

Agnes Grey

Anne Brontë

Chapter 24: The Sands

Our school was not situated in the heart of the town: on entering A— from the north-west there is a row of respectable-looking houses, on each side of the broad, white road, with narrow slips of garden-ground before them, Venetian blinds to the windows, and a flight of steps leading to each trim, brass-handled door. In one of the largest of these habitations dwelt my mother and I, with such young ladies as our friends and the public chose to commit to our charge. Consequently, we were a considerable distance from the sea, and divided from it by a labyrinth of streets and houses. But the sea was my delight; and I would often gladly pierce the town to obtain the pleasure of a walk beside it, whether with the pupils, or alone with my mother during the vacations. It was delightful to me at all times and seasons, but especially in the wild commotion of a rough sea-breeze, and in the brilliant freshness of a summer morning.

I awoke early on the third morning after my return from Ashby Park—the sun was shining through the blind, and I thought how pleasant it would be to pass through the quiet town and take a solitary ramble on the sands while half the world was in bed. I was not long in forming the resolution, nor slow to act upon it. Of course I would not disturb my mother, so I stole noiselessly downstairs, and quietly unfastened the door. I was dressed and out, when the church clock struck a quarter to six. There was a feeling of freshness and vigour in the very streets; and when I got free of the town, when my foot was on the sands and my face towards the broad, bright bay, no language can describe the effect of the deep, clear azure of the sky and ocean, the bright morning sunshine on the semicircular barrier of craggy cliffs surmounted by green swelling hills, and on the smooth, wide sands, and the low rocks out at sea—looking, with their clothing of weeds and moss, like little grass-grown islands—and above all, on the brilliant, sparkling waves. And then, the unspeakable purity—and freshness of the air! There was just enough heat to enhance



the value of the breeze, and just enough wind to keep the whole sea in motion, to make the waves come bounding to the shore, foaming and sparkling, as if wild with glee. Nothing else was stirring—no living creature was visible besides myself. My footsteps were the first to press the firm, unbroken sands;—nothing before had trampled them since last night's flowing tide had obliterated the deepest marks of yesterday, and left them fair and even, except where the subsiding water had left behind it the traces of dimpled pools and little running streams.

Refreshed, delighted, invigorated, I walked along, forgetting all my cares, feeling as if I had wings to my feet, and could go at least forty miles without fatigue, and experiencing a sense of exhilaration to which I had been an entire stranger since the days of early youth. About half-past six, however, the grooms began to come down to air their masters' horses—first one, and then another, till there were some dozen horses and five or six riders: but that need not trouble me, for they would not come as far as the low rocks which I was now approaching. When I had reached these, and walked over the moist, slippery sea-weed (at the risk of floundering into one of the numerous pools of clear, salt water that lay between them), to a little mossy promontory with the sea splashing round it, I looked back again to see who next was stirring. Still, there were only the early grooms with their horses, and one gentleman with a little dark speck of a dog running before him, and one water-cart coming out of the town to get water for the baths. In another minute or two, the distant bathing machines would begin to move, and then the elderly gentlemen of regular habits and sober quaker ladies would be coming to take their salutary morning walks. But however interesting such a scene might be, I could not wait to witness it, for the sun and the sea so dazzled my eyes in that direction, that I could but afford one glance; and then I turned again to delight myself with the sight and the sound of the sea, dashing against my promontory—with no prodigious force, for the swell was broken by the tangled sea-weed and the unseen rocks beneath; otherwise I should soon have been deluged with spray. But the tide was coming in; the water was rising; the gulfs and lakes were filling; the straits were widening: it was time to seek some safer footing; so I walked, skipped, and stumbled back to the smooth, wide sands, and resolved to proceed to a certain bold projection in the cliffs, and then return.

Presently, I heard a snuffling sound behind me and then a dog came frisking and wriggling to my feet. It was my own Snap—the little dark, wire-haired terrier! When I spoke his name, he leapt up in my face and yelled for joy. Almost as much delighted as himself, I caught the little creature in my arms, and kissed him repeatedly. But



how came he to be there? He could not have dropped from the sky, or come all that way alone: it must be either his master, the rat-catcher, or somebody else that had brought him; so, repressing my extravagant caresses, and endeavouring to repress his likewise, I looked round, and beheld—Mr. Weston!

‘Your dog remembers you well, Miss Grey,’ said he, warmly grasping the hand I offered him without clearly knowing what I was about. ‘You rise early.’

‘Not often so early as this,’ I replied, with amazing composure, considering all the circumstances of the case.

‘How far do you purpose to extend your walk?’

‘I was thinking of returning—it must be almost time, I think.’

He consulted his watch—a gold one now—and told me it was only five minutes past seven.

‘But, doubtless, you have had a long enough walk,’ said he, turning towards the town, to which I now proceeded leisurely to retrace my steps; and he walked beside me.

‘In what part of the town do you live?’ asked he. ‘I never could discover.’

Never could discover? Had he endeavoured to do so then? I told him the place of our abode. He asked how we prospered in our affairs. I told him we were doing very well—that we had had a considerable addition to our pupils after the Christmas vacation, and expected a still further increase at the close of this.

‘You must be an accomplished instructor,’ he observed.

‘No, it is my mother,’ I replied; ‘she manages things so well, and is so active, and clever, and kind.’

‘I should like to know your mother. Will you introduce me to her some time, if I call?’

‘Yes, willingly.’

‘And will you allow me the privilege of an old friend, of looking in upon you now and then?’

‘Yes, if—I suppose so.’

This was a very foolish answer, but the truth was, I considered that I had no right to invite anyone to my mother’s house without her knowledge; and if I had said, ‘Yes, if my mother does not object,’ it would appear as if by his question I understood more than was expected; so, SUPPOSING she would not, I added, ‘I suppose so:’ but of course I should have said something more sensible and more polite, if I had had my wits about me. We continued our walk for a minute in silence; which, however,



was shortly relieved (no small relief to me) by Mr. Weston commenting upon the brightness of the morning and the beauty of the bay, and then upon the advantages A— possessed over many other fashionable places of resort.

‘You don’t ask what brings me to A— ‘ said he. ‘You can’t suppose I’m rich enough to come for my own pleasure.’

‘I heard you had left Horton.’

‘You didn’t hear, then, that I had got the living of F—?’

F— was a village about two miles distant from A—.

‘No,’ said I; ‘we live so completely out of the world, even here, that news seldom reaches me through any quarter; except through the medium of the—Gazette. But I hope you like your new parish; and that I may congratulate you on the acquisition?’

‘I expect to like my parish better a year or two hence, when I have worked certain reforms I have set my heart upon—or, at least, progressed some steps towards such an achievement. But you may congratulate me now; for I find it very agreeable to HAVE a parish all to myself, with nobody to interfere with me—to thwart my plans or cripple my exertions: and besides, I have a respectable house in a rather pleasant neighbourhood, and three hundred pounds a year; and, in fact, I have nothing but solitude to complain of, and nothing but a companion to wish for.’

He looked at me as he concluded: and the flash of his dark eyes seemed to set my face on fire; greatly to my own discomfiture, for to evince confusion at such a juncture was intolerable. I made an effort, therefore, to remedy the evil, and disclaim all personal application of the remark by a hasty, ill—expressed reply, to the effect that, if he waited till he was well known in the neighbourhood, he might have numerous opportunities for supplying his want among the residents of F— and its vicinity, or the visitors of A—, if he required so ample a choice: not considering the compliment implied by such an assertion, till his answer made me aware of it.

‘I am not so presumptuous as to believe that,’ said he, ‘though you tell it me; but if it were so, I am rather particular in my notions of a companion for life, and perhaps I might not find one to suit me among the ladies you mention.’

‘If you require perfection, you never will.’

‘I do not—I have no right to require it, as being so far from perfect myself.’

Here the conversation was interrupted by a water—cart lumbering past us, for we were now come to the busy part of the sands; and, for the next eight or ten minutes, between carts and horses, and asses, and men, there was little room for social intercourse, till we had turned our backs upon the sea, and begun to ascend



the precipitous road leading into the town. Here my companion offered me his arm, which I accepted, though not with the intention of using it as a support.

‘You don’t often come on to the sands, I think,’ said he, ‘for I have walked there many times, both morning and evening, since I came, and never seen you till now; and several times, in passing through the town, too, I have looked about for your school—but I did not think of the—Road; and once or twice I made inquiries, but without obtaining the requisite information.’

When we had surmounted the acclivity, I was about to withdraw my arm from his, but by a slight tightening of the elbow was tacitly informed that such was not his will, and accordingly desisted. Discoursing on different subjects, we entered the town, and passed through several streets. I saw that he was going out of his way to accompany me, notwithstanding the long walk that was yet before him; and, fearing that he might be inconveniencing himself from motives of politeness, I observed—‘I fear I am taking you out of your way, Mr. Weston—I believe the road to F— lies quite in another direction.’

‘I’ll leave you at the end of the next street,’ said he.

‘And when will you come to see mamma?’

‘To-morrow—God willing.’

The end of the next street was nearly the conclusion of my journey. He stopped there, however, bid me good-morning, and called Snap, who seemed a little doubtful whether to follow his old mistress or his new master, but trotted away upon being summoned by the latter.

‘I won’t offer to restore him to you, Miss Grey,’ said Mr. Weston, smiling, ‘because I like him.’

‘Oh, I don’t want him,’ replied I, ‘now that he has a good master; I’m quite satisfied.’

‘You take it for granted that I am a good one, then?’

The man and the dog departed, and I returned home, full of gratitude to heaven for so much bliss, and praying that my hopes might not again be crushed.

