

Jane Eyre
A cutting from chapter 26
By Charlotte Bronte

We entered the quiet and humble temple; the priest waited in his white surplice at the lowly altar. All was still; two shadows only moved in a remote corner. The service began. The explanation of the intent of matrimony was gone through; and then the clergyman went on:

“I require and charge you both, that if either of you know any impediment why ye may not lawfully be joined together in matrimony, ye do now confess it.”

He paused, as the custom is. And the clergyman was proceeding; his hand was already stretched towards MR. Rochester, when a distinct and near voice said –

“The marriage cannot go on: I declare the existence of an impediment.”

The clergyman looked up at the speaker and stood mute; Mr. Rochester moved slightly, as if an earthquake had rolled under his feet: taking a firmer footing, he said, “Proceed.”

“I cannot proceed without some investigation into what has been asserted, and evidence of its truth or falsehood.”

“The ceremony is quite broken off. I am in a condition to prove my allegation: an insuperable impediment to this marriage exists.”

Mr. Rochester heard, but heeded not: he stood stubborn and rigid, making no movement but to possess himself of my hand.

“What is the nature of the impediment? Perhaps it may be got over – explained away?”

“Hardly. It simply consists in the existence of a previous marriage. Mr. Rochester has a wife now living.”

I looked at Mr. Rochester; I made him look at me. His whole face was colorless rock; his eye was both spark and flint. Without speaking, without smiling, without seeming to recognize in me a human being, he only twined my waist with his arm and riveted me to his side.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Briggs, a solicitor of London.”

“And you would thrust on me a wife?”

“I would remind you of your lady’s existence, sir, which the law recognizes, if you do not.”

“Favor me with an account of her – with her name, her parentage, her place of abode.”

“Certainly. ‘I affirm and can prove that on the 20th October, fifteen years ago, Edward Fairfax Rochester, of Thornfield Hall, England, was married to my sister, Bertha Antoinetta Mason, daughter of Jonas Mason, at Spanish Town, Jamaica. The record of the marriage will be found in the register of that church – a copy of it is now in my possession. Signed Richard Mason.’”

“That – if a genuine document – may prove I have been married, but it does not prove that the woman mentioned therein as my wife is still living.”

“She was living three months ago.”

“How do you know?”

“I have a witness to the fact, whose testimony even you, sir, will scarcely controvert.”

“Produce him.”

“I will. Mr. Mason, have the goodness to step forward.”

The second stranger now drew near – it was Mason himself. Mr. Rochester turned and glared at him.

“What have *you* to say?”

An inaudible reply escaped Mason’s white lips.

“The devil is in it if you cannot answer distinctly. I again demand what have you to say?”

“Sir – sir, do not forget you are in a sacred place. Are you aware, sir, whether or not this gentleman’s wife is still living?”

“She is now at Thornfield Hall. I saw her there last April. I am her brother.”

“At Thornfield Hall! Impossible! I am an old resident in this neighborhood, sir, and I never heard of a Mrs. Rochester at Thornfield Hall.”

“No! I took care that none should hear of it! Enough! Wood, close your book, and take off your surplice; there will be no wedding today. I have been married, and the woman to whom I was married lives! Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother was both a madwoman and a drunkard! – as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before. But I owe you no further explanation. Briggs, Wood, Mason, I invite you all to come up to the house and visit Mrs. Poole’s patient, and *my wife!* This girl,” he continued, looking at me, “knew no more than you, Wood, of the disgusting secret: she thought all was fair and legal, and never dreamt she was going to be entrapped into a feigned union with a degraded wretch, already bound to a bad, mad and embruted partner! Come all of you – follow!”

Still holding me fast, he left the church: the three gentlemen came after. At the front door of the hall we found the carriage.

“Take it back to the coach-house, John. It will not be wanted today.”

At our entrance Mrs. Fairfax, Adel, Sophie and Leah advanced to meet and greet us.

“To the right about – every soul! Away with you congratulations! Who wants them? Not I – they are fifteen years too late!”

He passed on and ascended the stairs, still holding my hand, and still beckoning the gentlemen to follow him. He lifted the hangings from the wall, uncovering the second door: this, too, he opened. IN a room without a window, there burnt a fire. Grace Poole bent over the fire, apparently cooking something. In the deep shad, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell.

“Good morrow, Mrs. Pool! How are you? An how is your charge today?”

“Ah! Sir, she sees you!” exclaimed Grace. “You’d better not stay.”

“Only a few moments, Grace: you must allow me a few moments.”

“Take care, then, sir! – take care!”

The maniac bellowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage, and gazed wildly at her visitors. The three gentlemen retreated simultaneously. Mr. Rochester flung me behind him: the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek: they struggled. At last, he mastered her arms; Grace Poole gave him a cord, and he pinioned them behind her: with more rope, which was at hand, he bound her to a chair.

“That is *my wife!* And this is what I wished to have – this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon. Look at the difference!

Then judge me, and remember with what judgment ye judge ye shall be judged! Off with you now. I must shut up my prize!”

We all withdrew. Without waiting to take leave of Mr. Rochester, they made their exit at the hall door. The house cleared, I shut myself in, and proceeded mechanically to take off the wedding dress, and replace it by the stuff gown I had worn yesterday.

Jane Eyre, who had been an ardent, expectant woman – almost bride – was a cold, solitary girl again. I looked on my cherished wishes, yesterday so blooming and glowing; they lay stark, chill. I looked at my love: that feeling which was my master’s – which he had created; it shivered in my heart. It could not seek Mr. Rochester’s arms. Oh, never more could it turn to him; for faith was blighted – confidence destroyed! Mr. Rochester was not to me what he had been. I would not say he had betrayed me; but the attribute of stainless truth was gone from his idea, and from his presence I must go. That bitter hour cannot be described: in truth, “The waters came into my soul. The floods overflowed me.”

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