

Agnes Grey

Anne Bronte

Chapter 6: The Parsonage Again

For a few months I remained peaceably at home, in the quiet enjoyment of liberty and rest, and genuine friendship, from all of which I had fasted so long; and in the earnest prosecution of my studies, to recover what I had lost during my stay at Wellwood House, and to lay in new stores for future use. My father's health was still very infirm, but not materially worse than when I last saw him; and I was glad I had it in my power to cheer him by my return, and to amuse him with singing his favourite songs.

No one triumphed over my failure, or said I had better have taken his or her advice, and quietly stayed at home. All were glad to have me back again, and lavished more kindness than ever upon me, to make up for the sufferings I had undergone; but not one would touch a shilling of what I had so cheerfully earned and so carefully saved, in the hope of sharing it with them. By dint of pinching here, and scraping there, our debts were already nearly paid. Mary had had good success with her drawings; but our father had insisted upon HER likewise keeping all the produce of her industry to herself. All we could spare from the supply of our humble wardrobe and our little casual expenses, he directed us to put into the savings'—bank; saying, we knew not how soon we might be dependent on that alone for support: for he felt he had not long to be with us, and what would become of our mother and us when he was gone, God only knew!

Dear papa! if he had troubled himself less about the afflictions that threatened us in case of his death, I am convinced that dreaded event would not have taken place so soon. My mother would never suffer him to ponder on the subject if she could help it.

'Oh, Richard!' exclaimed she, on one occasion, 'if you would but dismiss such gloomy subjects from your mind, you would live as long as any of us; at least you would live to see the girls married, and yourself a happy grandfather, with a canty old dame for your companion.'

My mother laughed, and so did my father: but his laugh soon perished in a dreary sigh.

'THEY married—poor penniless things!' said he; 'who will take them I wonder!'



‘Why, nobody shall that isn’t thankful for them. Wasn’t I penniless when you took me? and you PRETENDED, at least, to be vastly pleased with your acquisition. But it’s no matter whether they get married or not: we can devise a thousand honest ways of making a livelihood. And I wonder, Richard, you can think of bothering your head about our POVERTY in case of your death; as if THAT would be anything compared with the calamity of losing you—an affliction that you well know would swallow up all others, and which you ought to do your utmost to preserve us from: and there is nothing like a cheerful mind for keeping the body in health.’

‘I know, Alice, it is wrong to keep repining as I do, but I cannot help it: you must bear with me.’

‘I WON’T bear with you, if I can alter you,’ replied my mother: but the harshness of her words was undone by the earnest affection of her tone and pleasant smile, that made my father smile again, less sadly and less transiently than was his wont.

‘Mamma,’ said I, as soon as I could find an opportunity of speaking with her alone, ‘my money is but little, and cannot last long; if I could increase it, it would lessen papa’s anxiety, on one subject at least. I cannot draw like Mary, and so the best thing I could do would be to look out for another situation.’

‘And so you would actually try again, Agnes?’

‘Decidedly, I would.’

‘Why, my dear, I should have thought you had had enough of it.’

‘I know,’ said I, ‘everybody is not like Mr. and Mrs. Bloomfield—’

‘Some are worse,’ interrupted my mother.

‘But not many, I think,’ replied I, ‘and I’m sure all children are not like theirs; for I and Mary were not: we always did as you bid us, didn’t we?’

‘Generally: but then, I did not spoil you; and you were not perfect angels after all: Mary had a fund of quiet obstinacy, and you were somewhat faulty in regard to temper; but you were very good children on the whole.’

‘I know I was sulky sometimes, and I should have been glad to see these children sulky sometimes too; for then I could have understood them: but they never were, for they COULD not be offended, nor hurt, nor ashamed: they could not be unhappy in any way, except when they were in a passion.’

‘Well, if they COULD not, it was not their fault: you cannot expect stone to be as pliable as clay.’

‘No, but still it is very unpleasant to live with such unimpressible, incomprehensible creatures. You cannot love them; and if you could, your love would be utterly thrown



away: they could neither return it, nor value, nor understand it. But, however, even if I should stumble on such a family again, which is quite unlikely, I have all this experience to begin with, and I should manage better another time; and the end and aim of this preamble is, let me try again.'

'Well, my girl, you are not easily discouraged, I see: I am glad of that. But, let me tell you, you are a good deal paler and thinner than when you first left home; and we cannot have you undermining your health to hoard up money either for yourself or others.'

'Mary tells me I am changed too; and I don't much wonder at it, for I was in a constant state of agitation and anxiety all day long: but next time I am determined to take things coolly.'

After some further discussion, my mother promised once more to assist me, provided I would wait and be patient; and I left her to broach the matter to my father, when and how she deemed it most advisable: never doubting her ability to obtain his consent. Meantime, I searched, with great interest, the advertising columns of the newspapers, and wrote answers to every 'Wanted a Governess' that appeared at all eligible; but all my letters, as well as the replies, when I got any, were dutifully shown to my mother; and she, to my chagrin, made me reject the situations one after another: these were low people, these were too exacting in their demands, and these too niggardly in their remuneration.

'Your talents are not such as every poor clergyman's daughter possesses, Agnes,' she would say, 'and you must not throw them away. Remember, you promised to be patient: there is no need of hurry: you have plenty of time before you, and may have many chances yet.'

At length, she advised me to put an advertisement, myself, in the paper, stating my qualifications, &c.

'Music, singing, drawing, French, Latin, and German,' said she, 'are no mean assemblage: many will be glad to have so much in one instructor; and this time, you shall try your fortune in a somewhat higher family in that of some genuine, thoroughbred gentleman; for such are far more likely to treat you with proper respect and consideration than those purse-proud tradespeople and arrogant upstarts. I have known several among the higher ranks who treated their governesses quite as one of the family; though some, I allow, are as insolent and exacting as any one else can be: for there are bad and good in all classes.'

The advertisement was quickly written and despatched. Of the two parties who answered it, but one would consent to give me fifty pounds, the sum my mother bade me name as the salary I should require; and here, I hesitated about engaging myself, as



I feared the children would be too old, and their parents would require some one more showy, or more experienced, if not more accomplished than I. But my mother dissuaded me from declining it on that account: I should do vastly well, she said, if I would only throw aside my diffidence, and acquire a little more confidence in myself. I was just to give a plain, true statement of my acquirements and qualifications, and name what stipulations I chose to make, and then await the result. The only stipulation I ventured to propose, was that I might be allowed two months' holidays during the year to visit my friends, at Midsummer and Christmas. The unknown lady, in her reply, made no objection to this, and stated that, as to my acquirements, she had no doubt I should be able to give satisfaction; but in the engagement of governesses she considered those things as but subordinate points; as being situated in the neighbourhood of O—, she could get masters to supply any deficiencies in that respect: but, in her opinion, next to unimpeachable morality, a mild and cheerful temper and obliging disposition were the most essential requisities.

My mother did not relish this at all, and now made many objections to my accepting the situation; in which my sister warmly supported her: but, unwilling to be balked again, I overruled them all; and, having first obtained the consent of my father (who had, a short time previously, been apprised of these transactions), I wrote a most obliging epistle to my unknown correspondent, and, finally, the bargain was concluded.

It was decreed that on the last day of January I was to enter upon my new office as governess in the family of Mr. Murray, of Horton Lodge, near O—, about seventy miles from our village: a formidable distance to me, as I had never been above twenty miles from home in all the course of my twenty years' sojourn on earth; and as, moreover, every individual in that family and in the neighbourhood was utterly unknown to myself and all my acquaintances. But this rendered it only the more piquant to me. I had now, in some measure, got rid of the *mauvaise honte* that had formerly oppressed me so much; there was a pleasing excitement in the idea of entering these unknown regions, and making my way alone among its strange inhabitants. I now flattered myself I was going to see something in the world: Mr. Murray's residence was near a large town, and not in a manufacturing district, where the people had nothing to do but to make money; his rank from what I could gather, appeared to be higher than that of Mr. Bloomfield; and, doubtless, he was one of those genuine thoroughbred gentry my mother spoke of, who would treat his governess with due consideration as a respectable well-educated lady, the instructor and guide of his children, and not a mere upper servant. Then, my pupils being older, would be more rational, more teachable, and less troublesome than the last;



they would be less confined to the schoolroom, and not require that constant labour and incessant watching; and, finally, bright visions mingled with my hopes, with which the care of children and the mere duties of a governess had little or nothing to do. Thus, the reader will see that I had no claim to be regarded as a martyr to filial piety, going forth to sacrifice peace and liberty for the sole purpose of laying up stores for the comfort and support of my parents: though certainly the comfort of my father, and the future support of my mother, had a large share in my calculations; and fifty pounds appeared to me no ordinary sum. I must have decent clothes becoming my station; I must, it seemed, put out my washing, and also pay for my four annual journeys between Horton Lodge and home; but with strict attention to economy, surely twenty pounds, or little more, would cover those expenses, and then there would be thirty for the bank, or little less: what a valuable addition to our stock! Oh, I must struggle to keep this situation, whatever it might be! both for my own honour among my friends and for the solid services I might render them by my continuance there.

