



HOME MAGAZINE



Life, Literature and Education.



Charlotte Bronte (Currer Bell).

(Born, 1816; died, 1854.)

Reader, had you travelled in the right direction, upwards of 100 years ago, you might have come to a spot in West York, England, where, leaving the more sequestered vales and tree-covered slopes of kinder Britannia, you came to the bleak moors of the Northern country, marked, even then, by the villages of the manufacturing people, and the bare, unsightly walls of the woollen mills, scattered, with a practical disregard of the artistic, over the stubborn Northern wolds. And yet, too, when the wild heath was thick in flower, and the sky purple and gold with sunset, you might have thought this moorland country beautiful. Had your home been there you might have loved it.

In the very midst of the bare land, in the village of Haworth, stood an old, square, massive-looking house, unshaded by tree or vine. Haworth in those days was neither a pleasing nor, despite its fine airs, a beautiful spot. Its one curving street ran abruptly up and up a very steep hill, along which the houses clung as if by tooth and nail. At the very top stood the church, with a graveyard literally paved with graves, and beside the church stood the old house above referred to. On two sides of the little, treeless garden-plot about the house stretched the graveyard, but beyond that, "up above the whole world and the very realms of silence," reached the heather-covered moors and the breath of God's own heaven.

Had you gone into the stone house on a certain day at that time, you would have come upon a scene that would not likely have left you. You would have observed serious faces passing in and out of the rooms, and heard quiet feet stepping lightly over the stone floors, and by and by you would have seen a coffin carried mournfully out, with a solitary mourner following, and six little motherless children watching from the win-

dows. Afterwards, as has been told, it was pitiful, day by day, to watch the same six little creatures "walking out hand in hand towards the glorious moors which in after days they loved so passionately, the elder ones taking thoughtful care for the toddling wee things."

This sad death took place in September, 1821, and from that day the little Brontes grew up almost without the affectionate care and happy gaiety of home which come into the lives of most children. The father, the Rev. Patrick Bronte, though an Irishman by birth, appears to have been a man of singularly stern and austere character. He was not fond of children. Even his own were not permitted to eat with him, hence it is not wonderful that they held aloof from him, regarding him as a judge, rather than a father. As an example of the peculiar relationship between Mr. Bronte and his little ones, may be related one instance in which he put a mask on each child in turn, in order, as he thought, to reduce its bashfulness before him while he questioned it. And were ever such questions asked or such answers given by little, motherless bairns? Of the youngest he enquired, "What does a little girl like you most need?" "Age and experience," the answer, without a moment's hesitation. Of the next, "What should I do to your little brother when he is naughty?"—and the answer, "Reason with him, and if he refuses to listen to reason, whip him." And of the third (little Charlotte), "What is the best book in the world?" "The Bible." "And the next?" "The book of Nature." And so on, throughout the almost uncannily precocious six.

Of such extraordinary children something extraordinary was to be expected. As a matter of fact, of the five girls three became famous; two, equally promising, died before they came to womanhood. The one boy, with gifts uniquely, variously brilliant, threw all his talents to the wind, and, after a career of vice that made him a living death to his family, died, unhonored, if not unwept, at the age of 30.

As educational advantages were not to be had at Haworth, Mr. Bronte sent his three eldest daughters to school at Cowan Bridge, the institution since immortalized as "Lowood," in "Jane Eyre." Here it was that the two eldest sickened and died. In "Helen Burns" we see Maria Bronte. Consequently, Charlotte was brought home, and here, under the guidance of their father and their aunt, Miss Branwell, the education of the remaining children went on in its desultory way, which advanced them far beyond ordinary children in some things, leaving them lamentably ignorant in others. At this time, too, was it that the three, Charlotte, Emily and Anne, began the little Magazine, for which they wrote some of the strangest compositions ever penned by little hands—a pastime which, no doubt, suggested to them the career which was afterwards to become theirs.

In 1831 Charlotte was again sent to school, this time at Roe Head. "I first saw her coming out of a covered cart," says one of her schoolmates, "in very old-fashioned clothes, and looking very cold and miserable.

When she appeared in the school-room her dress was changed, but just as old. She looked a little old woman, so short-sighted that she always appeared to be seeking something, and moving her head from side to side to catch a sight of it. She was very shy and nervous, and spoke with a strong Irish accent. When a book was given her, she dropped her head over it until her nose nearly touched it, and when she was told to hold her head up, up went the book after it, still close to her nose, so that it was not possible to help laughing." Nevertheless, during her several years in this school, as pupil, and then as teacher, there were many who learned to love the shy, clever, short-sighted little girl, and to give her the friendship, not only of a period, but of a lifetime. Emily, too, tried going to this school, and, later, teaching, but for Emily, "that free, wild, untamable spirit, never happy nor well but on the sweeping moors that gathered round her home—that hater of strangers, doomed to live amongst them, and not merely to live, but to slave, in their service"—there was no place but Haworth, and to Haworth, accordingly, she returned.

After leaving Roe Head, Charlotte spent some time as a governess, thus coming into contact with some of those women, narrow-minded, shallow, though gifted with wealth and position, whom she has since scored so mercilessly in her books. A terribly homesick time this was for the girl. "I could like to be at home," she writes. "I could like to work in a mill. I could like to feel some mental liberty." And yet she was obliged, at every spare minute, to busy herself with "oceans of needle-work, yards of cambric to hem, muslin nightcaps to make, dolls to dress." "I used to think," she writes, "that I should like to be in grand folk's society; but I have had enough of it." Nevertheless, Charlotte Bronte was seeing life—the inner as well as the outer of it. She was, if unconsciously, gathering material for the "Jane Eyre," "Shirley" and "Vilette" of the future.

Weary of the life, she returned again to Haworth, and, under the necessity of making money in some way, the three sisters began to form plans for starting a school of their own. Feeling in need of further learning before setting the project afoot, Charlotte and Emily resolved to go to the Continent. Finally they settled upon Brussels, and here, accordingly, they spent some time in study, Charlotte afterwards remaining a term or two as teacher of English. To the friendship which was here formed between the young teacher and M. Heger, the principal of the school, those who would turn the limelight into the very heart and soul of those who have achieved, have professed to discover, upon the part of Miss Bronte, an unhappy and unrequited love. Regarding this, however, Mrs. Gaskell, in her exhaustive "Life of Charlotte Bronte," says not a word, and it is to be presumed that the story of a natural friendship has been grossly exaggerated.

Upon Miss Bronte's return from Brussels, the three sisters began to have new aims and aspirations.

Probably each was conscious of the possession of a talent which must find the ear of the world. At all events, Charlotte at last wrote to Southey regarding the advisability of a literary career for women. The long-delayed answer, if kind, was discouraging. "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life," wrote the poet, "and it ought not to be." She was advised, moreover, to "keep a quiet mind." Subsequently she wrote to Wordsworth, with little better encouragement. But the brave hearts were hard to kill, and we read of the three, in the face of all this opposition, walking up and down the little parlor at Haworth, when night came and the room was lighted only by the fire from the grate, with arms about one another, discussing the plans of their future books.

Charlotte's first book, "The Professor," found no open door among the publishers. Nevertheless, in the very face of its refusal, at a time, too, of peculiar trial, when she had gone to Manchester with her father, who was becoming blind of cataract, she began "Jane Eyre." It was accepted at once, as were also "Wuthering Heights" and "Agnes Grey," by Emily and Anne, and soon all England, and America, too, were in a ferment to know who were these three "brothers."—"Currer," "Ellis" and "Acton Bell," whose books were achieving such marvellous popularity. Of the three, however, Currer Bell (Charlotte) was most called for. "Jane Eyre" was slashed, hacked, riddled by the critics, yet it would persist in "selling," and publishers would persist in calling for more by the same facile pen.

Charlotte Bronte never wrote such another book. In her next, "Shirley," she tried to conform to the ideal set up by these critics. Her heroine became beautiful and more conventional than the plain and rather startling "Jane Eyre," but her work lost in strength. "Vilette" appealed more to the artistic literary model than either, yet it never was so taken up by the mass of the people. In our day we can see faults in "Jane Eyre." Its somewhat stilted style does not conform to modern ideas of ease in literature. Its characters often talk with a wisdom and solemnity beyond their years, and we wish the writer had not so often yielded to the then popular affectation of writing in French. Nevertheless, we find the story interesting throughout, and we recognize in it the strength which made Haworth a Mecca, not only of the casual sightseer, but of the literati of Charlotte Bronte's day and ours.

Haworth, however, had become unexpressibly lonely to Miss Bronte. Her brother died in 1847, and quickly following him, Emily and Anne, of consumption. Charlotte was now left, broken in health, to walk alone in the little parlor. But she could not leave, because of her aged father. Judging from her description of the Messrs. Donne, Sweeting and Malone, and the hard, cold St. John Rivers, the writer had little love for curates as a class. Nevertheless, in 1854 she quietly married a Mr. Nichols, a curate of her father's who had long cared for her. Her