

Agnes Grey

Anne Bronte

Chapter 14: The Rector

The following day was as fine as the preceding one. Soon after breakfast Miss Matilda, having galloped and blundered through a few unprofitable lessons, and vengeably thumped the piano for an hour, in a terrible humour with both me and it, because her mamma would not give her a holiday, had betaken herself to her favourite places of resort, the yards, the stables, and the dog-kennels; and Miss Murray was gone forth to enjoy a quiet ramble with a new fashionable novel for her companion, leaving me in the schoolroom hard at work upon a water-colour drawing which I had promised to do for her, and which she insisted upon my finishing that day.

At my feet lay a little rough terrier. It was the property of Miss Matilda; but she hated the animal, and intended to sell it, alleging that it was quite spoiled. It was really an excellent dog of its kind; but she affirmed it was fit for nothing, and had not even the sense to know its own mistress.

The fact was she had purchased it when but a small puppy, insisting at first that no one should touch it but herself; but soon becoming tired of so helpless and troublesome a nursling, she had gladly yielded to my entreaties to be allowed to take charge of it; and I, by carefully nursing the little creature from infancy to adolescence, of course, had obtained its affections: a reward I should have greatly valued, and looked upon as far outweighing all the trouble I had had with it, had not poor Snap's grateful feelings exposed him to many a harsh word and many a spiteful kick and pinch from his owner, and were he not now in danger of being 'put away' in consequence, or transferred to some rough, stony-hearted master. But how could I help it? I could not make the dog hate me by cruel treatment, and she would not propitiate him by kindness.

However, while I thus sat, working away with my pencil, Mrs. Murray came, half-sailing, half-bustling, into the room.

‘Miss Grey,’ she began,—‘dear! how can you sit at your drawing such a day as this?’ (She thought I was doing it for my own pleasure.) ‘I WONDER you don’t put on your bonnet and go out with the young ladies.’

‘I think, ma’am, Miss Murray is reading; and Miss Matilda is amusing herself with her dogs.’

‘If you would try to amuse Miss Matilda yourself a little more, I think she would not be driven to seek amusement in the companionship of dogs and horses and grooms, so much as she is; and if you would be a little more cheerful and conversable with Miss Murray, she would not so often go wandering in the fields with a book in her hand. However, I don’t want to vex you,’ added she, seeing, I suppose, that my cheeks burned and my hand trembled with some unamiable emotion. ‘Do, pray, try not to be so touchy—there’s no speaking to you else. And tell me if you know where Rosalie is gone: and why she likes to be so much alone?’

‘She says she likes to be alone when she has a new book to read.’

‘But why can’t she read it in the park or the garden?—why should she go into the fields and lanes? And how is it that that Mr. Hatfield so often finds her out? She told me last week he’d walked his horse by her side all up Moss Lane; and now I’m sure it was he I saw, from my dressing-room window, walking so briskly past the park-gates, and on towards the field where she so frequently goes. I wish you would go and see if she is there; and just gently remind her that it is not proper for a young lady of her rank and prospects to be wandering about by herself in that manner, exposed to the attentions of anyone that presumes to address her; like some poor neglected girl that has no park to walk in, and no friends to take care of her: and tell her that her papa would be extremely angry if he knew of her treating Mr. Hatfield in the familiar manner that I fear she does; and—oh! if you—if ANY governess had but half a mother’s watchfulness—half a mother’s anxious care, I should be saved this trouble; and you would see at once the necessity of keeping your eye upon her, and making your company agreeable to— Well, go—go; there’s no time to be lost,’ cried she, seeing that I had put away my drawing materials, and was waiting in the doorway for the conclusion of her address.

According to her prognostications, I found Miss Murray in her favourite field just without the park; and, unfortunately, not alone; for the tall, stately figure of Mr. Hatfield was slowly sauntering by her side.

Here was a poser for me. It was my duty to interrupt the *tete-a-tete*: but how was it to be done? Mr. Hatfield could not to be driven away by so insignificant person



as I; and to go and place myself on the other side of Miss Murray, and intrude my unwelcome presence upon her without noticing her companion, was a piece of rudeness I could not be guilty of: neither had I the courage to cry aloud from the top of the field that she was wanted elsewhere. So I took the intermediate course of walking slowly but steadily towards them; resolving, if my approach failed to scare away the beau, to pass by and tell Miss Murray her mamma wanted her.

She certainly looked very charming as she strolled, lingering along under the budding horse–chestnut trees that stretched their long arms over the park–palings; with her closed book in one hand, and in the other a graceful sprig of myrtle, which served her as a very pretty plaything; her bright ringlets escaping profusely from her little bonnet, and gently stirred by the breeze, her fair cheek flushed with gratified vanity, her smiling blue eyes, now slyly glancing towards her admirer, now gazing downward at her myrtle sprig. But Snap, running before me, interrupted her in the midst of some half–pert, half–playful repartee, by catching hold of her dress and vehemently tugging thereat; till Mr. Hatfield, with his cane, administered a resounding thwack upon the animal’s skull, and sent it yelping back to me with a clamorous outcry that afforded the reverend gentleman great amusement: but seeing me so near, he thought, I suppose, he might as well be taking his departure; and, as I stooped to caress the dog, with ostentatious pity to show my disapproval of his severity, I heard him say: ‘When shall I see you again, Miss Murray?’

‘At church, I suppose,’ replied she, ‘unless your business chances to bring you here again at the precise moment when I happen to be walking by.’

‘I could always manage to have business here, if I knew precisely when and where to find you.’

‘But if I would, I could not inform you, for I am so immethodical, I never can tell to–day what I shall do to–morrow.’

‘Then give me that, meantime, to comfort me,’ said he, half jestingly and half in earnest, extending his hand for the sprig of myrtle.

‘No, indeed, I shan’t.’

‘Do! PRAY do! I shall be the most miserable of men if you don’t. You cannot be so cruel as to deny me a favour so easily granted and yet so highly prized!’ pleaded he as ardently as if his life depended on it.

By this time I stood within a very few yards of them, impatiently waiting his departure.

‘There then! take it and go,’ said Rosalie.



He joyfully received the gift, murmured something that made her blush and toss her head, but with a little laugh that showed her displeasure was entirely affected; and then with a courteous salutation withdrew.

‘Did you ever see such a man, Miss Grey?’ said she, turning to me; ‘I’m so GLAD you came! I thought I never SHOULD, get rid of him; and I was so terribly afraid of papa seeing him.’

‘Has he been with you long?’

‘No, not long, but he’s so extremely impertinent: and he’s always hanging about, pretending his business or his clerical duties require his attendance in these parts, and really watching for poor me, and pouncing upon me wherever he sees me.’

‘Well, your mamma thinks you ought not to go beyond the park or garden without some discreet, matronly person like me to accompany you, and keep off all intruders. She descried Mr. Hatfield hurrying past the park-gates, and forthwith despatched me with instructions to seek you up and to take care of you, and likewise to warn—’

‘Oh, mamma’s so tiresome! As if I couldn’t take care of myself. She bothered me before about Mr. Hatfield; and I told her she might trust me: I never should forget my rank and station for the most delightful man that ever breathed. I wish he would go down on his knees to-morrow, and implore me to be his wife, that I might just show her how mistaken she is in supposing that I could ever—Oh, it provokes me so! To think that I could be such a fool as to fall in LOVE! It is quite beneath the dignity of a woman to do such a thing. Love! I detest the word! As applied to one of our sex, I think it a perfect insult. A preference I MIGHT acknowledge; but never for one like poor Mr. Hatfield, who has not seven hundred a year to bless himself with. I like to talk to him, because he’s so clever and amusing—I wish Sir Thomas Ashby were half as nice; besides, I must have SOMEBODY to flirt with, and no one else has the sense to come here; and when we go out, mamma won’t let me flirt with anybody but Sir Thomas—if he’s there; and if he’s NOT there, I’m bound hand and foot, for fear somebody should go and make up some exaggerated story, and put it into his head that I’m engaged, or likely to be engaged, to somebody else; or, what is more probable, for fear his nasty old mother should see or hear of my ongoings, and conclude that I’m not a fit wife for her excellent son: as if the said son were not the greatest scamp in Christendom; and as if any woman of common decency were not a world too good for him.’

‘Is it really so, Miss Murray? and does your mamma know it, and yet wish you to marry him?’



‘To be sure, she does! She knows more against him than I do, I believe: she keeps it from me lest I should be discouraged; not knowing how little I care about such things. For it’s no great matter, really: he’ll be all right when he’s married, as mamma says; and reformed rakes make the best husbands, EVERYBODY knows. I only wish he were not so ugly—THAT’S all I think about: but then there’s no choice here in the country; and papa WILL NOT let us go to London—’

‘But I should think Mr. Hatfield would be far better.’

‘And so he would, if he were lord of Ashby Park—there’s not a doubt of it: but the fact is, I MUST have Ashby Park, whoever shares it with me.’

‘But Mr. Hatfield thinks you like him all this time; you don’t consider how bitterly he will be disappointed when he finds himself mistaken.’

‘NO, indeed! It will be a proper punishment for his presumption— for ever DARING to think I could like him. I should enjoy nothing so much as lifting the veil from his eyes.’

‘The sooner you do it the better then.’

‘No; I tell you, I like to amuse myself with him. Besides, he doesn’t really think I like him. I take good care of that: you don’t know how cleverly I manage. He may presume to think he can induce me to like him; for which I shall punish him as he deserves.’

‘Well, mind you don’t give too much reason for such presumption— that’s all,’ replied I.

But all my exhortations were in vain: they only made her somewhat more solicitous to disguise her wishes and her thoughts from me. She talked no more to me about the Rector; but I could see that her mind, if not her heart, was fixed upon him still, and that she was intent upon obtaining another interview: for though, in compliance with her mother’s request, I was now constituted the companion of her rambles for a time, she still persisted in wandering in the fields and lanes that lay in the nearest proximity to the road; and, whether she talked to me or read the book she carried in her hand, she kept continually pausing to look round her, or gaze up the road to see if anyone was coming; and if a horseman trotted by, I could tell by her unqualified abuse of the poor equestrian, whoever he might be, that she hated him BECAUSE he was not Mr. Hatfield.

‘Surely,’ thought I, ‘she is not so indifferent to him as she believes herself to be, or would have others to believe her; and her mother’s anxiety is not so wholly causeless as she affirms.’

Three days passed away, and he did not make his appearance. On the afternoon of the fourth, as we were walking beside the park-palings in the memorable field, each



furnished with a book (for I always took care to provide myself with something to be doing when she did not require me to talk), she suddenly interrupted my studies by exclaiming—

‘Oh, Miss Grey! do be so kind as to go and see Mark Wood, and take his wife half-a-crown from me—I should have given or sent it a week ago, but quite forgot. There!’ said she, throwing me her purse, and speaking very fast—‘Never mind getting it out now, but take the purse and give them what you like; I would go with you, but I want to finish this volume. I’ll come and meet you when I’ve done it. Be quick, will you—and—oh, wait; hadn’t you better read to him a bit? Run to the house and get some sort of a good book. Anything will do.’

I did as I was desired; but, suspecting something from her hurried manner and the suddenness of the request, I just glanced back before I quitted the field, and there was Mr. Hatfield about to enter at the gate below. By sending me to the house for a book, she had just prevented my meeting him on the road.

‘Never mind!’ thought I, ‘there’ll be no great harm done. Poor Mark will be glad of the half-crown, and perhaps of the good book too; and if the Rector does steal Miss Rosalie’s heart, it will only humble her pride a little; and if they do get married at last, it will only save her from a worse fate; and she will be quite a good enough partner for him, and he for her.’

Mark Wood was the consumptive labourer whom I mentioned before. He was now rapidly wearing away. Miss Murray, by her liberality, obtained literally the blessing of him that was ready to perish; for though the half-crown could be of very little service to him, he was glad of it for the sake of his wife and children, so soon to be widowed and fatherless. After I had sat a few minutes, and read a little for the comfort and edification of himself and his afflicted wife, I left them; but I had not proceeded fifty yards before I encountered Mr. Weston, apparently on his way to the same abode. He greeted me in his usual quiet, unaffected way, stopped to inquire about the condition of the sick man and his family, and with a sort of unconscious, brotherly disregard to ceremony took from my hand the book out of which I had been reading, turned over its pages, made a few brief but very sensible remarks, and restored it; then told me about some poor sufferer he had just been visiting, talked a little about Nancy Brown, made a few observations upon my little rough friend the terrier, that was frisking at his feet, and finally upon the beauty of the weather, and departed.

I have omitted to give a detail of his words, from a notion that they would not interest the reader as they did me, and not because I have forgotten them. No; I



remember them well; for I thought them over and over again in the course of that day and many succeeding ones, I know not how often; and recalled every intonation of his deep, clear voice, every flash of his quick, brown eye, and every gleam of his pleasant, but too transient smile. Such a confession will look very absurd, I fear: but no matter: I have written it: and they that read it will not know the writer.

While I was walking along, happy within, and pleased with all around, Miss Murray came hastening to meet me; her buoyant step, flushed cheek, and radiant smiles showing that she, too, was happy, in her own way. Running up to me, she put her arm through mine, and without waiting to recover breath, began—'Now, Miss Grey, think yourself highly honoured, for I'm come to tell you my news before I've breathed a word of it to anyone else.'

'Well, what is it?'

'Oh, SUCH news! In the first place, you must know that Mr. Hatfield came upon me just after you were gone. I was in such a way for fear papa or mamma should see him; but you know I couldn't call you back again, and so!—oh, dear! I can't tell you all about it now, for there's Matilda, I see, in the park, and I must go and open my budget to her. But, however, Hatfield was most uncommonly audacious, unspeakably complimentary, and unprecedentedly tender—tried to be so, at least—he didn't succeed very well in THAT, because it's not his vein. I'll tell you all he said another time.'

'But what did YOU say—I'm more interested in that?'

'I'll tell you that, too, at some future period. I happened to be in a very good humour just then; but, though I was complaisant and gracious enough, I took care not to compromise myself in any possible way. But, however, the conceited wretch chose to interpret my amiability of temper his own way, and at length presumed upon my indulgence so far—what do you think?—he actually made me an offer!'

'And you—'

'I proudly drew myself up, and with the greatest coolness expressed my astonishment at such an occurrence, and hoped he had seen nothing in my conduct to justify his expectations. You should have SEEN how his countenance fell! He went perfectly white in the face. I assured him that I esteemed him and all that, but could not possibly accede to his proposals; and if I did, papa and mamma could never be brought to give their consent.'

'"But if they could," said he, "would yours be wanting?"'

'"Certainly, Mr. Hatfield," I replied, with a cool decision which quelled all hope at once. Oh, if you had seen how dreadfully mortified he was—how crushed to the earth by his disappointment! really, I almost pitied him myself.'



‘One more desperate attempt, however, he made. After a silence of considerable duration, during which he struggled to be calm, and I to be grave—for I felt a strong propensity to laugh—which would have ruined all—he said, with the ghost of a smile—’But tell me plainly, Miss Murray, if I had the wealth of Sir Hugh Meltham, or the prospects of his eldest son, would you still refuse me? Answer me truly, upon your honour.’

‘’Certainly,’’ said I. ‘‘That would make no difference whatever.’’

‘It was a great lie, but he looked so confident in his own attractions still, that I determined not to leave him one stone upon another. He looked me full in the face; but I kept my countenance so well that he could not imagine I was saying anything more than the actual truth.

‘’Then it’s all over, I suppose,’’ he said, looking as if he could have died on the spot with vexation and the intensity of his despair. But he was angry as well as disappointed. There was he, suffering so unspeakably, and there was I, the pitiless cause of it all, so utterly impenetrable to all the artillery of his looks and words, so calmly cold and proud, he could not but feel some resentment; and with singular bitterness he began—’I certainly did not expect this, Miss Murray. I might say something about your past conduct, and the hopes you have led me to foster, but I forbear, on condition—’

‘’No conditions, Mr. Hatfield!’’ said I, now truly indignant at his insolence.

‘’Then let me beg it as a favour,’’ he replied, lowering his voice at once, and taking a humbler tone: ‘‘let me entreat that you will not mention this affair to anyone whatever. If you will keep silence about it, there need be no unpleasantness on either side— nothing, I mean, beyond what is quite unavoidable: for my own feelings I will endeavour to keep to myself, if I cannot annihilate them—I will try to forgive, if I cannot forget the cause of my sufferings. I will not suppose, Miss Murray, that you know how deeply you have injured me. I would not have you aware of it; but if, in addition to the injury you have already done me—pardon me, but, whether innocently or not, you HAVE done it—and if you add to it by giving publicity to this unfortunate affair, or naming it AT ALL, you will find that I too can speak, and though you scorned my love, you will hardly scorn my—’

‘He stopped, but he bit his bloodless lip, and looked so terribly fierce that I was quite frightened. However, my pride upheld me still, and I answered disdainfully; ‘‘I do not know what motive you suppose I could have for naming it to anyone, Mr. Hatfield; but if I were disposed to do so, you would not deter me by threats; and it is scarcely the part of a gentleman to attempt it.’’



“Pardon me, Miss Murray,” said he, “I have loved you so intensely—I do still adore you so deeply, that I would not willingly offend you; but though I never have loved, and never CAN love any woman as I have loved you, it is equally certain that I never was so ill-treated by any. On the contrary, I have always found your sex the kindest and most tender and obliging of God’s creation, till now.” (Think of the conceited fellow saying that!) “And the novelty and harshness of the lesson you have taught me to-day, and the bitterness of being disappointed in the only quarter on which the happiness of my life depended, must excuse any appearance of asperity. If my presence is disagreeable to you, Miss Murray,” he said (for I was looking about me to show how little I cared for him, so he thought I was tired of him, I suppose)—“if my presence is disagreeable to you, Miss Murray, you have only to promise me the favour I named, and I will relieve you at once. There are many ladies—some even in this parish—who would be delighted to accept what you have so scornfully trampled under your feet. They would be naturally inclined to hate one whose surpassing loveliness has so completely estranged my heart from them and blinded me to their attractions; and a single hint of the truth from me to one of these would be sufficient to raise such a talk against you as would seriously injure your prospects, and diminish your chance of success with any other gentleman you or your mamma might design to entangle.”

“What do you mean, sir?” said I, ready to stamp with passion.

“I mean that this affair from beginning to end appears to me like a case of arrant flirtation, to say the least of it—such a case as you would find it rather inconvenient to have blazoned through the world: especially with the additions and exaggerations of your female rivals, who would be too glad to publish the matter, if I only gave them a handle to it. But I promise you, on the faith of a gentleman, that no word or syllable that could tend to your prejudice shall ever escape my lips, provided you will—”

“Well, well, I won’t mention it,” said I. “You may rely upon my silence, if that can afford you any consolation.”

“You promise it?”

“Yes,” I answered; for I wanted to get rid of him now.

“Farewell, then!” said he, in a most doleful, heart-sick tone; and with a look where pride vainly struggled against despair, he turned and went away: longing, no doubt, to get home, that he might shut himself up in his study and cry—if he doesn’t burst into tears before he gets there.’

‘But you have broken your promise already,’ said I, truly horrified at her perfidy.

‘Oh! it’s only to you; I know you won’t repeat it.’



‘Certainly, I shall not: but you say you are going to tell your sister; and she will tell your brothers when they come home, and Brown immediately, if you do not tell her yourself; and Brown will blazon it, or be the means of blazoning it, throughout the country.’

‘No, indeed, she won’t. We shall not tell her at all, unless it be under the promise of the strictest secrecy.’

‘But how can you expect her to keep her promises better than her more enlightened mistress?’

‘Well, well, she shan’t hear it then,’ said Miss Murray, somewhat snappishly.

‘But you will tell your mamma, of course,’ pursued I; ‘and she will tell your papa.’

‘Of course I shall tell mamma—that is the very thing that pleases me so much. I shall now be able to convince her how mistaken she was in her fears about me.’

‘Oh, THAT’S it, is it? I was wondering what it was that delighted you so much.’

‘Yes; and another thing is, that I’ve humbled Mr. Hatfield so charmingly; and another—why, you must allow me some share of female vanity: I don’t pretend to be without that most essential attribute of our sex—and if you had seen poor Hatfield’s intense eagerness in making his ardent declaration and his flattering proposal, and his agony of mind, that no effort of pride could conceal, on being refused, you would have allowed I had some cause to be gratified.’

‘The greater his agony, I should think, the less your cause for gratification.’

‘Oh, nonsense!’ cried the young lady, shaking herself with vexation. ‘You either can’t understand me, or you won’t. If I had not confidence in your magnanimity, I should think you envied me. But you will, perhaps, comprehend this cause of pleasure—which is as great as any—namely, that I am delighted with myself for my prudence, my self-command, my heartlessness, if you please. I was not a bit taken by surprise, not a bit confused, or awkward, or foolish; I just acted and spoke as I ought to have done, and was completely my own mistress throughout. And here was a man, decidedly good-looking—Jane and Susan Green call him bewitchingly handsome I suppose they’re two of the ladies he pretends would be so glad to have him; but, however, he was certainly a very clever, witty, agreeable companion—not what you call clever, but just enough to make him entertaining; and a man one needn’t be ashamed of anywhere, and would not soon grow tired of; and to confess the truth, I rather liked him—better even, of late, than Harry Meltham—and he evidently idolised me; and yet, though he came upon me all alone and unprepared, I had the wisdom, and



the pride, and the strength to refuse him—and so scornfully and coolly as I did: I have good reason to be proud of that.’

‘And are you equally proud of having told him that his having the wealth of Sir Hugh Meltham would make no difference to you, when that was not the case; and of having promised to tell no one of his misadventure, apparently without the slightest intention of keeping your promise?’

‘Of course! what else could I do? You would not have had me—but I see, Miss Grey, you’re not in a good temper. Here’s Matilda; I’ll see what she and mamma have to say about it.’

She left me, offended at my want of sympathy, and thinking, no doubt, that I envied her. I did not—at least, I firmly believed I did not. I was sorry for her; I was amazed, disgusted at her heartless vanity; I wondered why so much beauty should be given to those who made so bad a use of it, and denied to some who would make it a benefit to both themselves and others.

But, God knows best, I concluded. There are, I suppose, some men as vain, as selfish, and as heartless as she is, and, perhaps, such women may be useful to punish them.

