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雪莉的故事
(三)

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《SHIRLEY - A TALE》

By Charlotte Bront?

(三)

Chapter 16 Whitsuntide

The fund prospered. By dint of Miss Keeldars example, the three Rectors vigorous exertions, and the efficient though quiet aid of their spinster and spectacled lieutenants, Mary Ann Ainley and Margaret Hall, a handsome sum was raised; and this, being judiciously managed, served for the present greatly to alleviate the distress of the unemployed poor. The neighbourhood seemed to grow calmer; for a fortnight past no cloth had been destroyed, no outrage on mill or mansion had been committed in the three parishes. Shirley was sanguine that the evil she wished to avert was almost escaped; that the threatened storm was passing over; with the approach of summer she felt certain that trade would improveit always did; and then this weary war could not last for ever: peace must return one day; with peace what an impulse would be given to commerce!

Such was the usual tenor of her observations to her

tenant, Grard Moore, whenever she met him where they could converse, and Moore would listen very quietlytoo quietly to satisfy her. She would then by her impatient glance demand something more from himsome explanation, or at least some additional remark. Smiling in his way, with that expression which gave a remarkable cast of sweetness to his mouth, while his brow remained grave, he would answer to the effect that himself, too, trusted in the finite nature of the war; that it was, indeed, on that ground the anchor of his hopes was fixed; thereon his speculations depended.

For you are aware, he would continue, that I now work Hollows Mill entirely on speculation: I sell nothing; there is no market for my goods. I manufacture for a future day; I make myself ready to take advantage of the first opening that shall occur. Three months ago this was impossible to me; I had exhausted both credit and capital; you well know who came to my rescue; from what hand I received the loan which saved me. It is on the strength of that loan I am enabled to continue the bold game which, a while since, I feared I should never play more. Total ruin I know will follow loss, and I am

aware that gain is doubtful; but I am quite cheerful: so long as I can be active, so long as I can strive, so long, in short, as my hands are not tied, it is impossible for me to be depressed. One year, nay, but six months of the reign of the olive, and I am safe; for, as you say, peace will give an impulse to commerce. In this you are right; but as to the restored tranquillity of the neighbourhoodas to the permanent good effect of your charitable fundI doubt. Eleemosynary relief never yet tranquillized the working-classesit never made them grateful; it is not in human nature that it should. I suppose, were all things ordered aright, they ought not to be in a position to need that humiliating relief; and this they feel; we should feel it were we so placed. Besides, to whom should they be grateful? To youto the clergy, perhaps, but not to us mill-owners. They hate us worse than ever. Then, the disaffected here are in correspondence with the disaffected elsewhere; Nottingham is one of their head-quarters, Manchester another, and Birmingham a third. The subalterns receive orders from their chiefs: they are in a good state of discipline: no blow is struck without mature deliberation. In sultry weather, you have seen the

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sky threaten thunder day by day, and yet night after night the clouds have cleared, and the sun has set quietly; but the danger was not gone, it was only delayed; the long-threatening storm is sure to break at last. There is analogy between the moral and physical atmosphere.

Well, Mr. Moore (so these conferences always ended), take care of yourself. If you think that I have ever done you any good, reward me by promising to take care of yourself.

I do. I will take close and watchful care. I wish to live, not to die. The future opens like Eden before me. And still, when I look deep into the shades of my paradise, I see a vision that I like better than seraph or cherub glide across remote vistas.

Do you? Pray, what vision?

I see

The maid came bustling in with the tea-things.

The early part of that May, as we have seen, was fine, the middle was wet; but in the last week, at change of moon, it cleared again. A fresh wind swept off the silver-white, deep-piled rain-clouds, bearing them, mass on mass, to the eastern horizon, on whose verge they

dwindled, and behind whose rim they disappeared, leaving the vault behind all pure blue space, ready for the reign of the summer sun. That sun rose broad on Whitsuntide. The gathering of the schools was signalized by splendid weather.

Whit-Tuesday was the great day, in preparation for which the two large schoolrooms of Briarfield, built by the present Rector, chiefly at his own expense, were cleaned out, whitewashed, re-painted, and decorated with flowers and evergreenssome from the Rectory garden, two cartloads from Fieldhead, and a wheel-barrowful from the more stingy domain of De Walden, the residence of Mr. Wynne. In these schoolrooms twenty tables, each calculated to accommodate twenty guests, were laid out, surrounded with benches, and covered with white cloths. Above them were suspended at least some twenty cages containing as many canaries, according to a fancy of the district, specially cherished by Mr. Helstones clerk, who delighted in the piercing song of these birds, and knew that amidst confusion of tongues they always carolled loudest. These tables, be it understood, were not spread for the twelve hundred

scholars to be assembled from the three parishes, but only for the patrons and teachers of the schoolsthe childrens feast was to be spread in the open air. At one oclock the troops were to come in; at two they were to be marshalled; till four they were to parade the parish; then came the feast, and afterwards the meeting, with music and speechifying, in the church.

Why Briarfield was chosen for the point of rendezvousthe scene of the fteshould be explained. It was not because it was the largest or most populous parishWhinbury far outdid it in that respectnor because it was the oldest, antique as were the hoary church and Rectory, Nunnelys low-roofed temple and mossy Parsonage, buried both in coeval oaksoutstanding sentinels of Nunnwoodwere older still: it was simply because Mr. Helstone willed it so, and Mr. Helstones will was stronger than that of Boultby or Hall. The former could not, the latter would not, dispute a point of precedence with their resolute and imperious brother: they let him lead and rule.

This notable anniversary had always hitherto been a trying day to Caroline Helstone, because it dragged

her perforce into public, compelling her to face all that was wealthy, respectable, influential in the neighbourhood, in whose presence, but for the kind countenance of Mr. Hall, she would have appeared unsupported. Obliged to be conspicuous, obliged to walk at the head of her regiment as the Rectors niece and first teacher of the first class; obliged to make tea at the first table for a mixed multitude of ladies and gentlemen, and to do all this without the countenance of mother, aunt, or other chaperonshe, meantime, being a nervous person, who mortally feared publicityit will be comprehended that, under these circumstances, she trembled at the approach of Whitsuntide.

But this year Shirley was to be with her, and that changed the aspect of the trial singularlyit changed it utterly: it was a trial no longer, it was almost an enjoyment. Miss Keeldar was better in her single self than a host of ordinary friends. Quite self-possessed, and always spirited and easy, conscious of her social importance, yet never presuming upon it, it would be enough to give one courage only to look at her. The only fear was lest the heiress should not be punctual to tryst:

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she often had a careless way of lingering behind time, and Caroline knew her uncle would not wait a second for anyone. At the moment of the church clock tolling two, the bells would clash out and the march begin. She must look after Shirley, then, in this matter, or her expected companion would fail her.

Whit-Tuesday saw her rise almost with the sun. She, Fanny, and Eliza were busy the whole morning arranging the Rectory parlours in first-rate company order, and setting out a collation of cooling refreshmentswine, fruit, cakeson the dining-room side-board. Then she had to dress in her freshest and fairest attire of white muslin; the perfect fineness of the day and the solemnity of the occasion warranted, and even exacted, such costume. Her new sasha birthday present from Margaret Hall, which she had reason to believe Cyril himself had bought, and in return for which she had indeed given him a set of cambric bands in a handsome casewas tied by the dexterous fingers of Fanny, who took no little pleasure in arraying her fair young mistress for the occasion; her simple bonnet had been trimmed to correspond with her sash: her pretty but

inexpensive scarf of white crape suited her dress. When ready, she formed a picture, not bright enough to dazzle, but fair enough to interest; not brilliantly striking, but very delicately pleasinga picture in which sweetness of tint, purity of air, and grace of mien, atoned for the absence of rich colouring and magnificent contour. What her brown eye and clear forehead showed of her mind was in keeping with her dress and facemodest, gentle, and, though pensive, harmonious. It appeared that neither lamb nor dove need fear her, but would welcome, rather, in her look of simplicity and softness, a sympathy with their own natures, or with the natures we ascribe to them.

After all, she was an imperfect, faulty human being, fair enough of form, hue, and array; but, as Cyril Hall said, neither so good nor so great as the withered Miss Ainley, now putting on her best black gown and Quaker-drab shawl and bonnet in her own narrow cottage-chamber.

Away Caroline went, across some very sequestered fields and through some quite hidden lanes, to Field-head. She glided quickly under the green hedges and

across the greener leas. There was no dust, no moisture, to soil the hem of her stainless garment, or to damp her slender sandalafter the late rains all was clean, and under the present glowing sun all was dry. She walked fearlessly, then, on daisy and turf and through thick plantations; she reached Fieldhead and penetrated to Miss Keeldars dressing-room. It was well she had come, or Shirley would have been too late. Instead of making ready with all speed, she lay stretched on a couch, absorbed in reading. Mrs. Pryor stood near, vainly urging her to rise and dress. Caroline wasted no words; she immediately took the book from her, and with her own hands commenced the business of disrobing and re-robing her. Shirley, indolent with the heat, and gay with her youth and pleasurable nature, wanted to talk, laugh, and linger; but Caroline, intent on being in time, persevered in dressing her as fast as fingers could fasten strings or insert pins. At length, as she united a final row of hooks and eyes, she found leisure to chide her, saying she was very naughty to be so unpunctual; that she looked even now the picture of incorrigible carelessness. And so Shirley did, but a very lovely picture of that

tiresome quality.

She presented quite a contrast to Caroline: there was style in every fold of her dress and every line of her figure; the rich silk suited her better than a simpler costume; the deep embroidered scarf became her; she wore it negligently, but gracefully; the wreath on her bonnet crowned her well; the attention to fashion, the tasteful appliance of ornament in each portion of her dress, were quite in place with her; all this suited her, like the frank light in her eyes, the rallying smile about her lips, like her shaft-straight carriage and lightsome step. Caroline took her hand when she was dressed, hurried her downstairs, out of doors, and thus they sped through the fields, laughing as they went, and looking very much like a snow-white dove and gem-tinted bird-of-paradise joined in social flight.

Thanks to Miss Helstones promptitude, they arrived in good time. While yet trees hid the church, they heard the bell tolling a measured but urgent summons for all to assemble; the trooping in of numbers, the trampling of many steps, and murmuring of many voices were likewise audible. From a rising ground they

presently saw, on the Whinbury road, the Whinbury school approaching; it numbered five hundred souls. The Rector and curate, Boultby and Donne, headed it, the former, looming large in full canonicals, walking, as became a beneficed priest, under the canopy of a shovel-hat, with the dignity of an ample corporation, the embellishment of the squarest and vastest of black coats, and the support of the stoutest of gold-headed canes. As the Doctor walked, he now and then slightly flourished his cane, and inclined his shovel-hat with a dogmatical wag towards his aide-de-camp. That aide-de-campDonne, to witnarrow as the line of his shape was compared to the broad bulk of his principal, contrived, notwithstanding, to look every inch a curate: all about him was pragmatical and self-complacent, from his turned-up nose and elevated chin to his clerical black gaiters, his somewhat short, strapless trousers, and his square-toed shoes.

Walk on, Mr. Donne! You have undergone scrutiny. You think you look wellwhether the white and purple figures watching you from yonder hill think so, is another question.

These figures come running down when the regiment has marched by; the churchyard is full of children and teachers, all in their very best holiday attire, and, distressed as is the district, bad as are the times, it is wonderful to see how respectablyhow handsomely eventhey have contrived to clothe themselves. That British love of decency will work miracles; the poverty which reduces an Irish girl to rags is impotent to rob the English girl of the neat wardrobe she knows necessary to her self-respect. Besides, the lady of the manorthat Shirley, now gazing with pleasure on this well-dressed and happy-looking crowdhas really done them good; her seasonable bounty consoled many a poor family against the coming holiday, and supplied many a child with a new frock or bonnet for the occasion; she knows it, and is elate with the consciousness: glad that her money, example, and influence have reallysubstantiallybenefited those around her. She cannot be charitable like Miss Ainleyit is not in her nature; it relieves her to feel that there is another way of being charitable, practicable for other characters, and under other circumstances.

Caroline, too, is pleased; for she also has done

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