

Agnes Grey

Anne Brontë

Chapter 20: The Farewell

A house in A—, the fashionable watering-place, was hired for our seminary; and a promise of two or three pupils was obtained to commence with. I returned to Horton Lodge about the middle of July, leaving my mother to conclude the bargain for the house, to obtain more pupils, to sell off the furniture of our old abode, and to fit out the new one.

We often pity the poor, because they have no leisure to mourn their departed relatives, and necessity obliges them to labour through their severest afflictions: but is not active employment the best remedy for overwhelming sorrow—the surest antidote for despair? It may be a rough comforter: it may seem hard to be harassed with the cares of life when we have no relish for its enjoyments; to be goaded to labour when the heart is ready to break, and the vexed spirit implores for rest only to weep in silence: but is not labour better than the rest we covet? and are not those petty, tormenting cares less hurtful than a continual brooding over the great affliction that oppresses us? Besides, we cannot have cares, and anxieties, and toil, without hope—if it be but the hope of fulfilling our joyless task, accomplishing some needful project, or escaping some further annoyance. At any rate, I was glad my mother had so much employment for every faculty of her action-loving frame. Our kind neighbours lamented that she, once so exalted in wealth and station, should be reduced to such extremity in her time of sorrow; but I am persuaded that she would have suffered thrice as much had she been left in affluence, with liberty to remain in that house, the scene of her early happiness and late affliction, and no stern necessity to prevent her from incessantly brooding over and lamenting her bereavement.

I will not dilate upon the feelings with which I left the old house, the well-known garden, the little village church—then doubly dear to me, because my father, who, for thirty years, had taught and prayed within its walls, lay slumbering now beneath its flags—and the old bare hills, delightful in their very desolation, with the



narrow vales between, smiling in green wood and sparkling water—the house where I was born, the scene of all my early associations, the place where throughout life my earthly affections had been centred;—and left them to return no more! True, I was going back to Horton Lodge, where, amid many evils, one source of pleasure yet remained: but it was pleasure mingled with excessive pain; and my stay, alas! was limited to six weeks. And even of that precious time, day after day slipped by and I did not see him: except at church, I never saw him for a fortnight after my return. It seemed a long time to me: and, as I was often out with my rambling pupil, of course hopes would keep rising, and disappointments would ensue; and then, I would say to my own heart, ‘Here is a convincing proof—if you would but have the sense to see it, or the candour to acknowledge it—that he does not care for you. If he only thought HALF as much about you as you do about him, he would have contrived to meet you many times ere this: you must know that, by consulting your own feelings. Therefore, have done with this nonsense: you have no ground for hope: dismiss, at once, these hurtful thoughts and foolish wishes from your mind, and turn to your own duty, and the dull blank life that lies before you. You might have known such happiness was not for you.’

But I saw him at last. He came suddenly upon me as I was crossing a field in returning from a visit to Nancy Brown, which I had taken the opportunity of paying while Matilda Murray was riding her matchless mare. He must have heard of the heavy loss I had sustained: he expressed no sympathy, offered no condolence: but almost the first words he uttered were,—‘How is your mother?’ And this was no matter-of-course question, for I never told him that I had a mother: he must have learned the fact from others, if he knew it at all; and, besides, there was sincere goodwill, and even deep, touching, unobtrusive sympathy in the tone and manner of the inquiry. I thanked him with due civility, and told him she was as well as could be expected. ‘What will she do?’ was the next question. Many would have deemed it an impertinent one, and given an evasive reply; but such an idea never entered my head, and I gave a brief but plain statement of my mother’s plans and prospects.

‘Then you will leave this place shortly?’ said he.

‘Yes, in a month.’

He paused a minute, as if in thought. When he spoke again, I hoped it would be to express his concern at my departure; but it was only to say,—‘I should think you will be willing enough to go?’

‘Yes—for some things,’ I replied.



‘For SOME things only—I wonder what should make you regret it?’

I was annoyed at this in some degree; because it embarrassed me: I had only one reason for regretting it; and that was a profound secret, which he had no business to trouble me about.

‘Why,’ said I—‘why should you suppose that I dislike the place?’

‘You told me so yourself,’ was the decisive reply. ‘You said, at least, that you could not live contentedly, without a friend; and that you had no friend here, and no possibility of making one—and, besides, I know you MUST dislike it.’

‘But if you remember rightly, I said, or meant to say, I could not live contentedly without a friend in the world: I was not so unreasonable as to require one always near me. I think I could be happy in a house full of enemies, if—’ but no; that sentence must not be continued—I paused, and hastily added,—‘And, besides, we cannot well leave a place where we have lived for two or three years, without some feeling of regret.’

‘Will you regret to part with Miss Murray, your sole remaining pupil and companion?’

‘I dare say I shall in some degree: it was not without sorrow I parted with her sister.’

‘I can imagine that.’

‘Well, Miss Matilda is quite as good—better in one respect.’

‘What is that?’

‘She’s honest.’

‘And the other is not?’

‘I should not call her DIShonest; but it must be confessed she’s a little artful.’

‘ARTFUL is she?—I saw she was giddy and vain—and now,’ he added, after a pause, ‘I can well believe she was artful too; but so excessively so as to assume an aspect of extreme simplicity and unguarded openness. Yes,’ continued he, musingly, ‘that accounts for some little things that puzzled me a trifle before.’

After that, he turned the conversation to more general subjects. He did not leave me till we had nearly reached the park-gates: he had certainly stepped a little out of his way to accompany me so far, for he now went back and disappeared down Moss Lane, the entrance of which we had passed some time before. Assuredly I did not regret this circumstance: if sorrow had any place in my heart, it was that he was gone at last—that he was no longer walking by my side, and that that short interval of delightful intercourse was at an end. He had not breathed a word of love, or dropped



one hint of tenderness or affection, and yet I had been supremely happy. To be near him, to hear him talk as he did talk, and to feel that he thought me worthy to be so spoken to—capable of understanding and duly appreciating such discourse—was enough.

‘Yes, Edward Weston, I could indeed be happy in a house full of enemies, if I had but one friend, who truly, deeply, and faithfully loved me; and if that friend were you—though we might be far apart—seldom to hear from each other, still more seldom to meet— though toil, and trouble, and vexation might surround me, still—it would be too much happiness for me to dream of! Yet who can tell,’ said I within myself, as I proceeded up the park,—’who can tell what this one month may bring forth? I have lived nearly three-and-twenty years, and I have suffered much, and tasted little pleasure yet; is it likely my life all through will be so clouded? Is it not possible that God may hear my prayers, disperse these gloomy shadows, and grant me some beams of heaven’s sunshine yet? Will He entirely deny to me those blessings which are so freely given to others, who neither ask them nor acknowledge them when received? May I not still hope and trust? I did hope and trust for a while: but, alas, alas! the time ebbed away: one week followed another, and, excepting one distant glimpse and two transient meetings—during which scarcely anything was said—while I was walking with Miss Matilda, I saw nothing of him: except, of course, at church.

And now, the last Sunday was come, and the last service. I was often on the point of melting into tears during the sermon—the last I was to hear from him: the best I should hear from anyone, I was well assured. It was over—the congregation were departing; and I must follow. I had then seen him, and heard his voice, too, probably for the last time. In the churchyard, Matilda was pounced upon by the two Misses Green. They had many inquiries to make about her sister, and I know not what besides. I only wished they would have done, that we might hasten back to Horton Lodge: I longed to seek the retirement of my own room, or some sequestered nook in the grounds, that I might deliver myself up to my feelings—to weep my last farewell, and lament my false hopes and vain delusions. Only this once, and then adieu to fruitless dreaming— thenceforth, only sober, solid, sad reality should occupy my mind. But while I thus resolved, a low voice close beside me said—’I suppose you are going this week, Miss Grey?’ ‘Yes,’ I replied. I was very much startled; and had I been at all hysterically inclined, I certainly should have committed myself in some way then. Thank God, I was not.



‘Well,’ said Mr. Weston, ‘I want to bid you good-bye—it is not likely I shall see you again before you go.’

‘Good-bye, Mr. Weston,’ I said. Oh, how I struggled to say it calmly! I gave him my hand. He retained it a few seconds in his.

‘It is possible we may meet again,’ said he; ‘will it be of any consequence to you whether we do or not?’

‘Yes, I should be very glad to see you again.’

I COULD say no less. He kindly pressed my hand, and went. Now, I was happy again—though more inclined to burst into tears than ever. If I had been forced to speak at that moment, a succession of sobs would have inevitably ensued; and as it was, I could not keep the water out of my eyes. I walked along with Miss Murray, turning aside my face, and neglecting to notice several successive remarks, till she bawled out that I was either deaf or stupid; and then (having recovered my self-possession), as one awakened from a fit of abstraction, I suddenly looked up and asked what she had been saying.

