into tears in the bitterness of her vexation.

Of course, I pitied her exceedingly; as well for her false idea of happiness and disregard of duty, as for the wretched partner with whom her fate was linked. I said what I could to comfort her, and offered such counsels as I thought she most required: advising her, first, by gentle reasoning, by kindness, example, and persuasion, to try to ameliorate her husband; and then, when she had done all she could, if she still found him incorrigible, to endeavour to abstract herself from him—to wrap herself up in her own integrity, and trouble herself as little about him as possible. I exhorted her to seek consolation in doing her duty to God and man, to put her trust in Heaven, and solace herself with the care and nurture of her little daughter; assuring her she would be amply rewarded by witnessing its progress in strength and wisdom, and receiving its genuine affection.



‘But I can’t devote myself entirely to a child,’ said she; ‘it may die—which is not at all improbable.’

‘But, with care, many a delicate infant has become a strong man or woman.’

‘But it may grow so intolerably like its father that I shall hate it.’

‘That is not likely; it is a little girl, and strongly resembles its mother.’

‘No matter; I should like it better if it were a boy—only that its father will leave it no inheritance that he can possibly squander away. What pleasure can I have in seeing a girl grow up to eclipse me, and enjoy those pleasures that I am for ever debarred from? But supposing I could be so generous as to take delight in this, still it is ONLY a child; and I can’t centre all my hopes in a child: that is only one degree better than devoting oneself to a dog. And as for all the wisdom and goodness you have been trying to instil into me—that is all very right and proper, I daresay, and if I were some twenty years older, I might fructify by it: but people must enjoy themselves when they are young; and if others won’t let them—why, they must hate them for it!’

‘The best way to enjoy yourself is to do what is right and hate nobody. The end of Religion is not to teach us how to die, but how to live; and the earlier you become wise and good, the more of happiness you secure. And now, Lady Ashby, I have one more piece of advice to offer you, which is, that you will not make an enemy of your mother-in-law. Don’t get into the way of holding her at arms’ length, and regarding her with jealous distrust. I never saw her, but I have heard good as well as evil respecting her; and I imagine that, though cold and haughty in her general demeanour, and even exacting in her requirements, she has strong affections for those who can reach them; and, though so blindly attached to her son, she is not without good principles, or incapable of hearing reason. If you would but conciliate her a little, and adopt a friendly, open manner—and even confide your grievances to her—real grievances, such as you have a right to complain of—it is my firm belief that she would, in time, become your faithful friend, and a comfort and support to you, instead of the incubus you describe her.’ But I fear my advice had little effect upon the unfortunate young lady; and, finding I could render myself so little serviceable, my residence at Ashby Park became doubly painful. But still, I must stay out that day and the following one, as I had promised to do so: though, resisting all entreaties and inducements to prolong my visit further, I insisted upon departing the next morning; affirming that my mother would be lonely without me, and that she impatiently expected my return. Nevertheless, it was with a heavy heart that I bade adieu to poor



Lady Ashby, and left her in her princely home. It was no slight additional proof of her unhappiness, that she should so cling to the consolation of my presence, and earnestly desire the company of one whose general tastes and ideas were so little congenial to her own—whom she had completely forgotten in her hour of prosperity, and whose presence would be rather a nuisance than a pleasure, if she could but have half her heart's desire.

