

The Life of Charlotte Bronte

by

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PART I

Chapter 1

The Leeds and Skipton railway runs along a deep valley of the Aire; a slow and sluggish stream, compared to the neighbouring river of Wharfe. Keighley station is on this line of railway, about a quarter of a mile from the town of the same name. The number of inhabitants and the importance of Keighley have been very greatly increased during the last twenty years, owing to the rapidly extended market for worsted manufactures, a branch of industry that mainly employs the factory population of this part of Yorkshire, which has Bradford for its centre and metropolis.

Keighley is in process of transformation from a populous, old-fashioned village, into a still more populous and flourishing town. It is evident to the stranger, that as the gable-ended houses, which obtrude themselves corner-wise on the widening street, fall vacant, they are pulled down to allow of greater space for traffic, and a more modern style of architecture. The quaint and narrow shop-windows of fifty years ago, are giving way to large panes and plate-glass. Nearly every dwelling seems devoted to some branch of commerce. In passing hastily through the town, one hardly perceives where the necessary lawyer and doctor can live, so little appearance is there of any dwellings of the professional middle-class, such as abound in our old cathedral towns. In fact, nothing can be more opposed than the state of society, the modes of thinking, the standards of reference on all points of morality, manners, and even politics and religion, in such a new manufacturing place as Keighley in the north, and any stately, sleepy, picturesque cathedral town in the south. Yet the aspect of Keighley promises well for future stateliness, if not picturesqueness. Grey stone abounds; and the rows of houses built of it have a kind of solid grandeur connected with their uniform and enduring lines. The frame-work of the doors, and the lintels of the windows, even in the smallest dwellings, are made of blocks of stone. There is no painted wood to require continual beautifying, or else present a shabby aspect; and the stone is kept scrupulously clean by the notable Yorkshire housewives. Such glimpses into the interior as a passer-by obtains, reveal a rough abundance of the means of living, and diligent and active habits in the women. But the voices of the people are hard, and their tones discordant, promising little of the musical taste that distinguishes the district, and which has already furnished a Carrodus to the musical world. The names over the shops (of which the one just given is a sample) seem strange even to an inhabitant of the neighbouring county, and have a peculiar smack and flavour of the place.

The town of Keighley never quite melts into country on the road to Haworth, although the houses become more sparse as the traveller journeys upwards to the grey round hills that seem to bound his journey in a westerly direction. First come some villas; just sufficiently retired from the road to show that they can scarcely belong to any one liable

to be summoned in a hurry, at the call of suffering or danger, from his comfortable fire-side; the lawyer, the doctor, and the clergyman, live at hand, and hardly in the suburbs, with a screen of shrubs for concealment.

In a town one does not look for vivid colouring; what there may be of this is furnished by the wares in the shops, not by foliage or atmospheric effects; but in the country some brilliancy and vividness seems to be instinctively expected, and there is consequently a slight feeling of disappointment at the grey neutral tint of every object, near or far off, on the way from Keighley to Haworth. The distance is about four miles; and, as I have said, what with villas, great worsted factories, rows of workmen's houses, with here and there an old-fashioned farmhouse and outbuildings, it can hardly be called "country" any part of the way. For two miles the road passes over tolerably level ground, distant hills on the left, a "beck" flowing through meadows on the right, and furnishing water power, at certain points, to the factories built on its banks. The air is dim and lightless with the smoke from all these habitations and places of business. The soil in the valley (or "bottom," to use the local term) is rich; but, as the road begins to ascend, the vegetation becomes poorer; it does not flourish, it merely exists; and, instead of trees, there are only bushes and shrubs about the dwellings. Stone dykes are everywhere used in place of hedges; and what crops there are, on the patches of arable land, consist of pale, hungry-looking, grey green oats. Right before the traveller on this road rises Haworth village; he can see it for two miles before he arrives, for it is situated on the side of a pretty steep hill, with a back-ground of dun and purple moors, rising and sweeping away yet higher than the church, which is built at the very summit of the long narrow street. All round the horizon there is this same line of sinuous wave-like hills; the scoops into which they fall only revealing other hills beyond, of similar colour and shape, crowned with wild, bleak moors--grand, from the ideas of solitude and loneliness which they suggest, or oppressive from the feeling which they give of being pent-up by some monotonous and illimitable barrier, according to the mood of mind in which the spectator may be.

For a short distance the road appears to turn away from Haworth, as it winds round the base of the shoulder of a hill; but then it crosses a bridge over the "beck," and the ascent through the village begins. The flag-stones with which it is paved are placed end-ways, in order to give a better hold to the horses' feet; and, even with this help, they seem to be in constant danger of slipping backwards. The old stone houses are high compared to the width of the street, which makes an abrupt turn before reaching the more level ground at the head of the village, so that the steep aspect of the place, in one part, is almost like that of a wall. But this surmounted, the church lies a little off the main road on the left; a hundred yards, or so, and the driver relaxes his care, and the horse breathes more easily, as they pass into the quite little by-street that leads to Haworth Parsonage. The churchyard is on one side of this lane, the school-house and the sexton's dwelling (where the curates formerly lodged) on the other.

The parsonage stands at right angles to the road, facing down upon the church; so that, in fact, parsonage, church, and belfried school-house, form three sides of an irregular oblong, of which the fourth is open to the fields and moors that lie beyond. The area of this oblong is filled up by a crowded churchyard, and a small garden or court in front of

the clergyman's house. As the entrance to this from the road is at the side, the path goes round the corner into the little plot of ground. Underneath the windows is a narrow flower-border, carefully tended in days of yore, although only the most hardy plants could be made to grow there. Within the stone wall, which keeps out the surrounding churchyard, are bushes of elder and lilac; the rest of the ground is occupied by a square grass-plot and a gravel walk. The house is of grey stone, two stories high, heavily roofed with flags, in order to resist the winds that might strip off a lighter covering. It appears to have been built about a hundred years ago, and to consist of four rooms on each story; the two windows on the right (as the visitor stands with his back to the church, ready to enter in at the front door) belonging to Mr. Bronte's study, the two on the left to the family sitting-room. Everything about the place tells of the most dainty order, the most exquisite cleanliness. The door-steps are spotless; the small old-fashioned window-panes glitter like looking-glass. Inside and outside of that house cleanliness goes up into its essence, purity.

The little church lies, as I mentioned, above most of the houses in the village; and the graveyard rises above the church, and is terribly full of upright tombstones. The chapel or church claims greater antiquity than any other in that part of the kingdom; but there is no appearance of this in the external aspect of the present edifice, unless it be in the two eastern windows, which remain unmodernized, and in the lower part of the steeple. Inside, the character of the pillars shows that they were constructed before the reign of Henry VII. It is probable that there existed on this ground, a "field-kirk," or oratory, in the earliest times; and, from the Archbishop's registry at York, it is ascertained that there was a chapel at Haworth in 1317. The inhabitants refer inquirers concerning the date to the following inscription on a stone in the church tower:-

"Hic fecit Caenobium Monachorum Auteste fundator. A. D. sexcentissimo."

That is to say, before the preaching of Christianity in Northumbria. Whitaker says that this mistake originated in the illiterate copying out, by some modern stone-cutter, of an inscription in the character of Henry the Eighth's time on an adjoining stone:-

"Orate pro bono statu Eutest Tod."

"Now every antiquary knows that the formula of prayer 'bono statu' always refers to the living. I suspect this singular Christian name has been mistaken by the stone-cutter for Austet, a contraction of Eustatius, but the word Tod, which has been mis-read for the Arabic figures 600, is perfectly fair and legible. On the presumption of this foolish claim to antiquity, the people would needs set up for independence, and contest the right of the Vicar of Bradford to nominate a curate at Haworth."

I have given this extract, in order to explain the imaginary groundwork of a commotion which took place in Haworth about five and thirty years ago, to which I shall have occasion to allude again more particularly.

The interior of the church is commonplace; it is neither old enough nor modern enough to compel notice. The pews are of black oak, with high divisions; and the names of those to whom they belong are painted in white letters on the doors. There are neither brasses, nor altar-tombs, nor monuments, but there is a mural tablet on the right-hand side of the communion-table, bearing the following inscription:-

HERE LIE THE REMAINS OF MARIA BRONTE, WIFE OF THE REV. P. BRONTE, A.B., MINISTER OP HAWORTH. HER SOUL DEPARTED TO THE SAVIOUR, SEPT. 15TH, 1821, IN THE 39TH YEAR OF HER AGE.

"Be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of Man cometh." MATTHEW xxiv. 44.

ALSO HERE LIE THE REMAINS OF MARIA BRONTE, DAUGHTER OF THE AFORESAID; SHE DIED ON THE 6TH OF MAY, 1825, IN THE 12TH YEAR OF HER AGE; AND OF ELIZABETH BRONTE, HER SISTER, WHO DIED JUNE 15TH, 1825, IN THE 11TH YEAR OF HER AGE.

"Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."-- MATTHEW xviii. 3.

HERE ALSO LIE THE REMAINS OF PATRICK BRANWELL BRONTE, WHO DIED SEPT. 24TH, 1848, AGED 30 YEARS; AND OF EMILY JANE BRONTE, WHO DIED DEC. 19TH, 1848, AGED 29 YEARS, SON AND DAUGHTER OF THE REV. P. BRONTE, INCUMBENT.

THIS STONE IS ALSO DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF ANNE BRONTE, [1] YOUNGEST DAUGHTER OF THE REV. P. BRONTE, A.B. SHE DIED, AGED 27 YEARS, MAY 28TH, 1849, AND WAS BURIED AT THE OLD CHURCH, SCARBORO.'

[1] A reviewer pointed out the discrepancy between the age (twenty-seven years) assigned, on the mural tablet, to Anne Bronte at the time of her death in 1849, and the alleged fact that she was born at Thornton, from which place Mr. Bronte removed on February 25th, 1820. I was aware of the discrepancy, but I did not think it of sufficient consequence to be rectified by an examination of the register of births. Mr. Bronte's own words, on which I grounded my statement as to the time of Anne Bronte's birth, are as follows:-

"In Thornton, Charlotte, Patrick Branwell, Emily Jane, and Anne were born." And such of the inhabitants of Haworth as have spoken on the subject say that all the children of Mr. and Mrs. Bronte were born before they removed to Haworth. There is probably some mistake in the inscription on the tablet.

At the upper part of this tablet ample space is allowed between the lines of the inscription; when the first memorials were written down, the survivors, in their fond affection, thought little of the margin and verge they were leaving for those who were

still living. But as one dead member of the household follows another fast to the grave, the lines are pressed together, and the letters become small and cramped. After the record of Anne's death, there is room for no other.

But one more of that generation--the last of that nursery of six little motherless children--was yet to follow, before the survivor, the childless and widowed father, found his rest. On another tablet, below the first, the following record has been added to that mournful list:-

ADJOINING LIE THE REMAINS OF CHARLOTTE, WIFE OF THE REV. ARTHUR BELL NICHOLLS, A.B., AND DAUGHTER OF THE REV. P. BRONTE, A.B., INCUMBENT SHE DIED MARCH 31ST, 1855, IN THE 39TH YEAR OF HER AGE.
[2]

[2] In the month of April 1858, a neat mural tablet was erected within the Communion railing of the Church at Haworth, to the memory of the deceased members of the Bronte family. The tablet is of white Carrara marble on a ground of dove-coloured marble, with a cornice surmounted by an ornamental pediment of chaste design. Between the brackets which support the tablet, is inscribed the sacred monogram I.H.S., in old English letters.

This tablet, which corrects the error in the former tablet as to the age of Anne Bronte, bears the following inscription in Roman letters; the initials, however, being in old English.

In Memory of Maria, wife of the Rev. P. Bronte, A.B., Minister of Haworth, She died Sept. 15th, 1821, in the 39th year of her age. Also, of Maria, their daughter, who died May 6th, 1825, in the 12th year of her age. Also, of Elizabeth, their daughter, who died June 15th, 1825, in the 11th year of her age. Also, of Patrick Branwell, their son, who died Sept. 24th, 1848, aged 31 years. Also, of Emily Jane, their daughter, who died Dec. 19th, 1848, aged 30 years. Also, of Anne, their daughter, who died May 28th, 1849, aged 29 years. She was buried at the Old Church, Scarborough. Also, of Charlotte, their daughter, wife of the Rev. A. B. Nicholls, B.A. She died March 31st, 1855, in the 39th year of her age. "The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law, but thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."--1 Cor. xv. 56, 57.

Chapter 2

For a right understanding of the life of my dear friend, Charlotte Bronte, it appears to me more necessary in her case than in most others, that the reader should be made acquainted with the peculiar forms of population and society amidst which her earliest years were passed, and from which both her own and her sisters' first impressions of human life must have been received. I shall endeavour, therefore, before proceeding further with my work, to present some idea of the character of the people of Haworth, and the surrounding districts.

Even an inhabitant of the neighbouring county of Lancaster is struck by the peculiar force of character which the Yorkshiremen display. This makes them interesting as a race; while, at the same time, as individuals, the remarkable degree of self-sufficiency they possess gives them an air of independence rather apt to repel a stranger. I use this expression "self-sufficiency" in the largest sense. Conscious of the strong sagacity and the dogged power of will which seem almost the birthright of the natives of the West Riding, each man relies upon himself, and seeks no help at the hands of his neighbour. From rarely requiring the assistance of others, he comes to doubt the power of bestowing it: from the general success of his efforts, he grows to depend upon them, and to over-estimate his own energy and power. He belongs to that keen, yet short-sighted class, who consider suspicion of all whose honesty is not proved as a sign of wisdom. The practical qualities of a man are held in great respect; but the want of faith in strangers and untried modes of action, extends itself even to the manner in which the virtues are regarded; and if they produce no immediate and tangible result, they are rather put aside as unfit for this busy, striving world; especially if they are more of a passive than an active character. The affections are strong and their foundations lie deep: but they are not--such affections seldom are--wide-spreading; nor do they show themselves on the surface. Indeed, there is little display of any of the amenities of life among this wild, rough population. Their accost is curt; their accent and tone of speech blunt and harsh. Something of this may, probably, be attributed to the freedom of mountain air and of isolated hill-side life; something be derived from their rough Norse ancestry. They have a quick perception of character, and a keen sense of humour; the dwellers among them must be prepared for certain uncomplimentary, though most likely true, observations, pithily expressed. Their feelings are not easily roused, but their duration is lasting. Hence there is much close friendship and faithful service; and for a correct exemplification of the form in which the latter frequently appears, I need only refer the reader of "Wuthering Heights" to the character of "Joseph."

From the same cause come also enduring grudges, in some cases amounting to hatred, which occasionally has been bequeathed from generation to generation. I remember Miss Bronte once telling me that it was a saying round about Haworth, "Keep a stone in thy pocket seven year; turn it, and keep it seven year longer, that it may be ever ready to thine hand when thine enemy draws near."

The West Riding men are sleuth-hounds in pursuit of money. Miss Bronte related to my husband a curious instance illustrative of this eager desire for riches. A man that she knew, who was a small manufacturer, had engaged in many local speculations which had always turned out well, and thereby rendered him a person of some wealth. He was rather past middle age, when he bethought him of insuring his life; and he had only just taken out his policy, when he fell ill of an acute disease which was certain to end fatally in a very few days. The doctor, half-hesitatingly, revealed to him his hopeless state. "By jingo!" cried he, rousing up at once into the old energy, "I shall DO the insurance company! I always was a lucky fellow!"

These men are keen and shrewd; faithful and persevering in following out a good purpose, fell in tracking an evil one. They are not emotional; they are not easily made into either friends or enemies; but once lovers or haters, it is difficult to change their feeling. They are a powerful race both in mind and body, both for good and for evil.

The woollen manufacture was introduced into this district in the days of Edward III. It is traditionally said that a colony of Flemings came over and settled in the West Riding to teach the inhabitants what to do with their wool. The mixture of agricultural with manufacturing labour that ensued and prevailed in the West Riding up to a very recent period, sounds pleasant enough at this distance of time, when the classical impression is left, and the details forgotten, or only brought to light by those who explore the few remote parts of England where the custom still lingers. The idea of the mistress and her maidens spinning at the great wheels while the master was abroad ploughing his fields, or seeing after his flocks on the purple moors, is very poetical to look back upon; but when such life actually touches on our own days, and we can hear particulars from the lips of those now living, there come out details of coarseness--of the uncouthness of the rustic mingled with the sharpness of the tradesman--of irregularity and fierce lawlessness--that rather mar the vision of pastoral innocence and simplicity. Still, as it is the exceptional and exaggerated characteristics of any period that leave the most vivid memory behind them, it would be wrong, and in my opinion faithless, to conclude that such and such forms of society and modes of living were not best for the period when they prevailed, although the abuses they may have led into, and the gradual progress of the world, have made it well that such ways and manners should pass away for ever, and as preposterous to attempt to return to them, as it would be for a man to return to the clothes of his childhood.

The patent granted to Alderman Cockayne, and the further restrictions imposed by James I. on the export of undyed woollen cloths (met by a prohibition on the part of the States of Holland of the import of English-dyed cloths), injured the trade of the West Riding manufacturers considerably. Their independence of character, their dislike of authority, and their strong powers of thought, predisposed them to rebellion against the religious dictation of such men as Laud, and the arbitrary rule of the Stuarts; and the injury done by James and Charles to the trade by which they gained their bread, made the great majority of them Commonwealth men. I shall have occasion afterwards to give one or two instances of the warm feelings and extensive knowledge on subjects of both home and foreign politics existing at the present day in the villages lying west and east of the

mountainous ridge that separates Yorkshire and Lancashire; the inhabitants of which are of the same race and possess the same quality of character.

The descendants of many who served under Cromwell at Dunbar, live on the same lands as their ancestors occupied then; and perhaps there is no part of England where the traditional and fond recollections of the Commonwealth have lingered so long as in that inhabited by the woollen manufacturing population of the West Riding, who had the restrictions taken off their trade by the Protector's admirable commercial policy. I have it on good authority that, not thirty years ago, the phrase, "in Oliver's days," was in common use to denote a time of unusual prosperity. The class of Christian names prevalent in a district is one indication of the direction in which its tide of hero-worship sets. Grave enthusiasts in politics or religion perceive not the ludicrous side of those which they give to their children; and some are to be found, still in their infancy, not a dozen miles from Haworth, that will have to go through life as Lamartine, Kossuth, and Dembinsky. And so there is a testimony to what I have said, of the traditional feeling of the district, in the fact that the Old Testament names in general use among the Puritans are yet the prevalent appellations in most Yorkshire families of middle or humble rank, whatever their religious persuasion may be. There are numerous records, too, that show the kindly way in which the ejected ministers were received by the gentry, as well as by the poorer part of the inhabitants, during the persecuting days of Charles II. These little facts all testify to the old hereditary spirit of independence, ready ever to resist authority which was conceived to be unjustly exercised, that distinguishes the people of the West Riding to the present day.

The parish of Halifax touches that of Bradford, in which the chapelry of Haworth is included; and the nature of the ground in the two parishes is much the of the same wild and hilly description. The abundance of coal, and the number of mountain streams in the district, make it highly favourable to manufactures; and accordingly, as I stated, the inhabitants have for centuries been engaged in making cloth, as well as in agricultural pursuits. But the intercourse of trade failed, for a long time, to bring amenity and civilization into these outlying hamlets, or widely scattered dwellings. Mr. Hunter, in his "Life of Oliver Heywood," quotes a sentence out of a memorial of one James Rither, living in the reign of Elizabeth, which is partially true to this day:-

"They have no superior to court, no civilities to practise: a sour and sturdy humour is the consequence, so that a stranger is shocked by a tone of defiance in every voice, and an air of fierceness in every countenance."

Even now, a stranger can hardly ask a question without receiving some crusty reply, if, indeed, he receive any at all. Sometimes the sour rudeness amounts to positive insult. Yet, if the "foreigner" takes all this churlishness good-humouredly, or as a matter of course, and makes good any claim upon their latent kindness and hospitality, they are faithful and generous, and thoroughly to be relied upon. As a slight illustration of the roughness that pervades all classes in these out-of-the-way villages, I may relate a little adventure which happened to my husband and myself, three years ago, at Addingham -

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