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Jane Eyre

CHARLOTTE BRONTË

6

OXFORD BOOKWORMS



Part One – A child at Gateshead

1



The red room



We could not go for a walk that afternoon. There was such a freezing cold wind, and such heavy rain, that we all stayed indoors. I was glad of it. I never liked long walks, especially in winter. I used to hate coming home when it was almost dark, with ice-cold fingers and toes, feeling miserable because Bessie, the nursemaid, was always scolding me. All the time I knew I was different from my cousins, Eliza, John and Georgiana Reed. They were taller and stronger than me, and they were loved.

These three usually spent their time crying and quarrelling, but today they were sitting quietly around their mother in the sitting-room. I wanted to join the family circle, but Mrs Reed, my aunt, refused. Bessie had complained about me.

‘No, I’m sorry, Jane. Until I hear from Bessie, or see for myself, that you are really trying to behave better, you cannot be treated as a good, happy child, like *my* children.’

‘What does Bessie say I have done?’ I asked.

‘Jane, it is not polite to question me in that way. If you cannot speak pleasantly, be quiet.’

I crept out of the sitting-room and into the small room next door, where I chose a book full of pictures from the bookcase. I climbed on to the window-seat and drew the curtains, so that I was completely hidden. I sat there for a while. Sometimes I looked out of the window at the grey November afternoon, and saw the rain pouring down on the leafless garden. But most of the time I studied the book and stared, fascinated, at the pictures. Lost in the world of imagination, I forgot my sad, lonely existence for a while, and

was happy. I was only afraid that my secret hiding-place might be discovered.

Suddenly the door of the room opened. John Reed rushed in.

‘Where are you, rat?’ he shouted. He did not see me behind the curtain. ‘Eliza! Georgy! Jane isn’t here! Tell Mamma she’s run out into the rain – what a bad animal she is!’

‘How lucky I drew the curtain,’ I thought. He would never have found me, because he was not very intelligent. But Eliza guessed at once where I was.

‘She’s in the window-seat, John,’ she called from the sitting-room. So I came out immediately, as I did not want him to pull me out.

‘What do you want?’ I asked him.

‘Say, “What do you want, *Master Reed*”,’ he answered, sitting in an armchair. ‘I want you to come here.’

John Reed was fourteen and I was only ten. He was large and rather fat. He usually ate too much at meals, which made him ill. He should have been at boarding school, but his mother, who loved him very much, had brought him home for a month or two, because she thought his health was delicate.

John did not love his mother or his sisters, and he hated me. He bullied and punished me, not two or three times a week, not once or twice a day, but all the time. My whole body trembled when he came near. Sometimes he hit me, sometimes he just threatened me, and I lived in terrible fear of him. I had no idea how to stop him. The servants did not want to offend their young master, and Mrs Reed could see no fault in her dear boy.

So I obeyed John’s order and approached his armchair, thinking how very ugly his face was. Perhaps he understood what I was thinking, for he hit me hard on the face.

‘That is for your rudeness to Mamma just now,’ he said, ‘and for your wickedness in hiding, and for looking at me like that, you rat!’

I was so used to his bullying that I never thought of hitting him back.

‘What were you doing behind that curtain?’ he asked.

‘I was reading,’ I answered.

‘Show me the book.’ I gave it to him.

‘You have no right to take our books,’ he continued. ‘You have no money and your father left you none. You ought to beg in the streets, not live here in comfort with a gentleman’s family. Anyway, all these books are mine, and so is the whole house, or will be in a few years’ time. I’ll teach you not to borrow my books again.’ He lifted the heavy book and threw it hard at me.

It hit me and I fell, cutting my head on the door. I was in great pain, and suddenly for the first time in my life, I forgot my fear of John Reed.

‘You wicked, cruel boy!’ I cried. ‘You are a bully! You are as bad as a murderer!’

‘What! What!’ he cried. ‘Did she say that to me? Did you hear, Eliza and Georgiana? I’ll tell Mamma, but first . . .’

He rushed to attack me, but now he was fighting with a desperate girl. I really saw him as a wicked murderer. I felt the blood running down my face, and the pain gave me strength. I fought back as hard as I could. My resistance surprised him, and he shouted for help. His sisters ran for Mrs Reed, who called her maid, Miss Abbott, and Bessie. They pulled us apart and I heard them say, ‘What a wicked girl! She attacked Master John!’

Mrs Reed said calmly, ‘Take her away to the red room and lock her in there.’ And so I was carried upstairs, arms waving and legs kicking.

As soon as we arrived in the red room, I became quiet again, and the two servants both started scolding me.

‘Really, Miss Eyre,’ said Miss Abbott, ‘how could you hit him? He’s your young master!’

‘How can he be my master? I am not a servant!’ I cried.

‘No, Miss Eyre, you are less than a servant, because you do not work,’ replied Miss Abbott. They both looked at me as if they strongly disapproved of me.

‘You should remember, miss,’ said Bessie, ‘that your aunt pays for your food and clothes, and you should be grateful. You have no other relations or friends.’

All my short life I had been told this, and I had no answer to it. I stayed silent, listening to these painful reminders.

‘And if you are angry and rude, Mrs Reed may send you away,’ added Bessie.

‘Anyway,’ said Miss Abbott, ‘God will punish you, Jane Eyre, for your wicked heart. Pray to God, and say you’re sorry.’ They left the room, locking the door carefully behind them.

The red room was a cold, silent room, hardly ever used, although it was one of the largest bedrooms in the house. Nine years ago my uncle, Mr Reed, had died in this room, and since then nobody had wanted to sleep in it.

Now that I was alone I thought bitterly of the people I lived with. John Reed, his sisters, his mother, the servants – they all accused me, scolded me, hated me. Why could I never please them? Eliza was selfish, but was respected. Georgiana had a bad temper, but she was popular with everybody because she was beautiful. John was rude, cruel and violent, but nobody punished him. I tried to make no mistakes, but they called me naughty every moment of the day. Now that I had turned against John to protect myself, everybody blamed me.

And so I spent that whole long afternoon in the red room asking myself why I had to suffer and why life was so unfair. Perhaps I would run away, or starve myself to death.

Gradually it became dark outside. The rain was still beating on the windows, and I could hear the wind in the trees. Now I was no longer angry, and I began to think the Reeds might be right. Perhaps

I *was* wicked. Did I deserve to die, and be buried in the churchyard like my uncle Reed? I could not remember him, but knew he was my mother's brother, who had taken me to his house when my parents both died. On his death bed he had made his wife, aunt Reed, promise to look after me like her own children. I supposed she now regretted her promise.

A strange idea came to me. I felt sure that if Mr Reed had lived he would have treated me kindly, and now, as I looked round at the dark furniture and the walls in shadow, I began to fear that his ghost might come back to punish his wife for not keeping her promise. He might rise from the grave in the churchyard and appear in this room! I was so frightened by this thought that I hardly dared to breathe. Suddenly in the darkness I saw a light moving on the ceiling. It may have been from a lamp outside, but in my nervous state I did not think of that. I felt sure it must be a ghost, a visitor from another world. My head was hot, my heart beat fast. Was that the sound of wings in my ears? Was that something moving near me? Screaming wildly, I rushed to the door and shook it. Miss Abbott and Bessie came running to open it.

'Miss Eyre, are you ill?' asked Bessie.

'Take me out of here!' I screamed.

'Why? What's the matter?' she asked.

'I saw a light, and I thought it was a ghost,' I cried, holding tightly on to Bessie's hand.

'She's not even hurt,' said Miss Abbott in disgust. 'She screamed just to bring us here. I know all her little tricks.'

'What is all this?' demanded an angry voice. Mrs Reed appeared at the door of the room. 'Abbott and Bessie, I think I told you to leave Jane Eyre in this room till I came.'

'She screamed so loudly, ma'am,' said Bessie softly.

'Let go of her hands, Bessie,' was Mrs Reed's only answer. 'Jane Eyre, you need not think you can succeed in getting out of the room

like this. Your naughty tricks will not work with me. You will stay here an hour longer as a punishment for trying to deceive us.'

'Oh aunt, please forgive me! I can't bear it! I shall die if you keep me here . . .' I screamed and kicked as she held me.

'Silence! Control yourself!' She pushed me, resisting wildly, back into the red room and locked me in. There I was in the darkness again, with the silence and the ghosts. I must have fainted. I cannot remember anything more.

2



Leaving Gateshead



I woke up to find the doctor lifting me very carefully into my own bed. It was good to be back in my familiar bedroom, with a warm fire and candle-light. It was also a great relief to recognize Dr Lloyd, who Mrs Reed called in for her servants (she always called a specialist for herself and the children). He was looking after me so kindly. I felt he would protect me from Mrs Reed. He talked to me a little, then gave Bessie orders to take good care of me. When he left, I felt very lonely again.

But I was surprised to find that Bessie did not scold me at all. In fact she was so kind to me that I became brave enough to ask a question.

'Bessie, what's happened? Am I ill?'

'Yes, you became ill in the red room, but you'll get better, don't worry, Miss Jane,' she answered. Then she went next door to fetch another servant. I could hear her whispers.

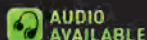
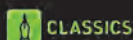
'Sarah, come in here and sleep with me and that poor child tonight. I daren't stay alone with her, she might die. She was so ill last night! Do you think she saw a ghost? Mrs Reed was too hard

Jane Eyre



Jane Eyre is alone in the world. Disliked by her aunt's family, she is sent away to school. Here she learns that a young girl, with neither money nor family to support her, can expect little from the world. She survives, but she wants more from life than simply to survive: she wants respect, and love. When she goes to work for Mr Rochester, she hopes she has found both at once. But the sound of strange laughter, late at night, behind a locked door, warns her that her troubles are only beginning.

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