

CHAPTER ELEVEN

York, two months later, June-July 1845

Anne drifted in and out of obliging Emily's desire to spend most of the journey pretending to be Gondal princes and princesses fleeing the palaces of instructions to join the Royalists.

Emily's unexpected enthusiasm for traveling didn't waver. Either she didn't notice Anne's mood or, in order to buoy her, was hoping to avoid any acknowledgment of what had brought her sister's spirits so low. Anne felt and appreciated it must be the latter, not convinced she was still tactful enough to spare others the disillusion verging on depression her final months at Thorpe Green had left her with.

The trip should have been effortlessly exciting for both of them. Other than asking Anne where she thought they should stay and what the essential attractions were, Emily took the initiative of planning their schedule and booking their travel and accommodations. They would arrive early evening to a meal and room at The George, and on Tuesday, after breakfast, spend at least an hour, maybe two, in the Minster, followed by shopping, snacking and as much sightseeing as time and Anne's stamina would allow. York was one of three destinations for a summer getaway first thought of at the beginning of the year. This visit would be the first real holiday Anne ever had there, with the chance to occupy herself as only she—and Emily—pleased, although not the best place to avoid thinking about the Robinsons.

Anne was bothered by so many things these days, least of all the train jolting and choking them most of the way from Leeds, a worse journey than riding the omnibuses from Keighley and Bradford. Even along the roughest stretches, Emily furthered the exploits of Ronald Macalgin, Henry Angora, Juliet Augusteena, Rosabella Esmalden, and Julian Egremont out loud and on paper, undeterred by the compartment's side door rattling as though any moment it would fly open. There was just a slight setback, when, at one screeching stop between scheduled ones, Anne's little case tumbled off the wire shelf above her head and knocked the notebook out of Emily's lap.

"We're coming into York station. Yes. We're passing through the archway," Anne announced less than fifteen minutes later.

"To be continued." Emily looked towards the window to see where they were outside of her imagination that, as Anne could tell from her sister's childlike expression, hadn't let her get away entirely.

Their room at The George was one Anne had occupied before. Once the Misses Robinsons were considered old enough, their governess' accommodation was away from theirs. At the top and back of the establishment, it provided a savings to their parents in shillings if not embarrassment due to complaints of the girls talking and giggling long into the night. Number fourteen was small and simple without a view of the Minster, but the cathedral's bells could be heard throughout the city.

Anne pushed up the sash window, leaning out a little to hear the skillful change-ringing.

"Don't jump!" Emily caught her round the waist, laughing even before Anne did. "Now if you were Branwell ..."

Anne withdrew from the open air and any amusement to sit on the bed that would fit two slim sisters who took comfort in each other's breath and touch. Emily had said the wrong thing, yet Anne didn't expect—want—her to apologize. They must never be sorry for being open to each other. Who else was there to be safely intimate with?

Emily picked up the small cases dropped just inside the door and took them over to the wardrobe, placing them inside and shutting it. She glanced and quickly turned away from its long mirror, only needing to take one step to prop her hands on the bed's bottom headboard. "Perhaps it's not as bad as you think."

"Oh, it is."

"Then you haven't told me everything."

Over dinner Anne said more than she ever had about the impropriety seen, gossip heard, and humiliation felt, which might not be everything but enough for Emily to understand the seriousness of the situation. Especially since their brother had supposedly returned to Thorpe Green even though he was no longer wanted there.

"You think he was already dismissed?" Emily stopped eating and pushed away her plate with what was left of a slice of soggy cottage pie. She continued to sip on a small glass of wine.

"I'm fairly sure of it. Miss Marshall saw Branwell and Mrs. Robinson together in dangerous ways. Also, she overheard Mrs. and Mr. Robinson discussing whether they should pay our brother through July to be rid of him."

"And keep him silent? They don't know our Branny."

Anne nodded, glancing around The George's dining room, at its blue and gold décor, unlit fireplace, low-hanging chandeliers, fringed rugs, and others diners who were also still in dusty street clothes and, no doubt, sleeping in the highest and tiniest backrooms of the hotel. They were the type of people the Robinsons ate later to avoid. Some of them noticed Anne staring. She silently admonished her own rudeness.

"I'm worried, Em." Anne put her hand out to her sister's left arm. "They can't have welcomed him back."

"So where is he?"

"Hopefully, he didn't go to Thorpe Green, but to find other employment before he has to tell Father he needs to."

"Too farsighted for Branny. If in Halifax, he's with Leyland and bemoaning how hard it is to be sensitive and artistic, drinking and drugging because of how he's been wronged. If gone to Grundy, thinking he can be reinstated with the railway, he's deluding himself even more."

"Are we finished?" The waitress was there to collect their dishes.

Anne's reply was demonstrated by her knife and fork neatly aligned across her half-empty plate.

"Summat wrong with food?" The dark-frocked, white aproned and capped young woman specifically asked Emily.

"Not if it was supposed to be undercooked."

"Em," Anne scolded softly.

Emily pointed to the sweet trolley another waitress had rolled over to another table. "I see cake."

"Sponge layered with raspberry cream. Or chocolate with coconut icing. Or—"

"Not for me." Anne immediately thought of how they had already agreed not to have dessert so they could indulge themselves at the confectioners the following day. Her expression must have said it all.

Emily slumped. "I forgot."

"Well?" the waitress began to clear their table.

"My little sister knows best."

Anne waited for their server to walk away. "Hardly, Em. If I did, I would never have stayed five years with the Robinsons."

“Well, at least Branny has given you an out.”

“Not the way I wished it to end. I kept thinking the situation would right itself. There was nothing for it but to flee my failure.”

“Your failure? What are you talking about? You’ve had letters from the girls every week since you left. Such is their devotion to you, the best person they’ll ever know.”

Anne wasn’t sure if she felt responsible for Elizabeth and Mary becoming heartfelt and hopeful young women, or for leading them on. “They have such challenges ahead.” She expected Emily to mock her pity for any Robinson.

“I wouldn’t change places with them.”

“I suspect not with anyone, Em.”

Emily leant back, noticing the serviette she had earlier spread on her lap was on the floor. She retrieved it. “I might wish I was you when I meet my maker.”

As they left the dining room, Emily noted it was only a quarter to six with hours of daylight left, Anne ineffectively resisting her sister’s suggestion they take a walk. Arm in arm they stepped outside of the hotel, hardly at risk of being the only ones at leisure on Coney Street. As they turned onto Stonegate, the heavy foot traffic was more diverse, unhurried and enquiring, fingers pointing this way and that and quite often at the window displays of the shops now closed. Most surprising were the numerous examples of children out with their parents at that hour, in a few cases accompanied by governesses who, too young and too old, reminded Anne of the trials she might have to take on again. In contrast, a number of strolling sweethearts, some probably honeymooners, even showing her what she would never do, seemed right for that bright summer’s evening.

Anne followed Emily’s lead and walked wide of a well-dressed man watching them pass the Olde Starre Inn. Her sister exhibited no qualms putting a coin in the cup of a blind beggar sitting under the printer’s red devil.

Anne nodded to another pair of women who might be sisters or close friends or both, distracting them from their guide’s monotonous delivery of facts and directions so they missed the rest of their party turning into one of the many ginnels between buildings.

“Through there.” Anne saw their panic, forgiving their lack of appreciation, her understanding almost rewarded when at the last moment before disappearing they looked back and limply waved.

“You may’ve just spoiled their escape.” Emily tilted her head onto Anne’s shoulder to let her know she was teasing. “How far shall we go? You look, as Tabby would say, fair knackered.”

Anne was tired, but needed a view of salvation. “Since we’ve come this far, a few steps more.”

Emily insisted they stop at the next corner, not to contradict her sister, but to look up at the blue-robed and helmeted statue, sitting with a pile of books and an owl, between the High Petergate and Minster Gates street signs.

“The girls liked her, too. More than the learning and wisdom she represents.”

“Never mind them, Annie. She smiles on us. Do you think she knows?”

Anne’s interest had already shifted from Minerva to the Minster, as expectantly as she remembered it rising with a creamy glow to calm and even silence the confusion of what had led to it. Its massive construction moved upward, pointing and peaking, lancet windows directing every gaze to its stunning south side gable with its famous rose created by stone mullions, tracery, and stained glass.

It wasn’t her intention to go into the Minster until the following day. She couldn’t have succumbed to the impulse of that alluring moment if she wanted to, the doors still unlocked only for earlier visitors to leave, a placard outside announcing its closure.

Anne wasn’t sure how her sister’s first sight of the Minster affected her. Emily silently and loosely folded her hands like she did at church when she didn’t want anyone to know whether she was praying or not. They quickly walked back to The George, wrapped around each other, feeling cold with just their summer shawls and because they were overtired and at such liberty away from home.

In their room Anne offered but Emily took the jug down to reception for some warm water. Washed and changed, they climbed into bed and discussed their writing, not for the first time the novels they had begun, and, surprisingly for Anne, Emily admitting she had been copying a number of poems into a separate journal from her Gondal ones. They also talked about what they would do the next day and agreed not to visit Scarborough that trip, because the Robinsons were there.

“I have a feeling Branny went back to Thorpe Green.”

“You do?” Anne was glad to feel the warmth of Emily’s body. “If so, perhaps at the invitation of Dr. Crosby.”

“His shooting chum at Great Ouseburn?” Emily often remembered conversations it seemed at the time she wasn’t listening to.

“Yes. Perhaps he’ll talk some sense into him.”

“No one can do that, Annie. Not even you.” Emily gently pulled her sister’s neat bedtime braid. “As I’m assuming you tried.”

The chill of a drafty hotel room and the early morning were soon countered by a walk between Botham and Monk Bars along the city wall from which there were excellent views of the Minster’s north side with its tree rich Deanery Park and octagonal chapter house. Anne was slowly warmed and quickly wearied, while Emily had the long lean legs, constitution, and naiveté of a marching soldier who had not yet experienced battle.

It wasn’t that Emily ignored Anne’s struggle to keep up, but, similar to when she roamed the wilds around Haworth, she couldn’t hold back her instinctively animal nature any more than Keeper or Flossy, not even for the one she loved best.

It didn’t help that Emily had a long list in her head of all she wanted to do in a day that was in danger of ending too soon to leave enough time to collect their bags from The George and get to the railway station for an early evening train back to Leeds. At the very least their adventure must include the Shambles and its tributaries, Newgate Market, the Assembly Rooms, York Castle and Dungeon, cause one frivolous purchase each, and fulfil the promise of a meal more sweet than savory. Anne was glad her skeptical sister allowed the Minster to be their first necessity. The choir area often closed at noon. Also, because the morning had been open-skied it was likely clouds would roll in by the afternoon; the Minster’s interior was even more magnificent when the sun shone.

They made their way to the entrance off Precentor’s Court. It rose up to the graceful “Heart of Yorkshire” and even higher in the symmetry of the pinnacled towers framing it that were, as Anne had seen on many a carriage approach, the cathedral’s declaration of dominance in the city skyline. She identified the religious stories in the arch above the doorway, while Emily grimaced back at the grotesque creatures looking down on all who noticed their immovable presence. The crowding, smells and noise of the medieval maze of narrow streets nearby might have been a hundred miles away as they stepped into the Minster’s west transept and found relief in a spaciousness no number of visitors could diminish. They inhaled burning wax and incense and

even the dampness of limestone and oak wood, while hearing organ music, whispers and sighs. Their sights lifted and expanded, the grayness of granite broken by flashes of gold, the purity of marble, candles, and, through the stories windows told, light that floated like dust and shone like diamonds.

Anne didn't assume Emily was experiencing the Minster as she was, but she couldn't imagine anyone visiting there without their steps and eyes wandering reverently. Even children respected its solemnity, refraining from running or shouting as would be tempting in any other structure with such long echoing corridors and soaring ceilings, although, as Anne remembered and reconsidered, being on their best behavior might not have been voluntary. It wasn't her choice to walk the whole of the Nave without her customary sitting for a while, hardly able to keep track of Emily weaving around its north aisle's vaulted columns. They came together at the crossing to the Quire, the large decorative pipes of the main organ gleaming and moaning melodically above its arched passage into the cathedral's east wing. Anne was relieved the section was open to her need to rest and contemplate. Before they went in, Emily insisted they name the sculpted English kings lined up asymmetrically on the screen without reading the inscriptions, proving she was a master of royal genealogy, at least from William the Conqueror to Henry V. Eventually they joined the hushed investigations of the Sanctuary's choir, a lofty pulpit their father would have longed to preach from, the high altar, chapels, and biblical proportions and narratives of the largest stained glass window in the world, as someone finally spoke for all to hear.

Emily still wanted to go to the top of the central tower. Having done it once with Elizabeth and Mary, Anne knew if she did climb its two hundred and seventy-five steps she would make herself ill for the rest of the day and longer.

They agreed to meet in front of the Quire, Anne reserving her breathlessness for the power of prayer while Emily exercised her need to view York and its surrounding countryside.

"Like a hawk pushing the limits of how high it can fly."

While Emily had her say about the experience, especially the thrill of its narrow, dingy, windy, spiraling ascent and descent, Anne was more interested in the interior view of the south transept's Rose Window as mid-morning inspired it to blossom.

They walked in the opposite direction, overhearing other visitors bemoaning the closure of the Chapter House for a meeting of Canons. That inconvenience gave Anne and Emily more time to view the massive Five Sisters window comprised of side by side lanceted sections:

independent although conjoined, sturdy as lead and fragile as glass, dark and complicated with jewel-like flashes of brilliance.

Anne thought she heard Emily gasp.