

Agnes *Anne Bronte* Grey

Chapter 4: The Grandmamma

I spare my readers the account of my delight on coming home, my happiness while there—enjoying a brief space of rest and liberty in that dear, familiar place, among the loving and the loved—and my sorrow on being obliged to bid them, once more, a long adieu.

I returned, however, with unabated vigour to my work—a more arduous task than anyone can imagine, who has not felt something like the misery of being charged with the care and direction of a set of mischievous, turbulent rebels, whom his utmost exertions cannot bind to their duty; while, at the same time, he is responsible for their conduct to a higher power, who exacts from him what cannot be achieved without the aid of the superior's more potent authority; which, either from indolence, or the fear of becoming unpopular with the said rebellious gang, the latter refuses to give. I can conceive few situations more harassing than that wherein, however you may long for success, however you may labour to fulfil your duty, your efforts are baffled and set at nought by those beneath you, and unjustly censured and misjudged by those above.

I have not enumerated half the vexatious propensities of my pupils, or half the troubles resulting from my heavy responsibilities, for fear of trespassing too much upon the reader's patience; as, perhaps, I have already done; but my design in writing the few last pages was not to amuse, but to benefit those whom it might concern; he that has no interest in such matters will doubtless have skipped them over with a cursory glance, and, perhaps, a malediction against the prolixity of the writer; but if a parent has, therefrom, gathered any useful hint, or an unfortunate governess received thereby the slightest benefit, I am well rewarded for my pains.

To avoid trouble and confusion, I have taken my pupils one by one, and discussed their various qualities; but this can give no adequate idea of being worried by the whole three together; when, as was often the case, all were determined to 'be naughty, and to tease Miss Grey, and put her in a passion.'



Sometimes, on such occasions, the thought has suddenly occurred to me—'If they could see me now!' meaning, of course, my friends at home; and the idea of how they would pity me has made me pity myself—so greatly that I have had the utmost difficulty to restrain my tears: but I have restrained them, till my little tormentors were gone to dessert, or cleared off to bed (my only prospects of deliverance), and then, in all the bliss of solitude, I have given myself up to the luxury of an unrestricted burst of weeping. But this was a weakness I did not often indulge: my employments were too numerous, my leisure moments too precious, to admit of much time being given to fruitless lamentations.

I particularly remember one wild, snowy afternoon, soon after my return in January: the children had all come up from dinner, loudly declaring that they meant 'to be naughty;' and they had well kept their resolution, though I had talked myself hoarse, and wearied every muscle in my throat, in the vain attempt to reason them out of it. I had got Tom pinned up in a corner, whence, I told him, he should not escape till he had done his appointed task. Meantime, Fanny had possessed herself of my work-bag, and was rifling its contents—and spitting into it besides. I told her to let it alone, but to no purpose, of course. 'Burn it, Fanny!' cried Tom: and THIS command she hastened to obey. I sprang to snatch it from the fire, and Tom darted to the door. 'Mary Ann, throw her desk out of the window!' cried he: and my precious desk, containing my letters and papers, my small amount of cash, and all my valuables, was about to be precipitated from the three-storey window. I flew to rescue it. Meanwhile Tom had left the room, and was rushing down the stairs, followed by Fanny. Having secured my desk, I ran to catch them, and Mary Ann came scampering after. All three escaped me, and ran out of the house into the garden, where they plunged about in the snow, shouting and screaming in exultant glee.

What must I do? If I followed them, I should probably be unable to capture one, and only drive them farther away; if I did not, how was I to get them in? And what would their parents think of me, if they saw or heard the children rioting, hatless, bonnetless, gloveless, and bootless, in the deep soft snow? While I stood in this perplexity, just without the door, trying, by grim looks and angry words, to awe them into subjection, I heard a voice behind me, in harshly piercing tones, exclaiming,—

'Miss Grey! Is it possible? What, in the devil's name, can you be thinking about?'

'I can't get them in, sir,' said I, turning round, and beholding Mr. Bloomfield, with his hair on end, and his pale blue eyes bolting from their sockets.

'But I INSIST upon their being got in!' cried he, approaching nearer, and looking perfectly ferocious.



‘Then, sir, you must call them yourself, if you please, for they won’t listen to me,’ I replied, stepping back.

‘Come in with you, you filthy brats; or I’ll horsewhip you every one!’ roared he; and the children instantly obeyed. ‘There, you see!—they come at the first word!’

‘Yes, when YOU speak.’

‘And it’s very strange, that when you’ve the care of ‘em you’ve no better control over ‘em than that!—Now, there they are—gone upstairs with their nasty snowy feet! Do go after ‘em and see them made decent, for heaven’s sake!’

That gentleman’s mother was then staying in the house; and, as I ascended the stairs and passed the drawing-room door, I had the satisfaction of hearing the old lady declaiming aloud to her daughter-in-law to this effect (for I could only distinguish the most emphatic words)—

‘Gracious heavens!—never in all my life—!—get their death as sure as—! Do you think, my dear, she’s a PROPER PERSON? Take my word for it—’

I heard no more; but that sufficed.

The senior Mrs. Bloomfield had been very attentive and civil to me; and till now I had thought her a nice, kind-hearted, chatty old body. She would often come to me and talk in a confidential strain; nodding and shaking her head, and gesticulating with hands and eyes, as a certain class of old ladies are won’t to do; though I never knew one that carried the peculiarity to so great an extent. She would even sympathise with me for the trouble I had with the children, and express at times, by half sentences, interspersed with nods and knowing winks, her sense of the injudicious conduct of their mamma in so restricting my power, and neglecting to support me with her authority. Such a mode of testifying disapprobation was not much to my taste; and I generally refused to take it in, or understand anything more than was openly spoken; at least, I never went farther than an implied acknowledgment that, if matters were otherwise ordered my task would be a less difficult one, and I should be better able to guide and instruct my charge; but now I must be doubly cautious. Hitherto, though I saw the old lady had her defects (of which one was a proneness to proclaim her perfections), I had always been wishful to excuse them, and to give her credit for all the virtues she professed, and even imagine others yet untold. Kindness, which had been the food of my life through so many years, had lately been so entirely denied me, that I welcomed with grateful joy the slightest semblance of it. No wonder, then, that my heart warmed to the old lady, and always gladdened at her approach and regretted her departure.

But now, the few words luckily or unluckily heard in passing had wholly revolutionized my ideas respecting her: now I looked upon her as hypocritical and



insincere, a flatterer, and a spy upon my words and deeds. Doubtless it would have been my interest still to meet her with the same cheerful smile and tone of respectful cordiality as before; but I could not, if I would: my manner altered with my feelings, and became so cold and shy that she could not fail to notice it. She soon did notice it, and HER manner altered too: the familiar nod was changed to a stiff bow, the gracious smile gave place to a glare of Gorgon ferocity; her vivacious loquacity was entirely transferred from me to ‘the darling boy and girls,’ whom she flattered and indulged more absurdly than ever their mother had done.

I confess I was somewhat troubled at this change: I feared the consequences of her displeasure, and even made some efforts to recover the ground I had lost—and with better apparent success than I could have anticipated. At one time, I, merely in common civility, asked after her cough; immediately her long visage relaxed into a smile, and she favoured me with a particular history of that and her other infirmities, followed by an account of her pious resignation, delivered in the usual emphatic, declamatory style, which no writing can portray.

‘But there’s one remedy for all, my dear, and that’s resignation’ (a toss of the head), ‘resignation to the will of heaven!’ (an uplifting of the hands and eyes). ‘It has always supported me through all my trials, and always will do’ (a succession of nods). ‘But then, it isn’t everybody that can say that’ (a shake of the head); ‘but I’m one of the pious ones, Miss Grey!’ (a very significant nod and toss). ‘And, thank heaven, I always was’ (another nod), ‘and I glory in it!’ (an emphatic clasping of the hands and shaking of the head). And with several texts of Scripture, misquoted or misapplied, and religious exclamations so redolent of the ludicrous in the style of delivery and manner of bringing in, if not in the expressions themselves, that I decline repeating them, she withdrew; tossing her large head in high good-humour—with herself at least—and left me hoping that, after all, she was rather weak than wicked.

At her next visit to Wellwood House, I went so far as to say I was glad to see her looking so well. The effect of this was magical: the words, intended as a mark of civility, were received as a flattering compliment; her countenance brightened up, and from that moment she became as gracious and benign as heart could wish—in outward semblance at least. From what I now saw of her, and what I heard from the children, I know that, in order to gain her cordial friendship, I had but to utter a word of flattery at each convenient opportunity: but this was against my principles; and for lack of this, the capricious old dame soon deprived me of her favour again, and I believe did me much secret injury.

She could not greatly influence her daughter-in-law against me, because, between that lady and herself there was a mutual dislike— chiefly shown by her in secret



detractions and calumniations; by the other, in an excess of frigid formality in her demeanour; and no fawning flattery of the elder could thaw away the wall of ice which the younger interposed between them. But with her son, the old lady had better success: he would listen to all she had to say, provided she could soothe his fretful temper, and refrain from irritating him by her own asperities; and I have reason to believe that she considerably strengthened his prejudice against me. She would tell him that I shamefully neglected the children, and even his wife did not attend to them as she ought; and that he must look after them himself, or they would all go to ruin.

Thus urged, he would frequently give himself the trouble of watching them from the windows during their play; at times, he would follow them through the grounds, and too often came suddenly upon them while they were dabbling in the forbidden well, talking to the coachman in the stables, or revelling in the filth of the farm-yard—and I, meanwhile, wearily standing, by, having previously exhausted my energy in vain attempts to get them away. Often, too, he would unexpectedly pop his head into the schoolroom while the young people were at meals, and find them spilling their milk over the table and themselves, plunging their fingers into their own or each other's mugs, or quarrelling over their victuals like a set of tiger's cubs. If I were quiet at the moment, I was conniving at their disorderly conduct; if (as was frequently the case) I happened to be exalting my voice to enforce order, I was using undue violence, and setting the girls a bad example by such ungentleness of tone and language.

I remember one afternoon in spring, when, owing to the rain, they could not go out; but, by some amazing good fortune, they had all finished their lessons, and yet abstained from running down to tease their parents—a trick that annoyed me greatly, but which, on rainy days, I seldom could prevent their doing; because, below, they found novelty and amusement—especially when visitors were in the house; and their mother, though she bid me keep them in the schoolroom, would never chide them for leaving it, or trouble herself to send them back. But this day they appeared satisfied with, their present abode, and what is more wonderful still, seemed disposed to play together without depending on me for amusement, and without quarrelling with each other. Their occupation was a somewhat puzzling one: they were all squatted together on the floor by the window, over a heap of broken toys and a quantity of birds' eggs—or rather egg-shells, for the contents had luckily been abstracted. These shells they had broken up and were pounding into small fragments, to what end I could not imagine; but so long as they were quiet and not in positive mischief, I did not care; and, with a feeling of unusual repose, I sat by the fire, putting the finishing stitches to a frock for Mary Ann's doll; intending, when that was



done, to begin a letter to my mother. Suddenly the door opened, and the dingy head of Mr. Bloomfield looked in.

‘All very quiet here! What are you doing?’ said he. ‘No harm TO–DAY, at least,’ thought I. But he was of a different opinion. Advancing to the window, and seeing the children’s occupations, he testily exclaimed—‘What in the world are you about?’

‘We’re grinding egg–shells, papa!’ cried Tom.

‘How DARE you make such a mess, you little devils? Don’t you see what confounded work you’re making of the carpet?’ (the carpet was a plain brown drugget). ‘Miss Grey, did you know what they were doing?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You knew it?’

‘Yes.’

‘You knew it! and you actually sat there and permitted them to go on without a word of reproof!’

‘I didn’t think they were doing any harm.’

‘Any harm! Why, look there! Just look at that carpet, and see— was there ever anything like it in a Christian house before? No wonder your room is not fit for a pigsty— no wonder your pupils are worse than a litter of pigs!—no wonder—oh! I declare, it puts me quite past my patience’ and he departed, shutting the door after him with a bang that made the children laugh.

‘It puts me quite past my patience too!’ muttered I, getting up; and, seizing the poker, I dashed it repeatedly into the cinders, and stirred them up with unwonted energy; thus easing my irritation under pretence of mending the fire.

After this, Mr. Bloomfield was continually looking in to see if the schoolroom was in order; and, as the children were continually littering the floor with fragments of toys, sticks, stones, stubble, leaves, and other rubbish, which I could not prevent their bringing, or oblige them to gather up, and which the servants refused to ‘clean after them,’ I had to spend a considerable portion of my valuable leisure moments on my knees upon the floor, in painfully reducing things to order. Once I told them that they should not taste their supper till they had picked up everything from the carpet; Fanny might have hers when she had taken up a certain quantity, Mary Ann when she had gathered twice as many, and Tom was to clear away the rest. Wonderful to state, the girls did their part; but Tom was in such a fury that he flew upon the table, scattered the bread and milk about the floor, struck his sisters, kicked the coals out of the coal–pan, attempted to overthrow the table and chairs, and seemed inclined to make a Douglas–larder of the whole contents of the room:



but I seized upon him, and, sending Mary Ann to call her mamma, held him, in spite of kicks, blows, yells, and execrations, till Mrs. Bloomfield made her appearance.

‘What is the matter with my boy?’ said she.

And when the matter was explained to her, all she did was to send for the nursery-maid to put the room in order, and bring Master Bloomfield his supper.

‘There now,’ cried Tom, triumphantly, looking up from his viands with his mouth almost too full for speech. ‘There now, Miss Grey! you see I’ve got my supper in spite of you: and I haven’t picked up a single thing!’

The only person in the house who had any real sympathy for me was the nurse; for she had suffered like afflictions, though in a smaller degree; as she had not the task of teaching, nor was she so responsible for the conduct of her charge.

‘Oh, Miss Grey!’ she would say, ‘you have some trouble with them childer!’

‘I have, indeed, Betty; and I daresay you know what it is.’

‘Ay, I do so! But I don’t vex myself o’er ‘em as you do. And then, you see, I hit ‘em a slap sometimes: and them little ‘uns—I gives ‘em a good whipping now and then: there’s nothing else will do for ‘em, as what they say. Howsoever, I’ve lost my place for it.’

‘Have you, Betty? I heard you were going to leave.’

‘Eh, bless you, yes! Missis gave me warning a three wik sin’. She told me afore Christmas how it mud be, if I hit ‘em again; but I couldn’t hold my hand off ‘em at nothing. I know not how YOU do, for Miss Mary Ann’s worse by the half nor her sisters!’

