

Agnes Grey

Anne Brontë

Chapter 3: A Few More Lessons

I rose next morning with a feeling of hopeful exhilaration, in spite of the disappointments already experienced; but I found the dressing of Mary Ann was no light matter, as her abundant hair was to be smeared with pomade, plaited in three long tails, and tied with bows of ribbon: a task my unaccustomed fingers found great difficulty in performing. She told me her nurse could do it in half the time, and, by keeping up a constant fidget of impatience, contrived to render me still longer. When all was done, we went into the schoolroom, where I met my other pupil, and chatted with the two till it was time to go down to breakfast. That meal being concluded, and a few civil words having been exchanged with Mrs. Bloomfield, we repaired to the schoolroom again, and commenced the business of the day. I found my pupils very backward, indeed; but Tom, though averse to every species of mental exertion, was not without abilities. Mary Ann could scarcely read a word, and was so careless and inattentive that I could hardly get on with her at all. However, by dint of great labour and patience, I managed to get something done in the course of the morning, and then accompanied my young charge out into the garden and adjacent grounds, for a little recreation before dinner. There we got along tolerably together, except that I found they had no notion of going with me: I must go with them, wherever they chose to lead me. I must run, walk, or stand, exactly as it suited their fancy. This, I thought, was reversing the order of things; and I found it doubly disagreeable, as on this as well as subsequent occasions, they seemed to prefer the dirtiest places and the most dismal occupations. But there was no remedy; either I must follow them, or keep entirely apart from them, and thus appear neglectful of my charge. To-day, they manifested a particular attachment to a well at the bottom of the lawn, where they persisted in dabbling with sticks and pebbles for above half an hour. I was in constant fear that their mother would see them from the window, and blame me for allowing them thus to draggle their clothes and wet their feet and hands, instead of taking exercise; but no arguments, commands, or entreaties could draw them away. If SHE did not see them,



some one else did—a gentleman on horseback had entered the gate and was proceeding up the road; at the distance of a few paces from us he paused, and calling to the children in a waspish penetrating tone, bade them ‘keep out of that water.’ ‘Miss Grey,’ said he, ‘(I suppose it IS Miss Grey), I am surprised that you should allow them to dirty their clothes in that manner! Don’t you see how Miss Bloomfield has soiled her frock? and that Master Bloomfield’s socks are quite wet? and both of them without gloves? Dear, dear! Let me REQUEST that in future you will keep them DECENT at least!’ so saying, he turned away, and continued his ride up to the house. This was Mr. Bloomfield. I was surprised that he should nominate his children Master and Miss Bloomfield; and still more so, that he should speak so uncivilly to me, their governess, and a perfect stranger to himself. Presently the bell rang to summon us in. I dined with the children at one, while he and his lady took their luncheon at the same table. His conduct there did not greatly raise him in my estimation. He was a man of ordinary stature—rather below than above—and rather thin than stout, apparently between thirty and forty years of age: he had a large mouth, pale, dingy complexion, milky blue eyes, and hair the colour of a hempen cord. There was a roast leg of mutton before him: he helped Mrs. Bloomfield, the children, and me, desiring me to cut up the children’s meat; then, after twisting about the mutton in various directions, and eyeing it from different points, he pronounced it not fit to be eaten, and called for the cold beef.

‘What is the matter with the mutton, my dear?’ asked his mate.

‘It is quite overdone. Don’t you taste, Mrs. Bloomfield, that all the goodness is roasted out of it? And can’t you see that all that nice, red gravy is completely dried away?’

‘Well, I think the BEEF will suit you.’

The beef was set before him, and he began to carve, but with the most rueful expressions of discontent.

‘What is the matter with the BEEF, Mr. Bloomfield? I’m sure I thought it was very nice.’

‘And so it WAS very nice. A nicer joint could not be; but it is QUITE spoiled,’ replied he, dolefully.

‘How so?’

‘How so! Why, don’t you see how it is cut? Dear—dear! it is quite shocking!’

‘They must have cut it wrong in the kitchen, then, for I’m sure I carved it quite properly here, yesterday.’

‘No DOUBT they cut it wrong in the kitchen—the savages! Dear dear! Did ever any one see such a fine piece of beef so completely ruined? But remember that, in future,



when a decent dish leaves this table, they shall not TOUCH it in the kitchen. Remember THAT, Mrs. Bloomfield!’

Notwithstanding the ruinous state of the beef, the gentleman managed to out himself some delicate slices, part of which he ate in silence. When he next spoke, it was, in a less querulous tone, to ask what there was for dinner.

‘Turkey and grouse,’ was the concise reply.

‘And what besides?’

‘Fish.’

‘What kind of fish?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘YOU DON’T KNOW?’ cried he, looking solemnly up from his plate, and suspending his knife and fork in astonishment.

‘No. I told the cook to get some fish—I did not particularize what.’

‘Well, that beats everything! A lady professes to keep house, and doesn’t even know what fish is for dinner! professes to order fish, and doesn’t specify what!’

‘Perhaps, Mr. Bloomfield, you will order dinner yourself in future.’

Nothing more was said; and I was very glad to get out of the room with my pupils; for I never felt so ashamed and uncomfortable in my life for anything that was not my own fault.

In the afternoon we applied to lessons again; then went out again; then had tea in the schoolroom; then I dressed Mary Ann for dessert; and when she and her brother had gone down to the dining-room, I took the opportunity of beginning a letter to my dear friends at home: but the children came up before I had half completed it. At seven I had to put Mary Ann to bed; then I played with Tom till eight, when he, too, went; and I finished my letter and unpacked my clothes, which I had hitherto found no opportunity for doing, and, finally, went to bed myself.

But this is a very favourable specimen of a day’s proceedings.

My task of instruction and surveillance, instead of becoming easier as my charges and I got better accustomed to each other, became more arduous as their characters unfolded. The name of governess, I soon found, was a mere mockery as applied to me: my pupils had no more notion of obedience than a wild, unbroken colt. The habitual fear of their father’s peevish temper, and the dread of the punishments he was wont to inflict when irritated, kept them generally within bounds in his immediate presence. The girls, too, had some fear of their mother’s anger; and the boy might occasionally be bribed to do as she bid him by the hope of reward; but I had no rewards to offer; and as for



punishments, I was given to understand, the parents reserved that privilege to themselves; and yet they expected me to keep my pupils in order. Other children might be guided by the fear of anger and the desire of approbation; but neither the one nor the other had any effect upon these.

Master Tom, not content with refusing to be ruled, must needs set up as a ruler, and manifested a determination to keep, not only his sisters, but his governess in order, by violent manual and pedal applications; and, as he was a tall, strong boy of his years, this occasioned no trifling inconvenience. A few sound boxes on the ear, on such occasions, might have settled the matter easily enough: but as, in that case, he might make up some story to his mother which she would be sure to believe, as she had such unshaken faith in his veracity—though I had already discovered it to be by no means unimpeachable—I determined to refrain from striking him, even in self-defence; and, in his most violent moods, my only resource was to throw him on his back and hold his hands and feet till the frenzy was somewhat abated. To the difficulty of preventing him from doing what he ought not, was added that of forcing him to do what he ought. Often he would positively refuse to learn, or to repeat his lessons, or even to look at his book. Here, again, a good birch rod might have been serviceable; but, as my powers were so limited, I must make the best use of what I had.

As there were no settled hours for study and play, I resolved to give my pupils a certain task, which, with moderate attention, they could perform in a short time; and till this was done, however weary I was, or however perverse they might be, nothing short of parental interference should induce me to suffer them to leave the schoolroom, even if I should sit with my chair against the door to keep them in. Patience, Firmness, and Perseverance were my only weapons; and these I resolved to use to the utmost. I determined always strictly to fulfil the threats and promises I made; and, to that end, I must be cautious to threaten and promise nothing that I could not perform. Then, I would carefully refrain from all useless irritability and indulgence of my own ill-temper: when they behaved tolerably, I would be as kind and obliging as it was in my power to be, in order to make the widest possible distinction between good and bad conduct; I would reason with them, too, in the simplest and most effective manner. When I reproved them, or refused to gratify their wishes, after a glaring fault, it should be more in sorrow than in anger: their little hymns and prayers I would make plain and clear to their understanding; when they said their prayers at night and asked pardon for their offences, I would remind them of the sins of the past day, solemnly, but in perfect kindness, to avoid raising a spirit of opposition; penitential hymns should be said by the naughty, cheerful ones by the



comparatively good; and every kind of instruction I would convey to them, as much as possible, by entertaining discourse—apparently with no other object than their present amusement in view.

By these means I hoped in time both to benefit the children and to gain the approbation of their parents; and also to convince my friends at home that I was not so wanting in skill and prudence as they supposed. I knew the difficulties I had to contend with were great; but I knew (at least I believed) unremitting patience and perseverance could overcome them; and night and morning I implored Divine assistance to this end. But either the children were so incorrigible, the parents so unreasonable, or myself so mistaken in my views, or so unable to carry them out, that my best intentions and most strenuous efforts seemed productive of no better result than sport to the children, dissatisfaction to their parents, and torment to myself.

The task of instruction was as arduous for the body as the mind. I had to run after my pupils to catch them, to carry or drag them to the table, and often forcibly to hold them there till the lesson was done. Tom I frequently put into a corner, seating myself before him in a chair, with a book which contained the little task that must be said or read, before he was released, in my hand. He was not strong enough to push both me and the chair away, so he would stand twisting his body and face into the most grotesque and singular contortions—laughable, no doubt, to an unconcerned spectator, but not to me—and uttering loud yells and doleful outcries, intended to represent weeping but wholly without the accompaniment of tears. I knew this was done solely for the purpose of annoying me; and, therefore, however I might inwardly tremble with impatience and irritation, I manfully strove to suppress all visible signs of molestation, and affected to sit with calm indifference, waiting till it should please him to cease this pastime, and prepare for a run in the garden, by casting his eye on the book and reading or repeating the few words he was required to say. Sometimes he was determined to do his writing badly; and I had to hold his hand to prevent him from purposely blotting or disfiguring the paper. Frequently I threatened that, if he did not do better, he should have another line: then he would stubbornly refuse to write this line; and I, to save my word, had finally to resort to the expedient of holding his fingers upon the pen, and forcibly drawing his hand up and down, till, in spite of his resistance, the line was in some sort completed.

Yet Tom was by no means the most unmanageable of my pupils: sometimes, to my great joy, he would have the sense to see that his wisest policy was to finish his tasks, and go out and amuse himself till I and his sisters came to join him; which frequently was not at all, for Mary Ann seldom followed his example in this particular: she apparently



preferred rolling on the floor to any other amusement: down she would drop like a leaden weight; and when I, with great difficulty, had succeeded in rooting her thence, I had still to hold her up with one arm, while with the other I held the book from which she was to read or spell her lesson. As the dead weight of the big girl of six became too heavy for one arm to bear, I transferred it to the other; or, if both were weary of the burden, I carried her into a corner, and told her she might come out when she should find the use of her feet, and stand up: but she generally preferred lying there like a log till dinner or tea-time, when, as I could not deprive her of her meals, she must be liberated, and would come crawling out with a grin of triumph on her round, red face. Often she would stubbornly refuse to pronounce some particular word in her lesson; and now I regret the lost labour I have had in striving to conquer her obstinacy. If I had passed it over as a matter of no consequence, it would have been better for both parties, than vainly striving to overcome it as I did; but I thought it my absolute duty to crush this vicious tendency in the bud: and so it was, if I could have done it; and had my powers been less limited, I might have enforced obedience; but, as it was, it was a trial of strength between her and me, in which she generally came off victorious; and every victory served to encourage and strengthen her for a future contest. In vain I argued, coaxed, entreated, threatened, scolded; in vain I kept her in from play, or, if obliged to take her out, refused to play with her, or to speak kindly or have anything to do with her; in vain I tried to set before her the advantages of doing as she was bid, and being loved, and kindly treated in consequence, and the disadvantages of persisting in her absurd perversity. Sometimes, when she would ask me to do something for her, I would answer,— ‘Yes, I will, Mary Ann, if you will only say that word. Come! you’d better say it at once, and have no more trouble about it.’

‘No.’

‘Then, of course, I can do nothing for you.’

With me, at her age, or under, neglect and disgrace were the most dreadful of punishments; but on her they made no impression. Sometimes, exasperated to the utmost pitch, I would shake her violently by the shoulder, or pull her long hair, or put her in the corner; for which she punished me with loud, shrill, piercing screams, that went through my head like a knife. She knew I hated this, and when she had shrieked her utmost, would look into my face with an air of vindictive satisfaction, exclaiming,— ‘NOW, then! THAT’S for you!’ and then shriek again and again, till I was forced to stop my ears. Often these dreadful cries would bring Mrs. Bloomfield up to inquire what was the matter?

‘Mary Ann is a naughty girl, ma’am.’

‘But what are these shocking screams?’



‘She is screaming in a passion.’

‘I never heard such a dreadful noise! You might be killing her. Why is she not out with her brother?’

‘I cannot get her to finish her lessons.’

‘But Mary Ann must be a GOOD girl, and finish her lessons.’ This was blandly spoken to the child. ‘And I hope I shall NEVER hear such terrible cries again!’

And fixing her cold, stony eyes upon me with a look that could not be mistaken, she would shut the door, and walk away. Sometimes I would try to take the little obstinate creature by surprise, and casually ask her the word while she was thinking of something else; frequently she would begin to say it, and then suddenly check herself, with a provoking look that seemed to say, ‘Ah! I’m too sharp for you; you shan’t trick it out of me, either.’

On another occasion, I pretended to forget the whole affair; and talked and played with her as usual, till night, when I put her to bed; then bending over her, while she lay all smiles and good humour, just before departing, I said, as cheerfully and kindly as before—‘Now, Mary Ann, just tell me that word before I kiss you good-night. You are a good girl now, and, of course, you will say it.’

‘No, I won’t.’

‘Then I can’t kiss you.’

‘Well, I don’t care.’

In vain I expressed my sorrow; in vain I lingered for some symptom of contrition; she really ‘didn’t care,’ and I left her alone, and in darkness, wondering most of all at this last proof of insensate stubbornness. In MY childhood I could not imagine a more afflictive punishment than for my mother to refuse to kiss me at night: the very idea was terrible. More than the idea I never felt, for, happily, I never committed a fault that was deemed worthy of such penalty; but once I remember, for some transgression of my sister’s, our mother thought proper to inflict it upon her: what SHE felt, I cannot tell; but my sympathetic tears and suffering for her sake I shall not soon forget.

Another troublesome trait in Mary Ann was her incorrigible propensity to keep running into the nursery, to play with her little sisters and the nurse. This was natural enough, but, as it was against her mother’s express desire, I, of course, forbade her to do so, and did my utmost to keep her with me; but that only increased her relish for the nursery, and the more I strove to keep her out of it, the oftener she went, and the longer she stayed, to the great dissatisfaction of Mrs. Bloomfield, who, I well knew, would impute all the blame of the matter to me. Another of my trials was the dressing in the



morning: at one time she would not be washed; at another she would not be dressed, unless she might wear some particular frock, that I knew her mother would not like her to have; at another she would scream and run away if I attempted to touch her hair. So that, frequently, when, after much trouble and toil, I had, at length, succeeded in bringing her down, the breakfast was nearly half over; and black looks from ‘mamma,’ and testy observations from ‘papa,’ spoken at me, if not to me, were sure to be my meed: for few things irritated the latter so much as want of punctuality at meal times. Then, among the minor annoyances, was my inability to satisfy Mrs. Bloomfield with her daughter’s dress; and the child’s hair ‘was never fit to be seen.’ Sometimes, as a powerful reproach to me, she would perform the office of tire woman herself, and then complain bitterly of the trouble it gave her.

When little Fanny came into the schoolroom, I hoped she would be mild and inoffensive, at least; but a few days, if not a few hours, sufficed to destroy the illusion: I found her a mischievous, intractable little creature, given up to falsehood and deception, young as she was, and alarmingly fond of exercising her two favourite weapons of offence and defence: that of spitting in the faces of those who incurred her displeasure, and bellowing like a bull when her unreasonable desires were not gratified. As she, generally, was pretty quiet in her parents’ presence, and they were impressed with the notion of her being a remarkably gentle child, her falsehoods were readily believed, and her loud uproars led them to suspect harsh and injudicious treatment on my part; and when, at length, her bad disposition became manifest even to their prejudiced eyes, I felt that the whole was attributed to me.

‘What a naughty girl Fanny is getting!’ Mrs. Bloomfield would say to her spouse. ‘Don’t you observe, my dear, how she is altered since she entered the schoolroom? She will soon be as bad as the other two; and, I am sorry to say, they have quite deteriorated of late.’

‘You may say that,’ was the answer. ‘I’ve been thinking that same myself. I thought when we got them a governess they’d improve; but, instead of that, they get worse and worse: I don’t know how it is with their learning, but their habits, I know, make no sort of improvement; they get rougher, and dirtier, and more unseemly every day.’

I knew this was all pointed at me; and these, and all similar innuendoes, affected me far more deeply than any open accusations would have done; for against the latter I should have been roused to speak in my own defence: now I judged it my wisest plan to subdue every resentful impulse, suppress every sensitive shrinking, and go on perseveringly, doing my best; for, irksome as my situation was, I earnestly wished to



retain it. I thought, if I could struggle on with unremitting firmness and integrity, the children would in time become more humanized: every month would contribute to make them some little wiser, and, consequently, more manageable; for a child of nine or ten as frantic and ungovernable as these at six and seven would be a maniac.

I flattered myself I was benefiting my parents and sister by my continuance here; for small as the salary was, I still was earning something, and with strict economy I could easily manage to have something to spare for them, if they would favour me by taking it. Then it was by my own will that I had got the place: I had brought all this tribulation on myself, and I was determined to bear it; nay, more than that, I did not even regret the step I had taken. I longed to show my friends that, even now, I was competent to undertake the charge, and able to acquit myself honourably to the end; and if ever I felt it degrading to submit so quietly, or intolerable to toil so constantly, I would turn towards my home, and say within myself—

They may crush, but they shall not subdue me! 'Tis of thee that I think, not of them.

About Christmas I was allowed to visit home; but my holiday was only of a fortnight's duration: 'For,' said Mrs. Bloomfield, 'I thought, as you had seen your friends so lately, you would not care for a longer stay.' I left her to think so still: but she little knew how long, how wearisome those fourteen weeks of absence had been to me; how intensely I had longed for my holidays, how greatly I was disappointed at their curtailment. Yet she was not to blame in this. I had never told her my feelings, and she could not be expected to divine them; I had not been with her a full term, and she was justified in not allowing me a full vacation.

