

Agnes Grey

Anne Bronte

Chapter 12: The Shower

The next visit I paid to Nancy Brown was in the second week in March: for, though I had many spare minutes during the day, I seldom could look upon an hour as entirely my own; since, where everything was left to the caprices of Miss Matilda and her sister, there could be no order or regularity. Whatever occupation I chose, when not actually busied about them or their concerns, I had, as it were, to keep my loins girded, my shoes on my feet, and my staff in my hand; for not to be immediately forthcoming when called for, was regarded as a grave and inexcusable offence: not only by my pupils and their mother, but by the very servant, who came in breathless haste to call me, exclaiming, ‘You’re to go to the schoolroom DIRECTLY, mum, the young ladies is WAITING!!’ Climax of horror! Actually waiting for their governess!!!

But this time I was pretty sure of an hour or two to myself; for Matilda was preparing for a long ride, and Rosalie was dressing for a dinner-party at Lady Ashby’s: so I took the opportunity of repairing to the widow’s cottage, where I found her in some anxiety about her cat, which had been absent all day. I comforted her with as many anecdotes of that animal’s roving propensities as I could recollect. ‘I’m feared o’ th’ gamekeepers,’ said she: ‘that’s all ‘at I think on. If th’ young gentlemen had been at home, I should a’ thought they’d been setting their dogs at her, an’ worried her, poor thing, as they did MANY a poor thing’s cat; but I haven’t that to be feared on now.’ Nancy’s eyes were better, but still far from well: she had been trying to make a Sunday shirt for her son, but told me she could only bear to do a little bit at it now and then, so that it progressed but slowly, though the poor lad wanted it sadly. So I proposed to help her a little, after I had read to her, for I had plenty of time that evening, and need not return till dusk. She thankfully accepted the offer. ‘An’ you’ll be a bit o’ company for me too, Miss,’ said she; ‘I like as I feel lonesome without my cat.’ But when I had finished reading, and done the half of a seam, with Nancy’s capacious brass thimble fitted on to my finger by means of a roll of paper, I was disturbed by the entrance of



Mr. Weston, with the identical cat in his arms. I now saw that he could smile, and very pleasantly too.

‘I’ve done you a piece of good service, Nancy,’ he began: then seeing me, he acknowledged my presence by a slight bow. I should have been invisible to Hatfield, or any other gentleman of those parts. ‘I’ve delivered your cat,’ he continued, ‘from the hands, or rather the gun, of Mr. Murray’s gamekeeper.’

‘God bless you, sir!’ cried the grateful old woman, ready to weep for joy as she received her favourite from his arms.

‘Take care of it,’ said he, ‘and don’t let it go near the rabbit-warren, for the gamekeeper swears he’ll shoot it if he sees it there again: he would have done so to-day, if I had not been in time to stop him. I believe it is raining, Miss Grey,’ added he, more quietly, observing that I had put aside my work, and was preparing to depart. ‘Don’t let me disturb you—I shan’t stay two minutes.’

‘You’ll BOTH stay while this shower gets owered,’ said Nancy, as she stirred the fire, and placed another chair beside it; ‘What! There’s room for all.’

‘I can see better here, thank you, Nancy,’ replied I, taking my work to the window, where she had the goodness to suffer me to remain unmolested, while she got a brush to remove the cat’s hairs from Mr. Weston’s coat, carefully wiped the rain from his hat, and gave the cat its supper, busily talking all the time: now thanking her clerical friend for what he had done; now wondering how the cat had found out the warren; and now lamenting the probable consequences of such a discovery. He listened with a quiet, good-natured smile, and at length took a seat in compliance with her pressing invitations, but repeated that he did not mean to stay.

‘I have another place to go to,’ said he, ‘and I see’ (glancing at the book on the table) ‘someone else has been reading to you.’

‘Yes, sir; Miss Grey has been as kind as read me a chapter; an’ now she’s helping me with a shirt for our Bill—but I’m feared she’ll be cold there. Won’t you come to th’ fire, Miss?’

‘No, thank you, Nancy, I’m quite warm. I must go as soon as this shower is over.’

‘Oh, Miss! You said you could stop while dusk!’ cried the provoking old woman, and Mr. Weston seized his hat.

‘Nay, sir,’ exclaimed she, ‘pray don’t go now, while it rains so fast.’

‘But it strikes me I’m keeping your visitor away from the fire.’

‘No, you’re not, Mr. Weston,’ replied I, hoping there was no harm in a falsehood of that description.



‘No, sure!’ cried Nancy. ‘What, there’s lots o’ room!’

‘Miss Grey,’ said he, half-jestingly, as if he felt it necessary to change the present subject, whether he had anything particular to say or not, ‘I wish you would make my peace with the squire, when you see him. He was by when I rescued Nancy’s cat, and did not quite approve of the deed. I told him I thought he might better spare all his rabbits than she her cat, for which audacious assertion he treated me to some rather ungentlemanly language; and I fear I retorted a trifle too warmly.’

‘Oh, lawful sir! I hope you didn’t fall out wi’ th’ maister for sake o’ my cat! he cannot bide answering again—can th’ maister.’

‘Oh! it’s no matter, Nancy: I don’t care about it, really; I said nothing VERY uncivil; and I suppose Mr. Murray is accustomed to use rather strong language when he’s heated.’

‘Ay, sir: it’s a pity.’

‘And now, I really must go. I have to visit a place a mile beyond this; and you would not have me to return in the dark: besides, it has nearly done raining now—so good-evening, Nancy. Good-evening, Miss Grey.’

‘Good-evening, Mr. Weston; but don’t depend upon me for making your peace with Mr. Murray, for I never see him—to speak to.’

‘Don’t you; it can’t be helped then,’ replied he, in dolorous resignation: then, with a peculiar half-smile, he added, ‘But never mind; I imagine the squire has more to apologise for than I;’ and left the cottage.

I went on with my sewing as long as I could see, and then bade Nancy good-evening; checking her too lively gratitude by the undeniable assurance that I had only done for her what she would have done for me, if she had been in my place and I in hers. I hastened back to Horton Lodge, where, having entered the schoolroom, I found the tea-table all in confusion, the tray flooded with slops, and Miss Matilda in a most ferocious humour.

‘Miss Grey, whatever have you been about? I’ve had tea half an hour ago, and had to make it myself, and drink it all alone! I wish you would come in sooner!’

‘I’ve been to see Nancy Brown. I thought you would not be back from your ride.’

‘How could I ride in the rain, I should like to know. That damned pelting shower was vexatious enough—coming on when I was just in full swing: and then to come and find nobody in to tea! and you know I can’t make the tea as I like it.’

‘I didn’t think of the shower,’ replied I (and, indeed, the thought of its driving her home had never entered my head).



‘No, of course; you were under shelter yourself, and you never thought of other people.’

I bore her coarse reproaches with astonishing equanimity, even with cheerfulness; for I was sensible that I had done more good to Nancy Brown than harm to her: and perhaps some other thoughts assisted to keep up my spirits, and impart a relish to the cup of cold, overdrawn tea, and a charm to the otherwise unsightly table; and—I had almost said—to Miss Matilda’s unamiable face. But she soon betook herself to the stables, and left me to the quiet enjoyment of my solitary meal.

