

Agnes Grey

Anne Brontë

Chapter 7: Horton Lodge

The 31st of January was a wild, tempestuous day: there was a strong north wind, with a continual storm of snow drifting on the ground and whirling through the air. My friends would have had me delay my departure, but fearful of prejudicing my employers against me by such want of punctuality at the commencement of my undertaking, I persisted in keeping the appointment.

I will not inflict upon my readers an account of my leaving home on that dark winter morning: the fond farewells, the long, long journey to O—, the solitary waitings in inns for coaches or trains—for there were some railways then—and, finally, the meeting at O— with Mr. Murray's servant, who had been sent with the phaeton to drive me from thence to Horton Lodge. I will just state that the heavy snow had thrown such impediments in the way of both horses and steam-engines, that it was dark some hours before I reached my journey's end, and that a most bewildering storm came on at last, which made the few miles' space between O— and Horton Lodge a long and formidable passage. I sat resigned, with the cold, sharp snow drifting through my veil and filling my lap, seeing nothing, and wondering how the unfortunate horse and driver could make their way even as well as they did; and indeed it was but a toilsome, creeping style of progression, to say the best of it. At length we paused; and, at the call of the driver, someone unlatched and rolled back upon their creaking hinges what appeared to be the park gates. Then we proceeded along a smoother road, whence, occasionally, I perceived some huge, hoary mass gleaming through the darkness, which I took to be a portion of a snow-clad tree. After a considerable time we paused again, before the stately portico of a large house with long windows descending to the ground.

I rose with some difficulty from under the superincumbent snowdrift, and alighted from the carriage, expecting that a kind and hospitable reception would indemnify me for the toils and hardships of the day. A gentleman person in black opened the door, and admitted me into a spacious hall, lighted by an amber-coloured lamp suspended from the



ceiling; he led me through this, along a passage, and opening the door of a back room, told me that was the schoolroom. I entered, and found two young ladies and two young gentlemen—my future pupils, I supposed. After a formal greeting, the elder girl, who was trifling over a piece of canvas and a basket of German wools, asked if I should like to go upstairs. I replied in the affirmative, of course.

‘Matilda, take a candle, and show her her room,’ said she.

Miss Matilda, a strapping hoyden of about fourteen, with a short frock and trousers, shrugged her shoulders and made a slight grimace, but took a candle and proceeded before me up the back stairs (a long, steep, double flight), and through a long, narrow passage, to a small but tolerably comfortable room. She then asked me if I would take some tea or coffee. I was about to answer No; but remembering that I had taken nothing since seven o’clock that morning, and feeling faint in consequence, I said I would take a cup of tea. Saying she would tell ‘Brown,’ the young lady departed; and by the time I had divested myself of my heavy, wet cloak, shawl, bonnet, &c., a mincing damsel came to say the young ladies desired to know whether I would take my tea up there or in the schoolroom. Under the plea of fatigue I chose to take it there. She withdrew; and, after a while, returned again with a small tea-tray, and placed it on the chest of drawers, which served as a dressing-table. Having civilly thanked her, I asked at what time I should be expected to rise in the morning.

‘The young ladies and gentlemen breakfast at half-past eight, ma’am,’ said she; ‘they rise early; but, as they seldom do any lessons before breakfast, I should think it will do if you rise soon after seven.’

I desired her to be so kind as to call me at seven, and, promising to do so, she withdrew. Then, having broken my long fast on a cup of tea and a little thin bread and butter, I sat down beside the small, smouldering fire, and amused myself with a hearty fit of crying; after which, I said my prayers, and then, feeling considerably relieved, began to prepare for bed. Finding that none of my luggage was brought up, I instituted a search for the bell; and failing to discover any signs of such a convenience in any corner of the room, I took my candle and ventured through the long passage, and down the steep stairs, on a voyage of discovery. Meeting a well-dressed female on the way, I told her what I wanted; but not without considerable hesitation, as I was not quite sure whether it was one of the upper servants, or Mrs. Murray herself: it happened, however, to be the lady’s-maid. With the air of one conferring an unusual favour, she vouchsafed to undertake the sending up of my things; and when I had re-entered my room, and waited and wondered a long time (greatly fearing that she had forgotten or neglected to perform her promise,



and doubting whether to keep waiting or go to bed, or go down again), my hopes, at length, were revived by the sound of voices and laughter, accompanied by the tramp of feet along the passage; and presently the luggage was brought in by a rough-looking maid and a man, neither of them very respectful in their demeanour to me. Having shut the door upon their retiring footsteps, and unpacked a few of my things, I betook myself to rest; gladly enough, for I was weary in body and mind.

It was with a strange feeling of desolation, mingled with a strong sense of the novelty of my situation, and a joyless kind of curiosity concerning what was yet unknown, that I awoke the next morning; feeling like one whirled away by enchantment, and suddenly dropped from the clouds into a remote and unknown land, widely and completely isolated from all he had ever seen or known before; or like a thistle-seed borne on the wind to some strange nook of uncongenial soil, where it must lie long enough before it can take root and germinate, extracting nourishment from what appears so alien to its nature: if, indeed, it ever can. But this gives no proper idea of my feelings at all; and no one that has not lived such a retired, stationary life as mine, can possibly imagine what they were: hardly even if he has known what it is to awake some morning, and find himself in Port Nelson, in New Zealand, with a world of waters between himself and all that knew him.

I shall not soon forget the peculiar feeling with which I raised my blind and looked out upon the unknown world: a wide, white wilderness was all that met my gaze; a waste of Deserts tossed in snow, And heavy laden groves.

I descended to the schoolroom with no remarkable eagerness to join my pupils, though not without some feeling of curiosity respecting what a further acquaintance would reveal. One thing, among others of more obvious importance, I determined with myself—I must begin with calling them Miss and Master. It seemed to me a chilling and unnatural piece of punctilio between the children of a family and their instructor and daily companion; especially where the former were in their early childhood, as at Wellwood House; but even there, my calling the little Bloomfields by their simple names had been regarded as an offensive liberty: as their parents had taken care to show me, by carefully designating them MASTER and MISS Bloomfield, &c., in speaking to me. I had been very slow to take the hint, because the whole affair struck me as so very absurd; but now I determined to be wiser, and begin at once with as much form and ceremony as any member of the family would be likely to require: and, indeed, the children being so much older, there would be less difficulty; though the little words Miss and Master seemed to have a surprising effect in repressing all familiar, open-hearted kindness, and extinguishing every gleam of cordiality that might arise between us.



As I cannot, like Dogberry, find it in my heart to bestow all my tediousness upon the reader, I will not go on to bore him with a minute detail of all the discoveries and proceedings of this and the following day. No doubt he will be amply satisfied with a slight sketch of the different members of the family, and a general view of the first year or two of my sojourn among them.

To begin with the head: Mr. Murray was, by all accounts, a blustering, roystering, country squire: a devoted fox-hunter, a skilful horse-jockey and farrier, an active, practical farmer, and a hearty bon vivant. By all accounts, I say; for, except on Sundays, when he went to church, I never saw him from month to month: unless, in crossing the hall or walking in the grounds, the figure of a tall, stout gentleman, with scarlet cheeks and crimson nose, happened to come across me; on which occasions, if he passed near enough to speak, an unceremonious nod, accompanied by a 'Morning, Miss Grey,' or some such brief salutation, was usually vouchsafed. Frequently, indeed, his loud laugh reached me from afar; and oftener still I heard him swearing and blaspheming against the footmen, groom, coachman, or some other hapless dependant.

Mrs. Murray was a handsome, dashing lady of forty, who certainly required neither rouge nor padding to add to her charms; and whose chief enjoyments were, or seemed to be, in giving or frequenting parties, and in dressing at the very top of the fashion. I did not see her till eleven o'clock on the morning after my arrival; when she honoured me with a visit, just as my mother might step into the kitchen to see a new servant-girl: yet not so, either, for my mother would have seen her immediately after her arrival, and not waited till the next day; and, moreover, she would have addressed her in a more kind and friendly manner, and given her some words of comfort as well as a plain exposition of her duties; but Mrs. Murray did neither the one nor the other. She just stepped into the schoolroom on her return from ordering dinner in the housekeeper's room, bade me good-morning, stood for two minutes by the fire, said a few words about the weather and the 'rather rough' journey I must have had yesterday; petted her youngest child—a boy of ten—who had just been wiping his mouth and hands on her gown, after indulging in some savoury morsel from the housekeeper's store; told me what a sweet, good boy he was; and then sailed out, with a self-complacent smile upon her face: thinking, no doubt, that she had done quite enough for the present, and had been delightfully condescending into the bargain. Her children evidently held the same opinion, and I alone thought otherwise.

After this she looked in upon me once or twice, during the absence of my pupils, to enlighten me concerning my duties towards them. For the girls she seemed anxious



only to render them as superficially attractive and showily accomplished as they could possibly be made, without present trouble or discomfort to themselves; and I was to act accordingly—to study and strive to amuse and oblige, instruct, refine, and polish, with the least possible exertion on their part, and no exercise of authority on mine. With regard to the two boys, it was much the same; only instead of accomplishments, I was to get the greatest possible quantity of Latin grammar and Valpy's Delectus into their heads, in order to fit them for school—the greatest possible quantity at least WITHOUT trouble to themselves. John might be a 'little high-spirited,' and Charles might be a little 'nervous and tedious—'

'But at all events, Miss Grey,' said she, 'I hope YOU will keep your temper, and be mild and patient throughout; especially with the dear little Charles; he is so extremely nervous and susceptible, and so utterly unaccustomed to anything but the tenderest treatment. You will excuse my naming these things to you; for the fact is, I have hitherto found all the governesses, even the very best of them, faulty in this particular. They wanted that meek and quiet spirit, which St. Matthew, or some of them, says is better than the putting on of apparel—you will know the passage to which I allude, for you are a clergyman's daughter. But I have no doubt you will give satisfaction in this respect as well as the rest. And remember, on all occasions, when any of the young people do anything improper, if persuasion and gentle remonstrance will not do, let one of the others come and tell me; for I can speak to them more plainly than it would be proper for you to do. And make them as happy as you can, Miss Grey, and I dare say you will do very well.'

I observed that while Mrs. Murray was so extremely solicitous for the comfort and happiness of her children, and continually talking about it, she never once mentioned mine; though they were at home, surrounded by friends, and I an alien among strangers; and I did not yet know enough of the world, not to be considerably surprised at this anomaly.

Miss Murray, otherwise Rosalie, was about sixteen when I came, and decidedly a very pretty girl; and in two years longer, as time more completely developed her form and added grace to her carriage and deportment, she became positively beautiful; and that in no common degree. She was tall and slender, yet not thin; perfectly formed, exquisitely fair, though not without a brilliant, healthy bloom; her hair, which she wore in a profusion of long ringlets, was of a very light brown inclining to yellow; her eyes were pale blue, but so clear and bright that few would wish them darker; the rest of her features were small, not quite regular, and not remarkably otherwise: but altogether you could not



hesitate to pronounce her a very lovely girl. I wish I could say as much for mind and disposition as I can for her form and face.

Yet think not I have any dreadful disclosures to make: she was lively, light-hearted, and could be very agreeable, with those who did not cross her will. Towards me, when I first came, she was cold and haughty, then insolent and overbearing; but, on a further acquaintance, she gradually laid aside her airs, and in time became as deeply attached to me as it was possible for HER to be to one of my character and position: for she seldom lost sight, for above half an hour at a time, of the fact of my being a hireling and a poor curate's daughter. And yet, upon the whole, I believe she respected me more than she herself was aware of; because I was the only person in the house who steadily professed good principles, habitually spoke the truth, and generally endeavoured to make inclination bow to duty; and this I say, not, of course, in commendation of myself, but to show the unfortunate state of the family to which my services were, for the present, devoted. There was no member of it in whom I regretted this sad want of principle so much as Miss Murray herself; not only because she had taken a fancy to me, but because there was so much of what was pleasant and prepossessing in herself, that, in spite of her failings, I really liked her—when she did not rouse my indignation, or ruffle my temper by TOO great a display of her faults. These, however, I would fain persuade myself were rather the effect of her education than her disposition: she had never been perfectly taught the distinction between right and wrong; she had, like her brothers and sisters, been suffered, from infancy, to tyrannize over nurses, governesses, and servants; she had not been taught to moderate her desires, to control her temper or bridle her will, or to sacrifice her own pleasure for the good of others. Her temper being naturally good, she was never violent or morose, but from constant indulgence, and habitual scorn of reason, she was often testy and capricious; her mind had never been cultivated: her intellect, at best, was somewhat shallow; she possessed considerable vivacity, some quickness of perception, and some talent for music and the acquisition of languages, but till fifteen she had troubled herself to acquire nothing;—then the love of display had roused her faculties, and induced her to apply herself, but only to the more showy accomplishments. And when I came it was the same: everything was neglected but French, German, music, singing, dancing, fancy-work, and a little drawing—such drawing as might produce the greatest show with the smallest labour, and the principal parts of which were generally done by me. For music and singing, besides my occasional instructions, she had the attendance of the best master the country afforded; and in these accomplishments, as well as in dancing, she certainly attained great proficiency. To music, indeed, she devoted



too much of her time, as, governess though I was, I frequently told her; but her mother thought that if SHE liked it, she COULD not give too much time to the acquisition of so attractive an art. Of fancy-work I knew nothing but what I gathered from my pupil and my own observation; but no sooner was I initiated, than she made me useful in twenty different ways: all the tedious parts of her work were shifted on to my shoulders; such as stretching the frames, stitching in the canvas, sorting the wools and silks, putting in the grounds, counting the stitches, rectifying mistakes, and finishing the pieces she was tired of.

At sixteen, Miss Murray was something of a romp, yet not more so than is natural and allowable for a girl of that age, but at seventeen, that propensity, like all other things, began to give way to the ruling passion, and soon was swallowed up in the all-absorbing ambition to attract and dazzle the other sex. But enough of her: now let us turn to her sister.

Miss Matilda Murray was a veritable hoyden, of whom little need be said. She was about two years and a half younger than her sister; her features were larger, her complexion much darker. She might possibly make a handsome woman; but she was far too big-boned and awkward ever to be called a pretty girl, and at present she cared little about it. Rosalie knew all her charms, and thought them even greater than they were, and valued them more highly than she ought to have done, had they been three times as great; Matilda thought she was well enough, but cared little about the matter; still less did she care about the cultivation of her mind, and the acquisition of ornamental accomplishments. The manner in which she learnt her lessons and practised her music was calculated to drive any governess to despair. Short and easy as her tasks were, if done at all, they were slurred over, at any time and in any way; but generally at the least convenient times, and in the way least beneficial to herself, and least satisfactory to me: the short half-hour of practising was horribly strummed through; she, meantime, unsparingly abusing me, either for interrupting her with corrections, or for not rectifying her mistakes before they were made, or something equally unreasonable. Once or twice, I ventured to remonstrate with her seriously for such irrational conduct; but on each of those occasions, I received such reprehensive expostulations from her mother, as convinced me that, if I wished to keep the situation, I must even let Miss Matilda go on in her own way.

When her lessons were over, however, her ill-humour was generally over too: while riding her spirited pony, or romping with the dogs or her brothers and sister, but especially with her dear brother John, she was as happy as a lark. As an animal, Matilda



was all right, full of life, vigour, and activity; as an intelligent being, she was barbarously ignorant, indocile, careless and irrational; and, consequently, very distressing to one who had the task of cultivating her understanding, reforming her manners, and aiding her to acquire those ornamental attainments which, unlike her sister, she despised as much as the rest. Her mother was partly aware of her deficiencies, and gave me many a lecture as to how I should try to form her tastes, and endeavour to rouse and cherish her dormant vanity; and, by insinuating, skilful flattery, to win her attention to the desired objects—which I would not do; and how I should prepare and smooth the path of learning till she could glide along it without the least exertion to herself: which I could not, for nothing can be taught to any purpose without some little exertion on the part of the learner.

As a moral agent, Matilda was reckless, headstrong, violent, and unamenable to reason. One proof of the deplorable state of her mind was, that from her father's example she had learned to swear like a trooper. Her mother was greatly shocked at the 'unlady-like trick,' and wondered 'how she had picked it up.' 'But you can soon break her of it, Miss Grey,' said she: 'it is only a habit; and if you will just gently remind her every time she does so, I am sure she will soon lay it aside.' I not only 'gently reminded' her, I tried to impress upon her how wrong it was, and how distressing to the ears of decent people: but all in vain: I was only answered by a careless laugh, and, 'Oh, Miss Grey, how shocked you are! I'm so glad!' or, 'Well! I can't help it; papa shouldn't have taught me: I learned it all from him; and maybe a bit from the coachman.'

Her brother John, alias Master Murray, was about eleven when I came: a fine, stout, healthy boy, frank and good-natured in the main, and might have been a decent lad had he been properly educated; but now he was as rough as a young bear, boisterous, unruly, unprincipled, untaught, unteachable—at least, for a governess under his mother's eye. His masters at school might be able to manage him better—for to school he was sent, greatly to my relief, in the course of a year; in a state, it is true, of scandalous ignorance as to Latin, as well as the more useful though more neglected things: and this, doubtless, would all be laid to the account of his education having been entrusted to an ignorant female teacher, who had presumed to take in hand what she was wholly incompetent to perform. I was not delivered from his brother till full twelve months after, when he also was despatched in the same state of disgraceful ignorance as the former.

Master Charles was his mother's peculiar darling. He was little more than a year younger than John, but much smaller, paler, and less active and robust; a pettish, cowardly, capricious, selfish little fellow, only active in doing mischief, and only clever in inventing falsehoods: not simply to hide his faults, but, in mere malicious wantonness,



to bring odium upon others. In fact, Master Charles was a very great nuisance to me: it was a trial of patience to live with him peaceably; to watch over him was worse; and to teach him, or pretend to teach him, was inconceivable. At ten years old, he could not read correctly the easiest line in the simplest book; and as, according to his mother's principle, he was to be told every word, before he had time to hesitate or examine its orthography, and never even to be informed, as a stimulant to exertion, that other boys were more forward than he, it is not surprising that he made but little progress during the two years I had charge of his education. His minute portions of Latin grammar, &c., were to be repeated over to him, till he chose to say he knew them, and then he was to be helped to say them; if he made mistakes in his little easy sums in arithmetic, they were to be shown him at once, and the sum done for him, instead of his being left to exercise his faculties in finding them out himself; so that, of course, he took no pains to avoid mistakes, but frequently set down his figures at random, without any calculation at all.

I did not invariably confine myself to these rules: it was against my conscience to do so; but I seldom could venture to deviate from them in the slightest degree, without incurring the wrath of my little pupil, and subsequently of his mamma; to whom he would relate my transgressions maliciously exaggerated, or adorned with embellishments of his own; and often, in consequence, was I on the point of losing or resigning my situation. But, for their sakes at home, I smothered my pride and suppressed my indignation, and managed to struggle on till my little tormentor was despatched to school; his father declaring that home education was 'no go; for him, it was plain; his mother spoiled him outrageously, and his governess could make no hand of him at all.'

A few more observations about Horton Lodge and its ongoings, and I have done with dry description for the present. The house was a very respectable one; superior to Mr. Bloomfield's, both in age, size, and magnificence: the garden was not so tastefully laid out; but instead of the smooth-shaven lawn, the young trees guarded by palings, the grove of upstart poplars, and the plantation of firs, there was a wide park, stocked with deer, and beautified by fine old trees. The surrounding country itself was pleasant, as far as fertile fields, flourishing trees, quiet green lanes, and smiling hedges with wild-flowers scattered along their banks, could make it; but it was depressingly flat to one born and nurtured among the rugged hills of —.

We were situated nearly two miles from the village church, and, consequently, the family carriage was put in requisition every Sunday morning, and sometimes oftener. Mr. and Mrs. Murray generally thought it sufficient to show themselves at church once in the course of the day; but frequently the children preferred going a second time to wandering



about the grounds all the day with nothing to do. If some of my pupils chose to walk and take me with them, it was well for me; for otherwise my position in the carriage was to be crushed into the corner farthest from the open window, and with my back to the horses: a position which invariably made me sick; and if I were not actually obliged to leave the church in the middle of the service, my devotions were disturbed with a feeling of languor and sickliness, and the tormenting fear of its becoming worse: and a depressing headache was generally my companion throughout the day, which would otherwise have been one of welcome rest, and holy, calm enjoyment.

‘It’s very odd, Miss Grey, that the carriage should always make you sick: it never makes ME,’ remarked Miss Matilda,

‘Nor me either,’ said her sister; ‘but I dare say it would, if I sat where she does—such a nasty, horrid place, Miss Grey; I wonder how you can bear it!’

‘I am obliged to bear it, since no choice is left me,’—I might have answered; but in tenderness for their feelings I only replied,—‘Oh! it is but a short way, and if I am not sick in church, I don’t mind it.’

If I were called upon to give a description of the usual divisions and arrangements of the day, I should find it a very difficult matter. I had all my meals in the schoolroom with my pupils, at such times as suited their fancy: sometimes they would ring for dinner before it was half cooked; sometimes they would keep it waiting on the table for above an hour, and then be out of humour because the potatoes were cold, and the gravy covered with cakes of solid fat; sometimes they would have tea at four; frequently, they would storm at the servants because it was not in precisely at five; and when these orders were obeyed, by way of encouragement to punctuality, they would keep it on the table till seven or eight.

Their hours of study were managed in much the same way; my judgment or convenience was never once consulted. Sometimes Matilda and John would determine ‘to get all the plaguy business over before breakfast,’ and send the maid to call me up at half-past five, without any scruple or apology; sometimes, I was told to be ready precisely at six, and, having dressed in a hurry, came down to an empty room, and after waiting a long time in suspense, discovered that they had changed their minds, and were still in bed; or, perhaps, if it were a fine summer morning, Brown would come to tell me that the young ladies and gentlemen had taken a holiday, and were gone out; and then I was kept waiting for breakfast till I was almost ready to faint: they having fortified themselves with something before they went.

Often they would do their lessons in the open air; which I had nothing to say against: except that I frequently caught cold by sitting on the damp grass, or from exposure to



the evening dew, or some insidious draught, which seemed to have no injurious effect on them. It was quite right that they should be hardy; yet, surely, they might have been taught some consideration for others who were less so. But I must not blame them for what was, perhaps, my own fault; for I never made any particular objections to sitting where they pleased; foolishly choosing to risk the consequences, rather than trouble them for my convenience. Their indecorous manner of doing their lessons was quite as remarkable as the caprice displayed in their choice of time and place. While receiving my instructions, or repeating what they had learned, they would lounge upon the sofa, lie on the rug, stretch, yawn, talk to each other, or look out of the window; whereas, I could not so much as stir the fire, or pick up the handkerchief I had dropped, without being rebuked for inattention by one of my pupils, or told that ‘mamma would not like me to be so careless.’

The servants, seeing in what little estimation the governess was held by both parents and children, regulated their behaviour by the same standard. I have frequently stood up for them, at the risk of some injury to myself, against the tyranny and injustice of their young masters and mistresses; and I always endeavoured to give them as little trouble as possible: but they entirely neglected my comfort, despised my requests, and slighted my directions. All servants, I am convinced, would not have done so; but domestics in general, being ignorant and little accustomed to reason and reflection, are too easily corrupted by the carelessness and bad example of those above them; and these, I think, were not of the best order to begin with.

I sometimes felt myself degraded by the life I led, and ashamed of submitting to so many indignities; and sometimes I thought myself a fool for caring so much about them, and feared I must be sadly wanting in Christian humility, or that charity which ‘suffereth long and is kind, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, beareth all things, endureth all things.’

But, with time and patience, matters began to be slightly ameliorated: slowly, it is true, and almost imperceptibly; but I got rid of my male pupils (that was no trifling advantage), and the girls, as I intimated before concerning one of them, became a little less insolent, and began to show some symptoms of esteem. ‘Miss Grey was a queer creature: she never flattered, and did not praise them half enough; but whenever she did speak favourably of them, or anything belonging to them, they could be quite sure her approbation was sincere. She was very obliging, quiet, and peaceable in the main, but there were some things that put her out of temper: they did not much care for that, to be sure, but still it was better to keep her in tune; as when she was in a good humour



she would talk to them, and be very agreeable and amusing sometimes, in her way; which was quite different to mamma's, but still very well for a change. She had her own opinions on every subject, and kept steadily to them—very tiresome opinions they often were; as she was always thinking of what was right and what was wrong, and had a strange reverence for matters connected with religion, and an unaccountable liking to good people.'

