

MACMILLAN READERS

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UPPER LEVEL

ANNE BRONTË

# Agnes Grey

Retold by Helen Holwill

 **MACMILLAN**

## The Grey Family

My father, Richard Grey, was a vicar in the north of England, who was respected by everybody who knew him. He lived quite well on a small salary and had a pleasant<sup>12</sup> little house of his own. My mother was the daughter of a rich landowner<sup>13</sup> and she married my father against the wishes of her friends and family. If she became the poor vicar's wife, they told her, she would have to give up her carriage, her lady's maid<sup>14</sup> and the chance to live in a large, beautiful house. A carriage and a maid were certainly nice things to have; but luckily my mother had feet to carry her and hands to dress herself. And a large, beautiful house would be pleasant, but she would rather live in a cottage with Richard Grey than in a palace with any other man in the world.

Her father told her that she could marry the vicar if she wanted to, but that if she did, she would lose her fortune<sup>15</sup>. However, my mother was a strong woman who knew what she wanted. So the couple got married and my mother's fortune was given to her sister. Despite these difficulties and their simple life, I believe that you could search the whole of England and not find a couple who were happier than they were.

My mother gave birth to six children, but my sister Mary and I were the only two that survived<sup>16</sup> the dangers of early childhood. I was six years younger than Mary, so I was always a little spoilt because I was the 'baby' of the family. We lived a very protected life and my sister and I did not go to school. Instead, our mother, who was hardworking and very well educated, taught us at home. Sometimes we went to a tea party at a nearby house or visited our father's parents and other elderly family members. Mostly, however, we heard about the world through the stories our mother told us about her younger days and of carriages, parties

and big elegant<sup>17</sup> houses. While these stories entertained us, they often made me secretly wish that I could see more of the world.

My mother seemed very happy and told her husband that she had everything that she needed in life. However, my father worried that his wife had given up too much in order to<sup>p</sup> marry him. As a result he was always thinking about how he could make more money.

One day, a kind friend suggested<sup>18</sup> to him a way of making a lot of money within just a few weeks. This friend was a merchant, a man who made money by buying and selling goods. If my father lent him some money, he said, he would make them both rich. My father took the chance and gave the man all the money he had. The friendly merchant used the money to buy goods and then arranged for them to be sent abroad on ships to be sold.

My father was excited and so were we all. We were going to be rich! We spent happy hours by the fire talking about what we would do, where we would travel and what we would buy with the money that would surely soon arrive.

The weeks passed but then the terrible news came. The ship, which contained the goods and therefore our fortune, had been caught in a terrible storm. It had sunk to the bottom of the sea along with the goods it carried and the unlucky merchant himself.

I was young and did not understand how serious this loss<sup>19</sup> was, but I could see how it had upset<sup>20</sup> my parents and this worried me. My mother concentrated on taking care of what little money we still had, and on cheering up my father<sup>21</sup>. He, on the other hand, lost all hope and became desperate<sup>22</sup>. He believed that this recent poor decision had made his wife's life even worse. Over time he became ill with the worry of it all and none of us could give him any hope.

We had a pony – a little horse – but we had to sell it. We stopped buying new clothes and we used everything we had as carefully as we possibly could. My father dismissed one of our two servants<sup>23</sup> and my mother and sister began to help with the

cooking. I offered to help, too, but although I thought of myself as a young woman, I was still a child in the eyes of my family. My mother would send me away, saying, 'No, Agnes, there's nothing here you can do. It's much easier for me to do it myself. Go and help your sister.'

Then I would go to my sister and say, 'Mary, Mother says that I should help you.'

To which Mary used to reply, 'No, you are too young to help me, sweet Agnes. Go and play the piano, or play with the cat.'

During this difficult time I never once heard my mother complain. When the summer came, though, she and Mary talked about ways in which they could make a little more money. They wanted to give Father a much-needed holiday by the sea.

'I wish I could do something,' I said one day.

'You, Agnes!' they both cried.

'Yes, I've had an idea ...,' I began nervously.

'Really?' said my mother. 'Tell us what it is.'

'I would like to be a governess,' I replied quietly.

My mother said nothing and Mary, who had been holding a book, dropped it in surprise and cried, 'You, Agnes? *You* want to be a governess?'

'Well, yes. I don't think it's such a strange idea. Surely I could teach little children ... and I think I would enjoy it ... I like children,' I explained. 'Please let me, Mother!'

'My child,' said my mother kindly, 'You have not learnt to take care of *yourself* yet. Young children need someone who is experienced to look after them.'

'But I am eighteen now,' I told her, 'and I can take care of myself, and others too. You do not know how capable<sup>24</sup> I am, because I haven't had a chance to try. Just let me try, that is all I ask of you.'

At that moment my father came into the room and heard about my idea. He agreed that I was not ready to become a governess and gently<sup>25</sup> said that I was too young to leave home.

The subject was not mentioned again, but I could think of nothing else. How wonderful it would be to be a governess! To go out into the world; to start a new life; to make my own decisions; to earn my own money, and give some help to my family; to show them what 'little' Agnes could do. I felt sure that I would be a good governess. Three or four days later I mentioned the idea again to my mother. With some difficulty, I persuaded<sup>26</sup> her to speak to my father. It was not long before my father and sister had warmed to<sup>27</sup> the idea and my mother began to look for a job for me. After a few weeks I was offered the job of taking care of the young family of Mrs Bloomfield, who was a friend of one of our distant<sup>28</sup> family members. The salary was only twenty-five pounds a year and my parents advised me not to take the job. However, I had no other job offers and because I was young and wanted to work, I happily accepted the offer.

Several weeks of preparation followed and I could not wait to start my new job. Finally, September came and my new clothes had been made and my bags had been packed. I had taken my last walk with Mary, I had sung my last song to my father and I had said goodbye to the little cat. When it was time to go to bed and I saw my empty cupboards, I suddenly felt nervous and wondered if I had made the right decision.

But in the morning I felt excited again. I washed, dressed, ate breakfast and kissed my family goodbye. I climbed up into the small, open carriage and waved to my mother and sister as the carriage began to move away down the hill. Then, and not before then, I burst into tears<sup>29</sup>.