

“SCALE HOW TUESDAYS.”

THE BRONTËS.

BY MARGARET SYKES.

HIGH up on the moorland is built the village of Haworth, on the steep grey side of a windy hill. Greyness indeed is the chief characteristic of the place—grey houses, grey church, with grey tombstones paving the paths and forming the outer wall of the churchyard; and the greyest of all is the little parsonage overlooking the church on one side and a small courtyard on the other. But all round the stony village and gloomy Rectory stretch great rolling sweeps of moorland, purple with summer heather, white with winter snows, full of shadows and colours and glorious curves and hollows, forming a perfect playground for the Parsonage children.

Let us take our first glimpse of them in 1821, six little children walking in long line, hand in hand—the tiniest hanging on to the skirts of the other elders—up to the skyline of the moors, with faces turned towards the sunset. They were not wanted at home, for their quiet, patient mother was dying of cancer and home-sickness for her Cornish land, and as long as they were “good” they might go and do as they liked.

Mrs. Brontë died in 1821. In those days of their first acquaintance with the Yorkshire moors, Maria, the eldest, was but seven years old; then came in quick succession Elizabeth, Charlotte, Branwell, Emily and Anne. Such babies were these four last that they, of course, remembered no other abode, and to them the wild moorland became emphatically their “home,” from which in Emily’s case at least, it became positive agony, in later days, to be separated.

During the long spells of wet weather when the rain poured down from the moorland heights, they had other joys, austere

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indeed but no less keen. A little room over the passage was appropriated for their use—no cosy nursery, but a little fireless room, always known as the “Children’s Study.” A pathetic acquaintance with the prevailing “Hush!” of the sick-room stilled the high voices of joyous laughter, and very early the children learnt the lesson of self-discipline.

“You would not have known there was a child in the house,” said their mother’s old nurse, “they were such still, noiseless little creatures. Maria would shut herself up in the Children’s Study with a newspaper, and be able to tell one everything when she came out—debates in Parliament and I don’t know what all. She was as good as a mother to her sisters and brother. But there were never such good children. I used to think them spiritless, they were so different from any I had ever seen.”

About this last supposition the good old woman was quite wrong. Repressed almost from their babyhood by an ailing, worried mother and a father who seems to have alternated between aloofness and the treatment of them as grown-up people, they began very early to live a life of their own, which was only very occasionally revealed to their elders. After their mother’s death an aunt came from the South to look after the six children. The chill of the stone floors and damp moorland air filled poor Miss Branwell with dismay. She left them very much to themselves and does not seem to have had any real influence over them, and though

she ruled the household well, she spent most of her time in her bedroom where, with a constant fire she was able to enjoy some of the comforts of her South Country existence. She taught the girls to sew and manage the house and also gave them a few lessons.

Mr. Brontë said that he was often drawn from the study by the sound of high, eager voices in angry discussion. But it was no quarrel over a doll or a disputed share in a rocking-horse on which he was called to arbitrate. The little sisters were accustomed to write plays for their own acting, in which the Duke of Wellington, Charlotte's hero, "was sure to come off conqueror," and disputes often arose concerning his superiority over Napoleon, Hannibal or Cæsar.

As soon almost as they could read and write at all they began to compose plays and act them. Their powers of invention and imagination were very great: and to this habit of composing stories in their own minds they gave the name of "making out."

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In the early days of the last century so-called "Children's books" were quite unknown, and being book-lovers from their cradles the Brontë children devoured eagerly the books they found in their father's rather scanty library. Such books as "Plutarch's Lives," Shakspeare, [sic] and the "Pilgrim's Progress," which last sent six-year-old Charlotte on a perilous journey to find the City Beautiful, only to be turned back in a fit of nervous terror when she reached a tree-darkened road which was clearly the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

The long distance, the wild country, and the motherless condition of the girls all tended to make their existence very lonely. But for this they cared little. They were devoted to each other, and were perfectly contented with their own companionship; and it must have been a great blow to them when the decree went forth that Maria and Elizabeth, now eleven and ten years old, must go to school.

At Cowan Bridge in Westmorland a school for clergymen's daughters had lately been opened. Here, in six or seven small, damp cottages, were gathered some seventy or eighty girls to be fed, clothed, and educated for £14 a year; and here the two little girls were left by their father to be fitted to earn a living in the future. Unfortunately, no training could have been more unsuitable to delicate children, accustomed to a wonder world of their own, inhabited by great men and women, and by fancies and thoughts of which their elders never dreamed.

At Cowan Bridge all such "nonsense" was swept away, and a parrot-like proficiency in geography, grammer [sic] and arithmetic took its place. Nor were their bodies better fed than their minds. Burnt porridge, tainted beef, sour milk, turned the delicate appetites to nausea and loathing, and the girls suffered from the chill that comes from damp and underfeeding. It must have been with mingled feelings of joy and dismay that the two elder girls were joined a few months later by Charlotte and Emily; for they found their "little mother"—their quiet, clever Maria—changed into a despairing, suffering child, the butt of the school, and the especial object of the bullying treatment of one of the mistresses. Little did the latter realize that in future days she herself would be pilloried before the world by the savage pen of the small sister, who took her as her model for "Miss Scatcherd," while Maria was the "Helen Burns" of "Jane Eyre."

Untidy, and forgetful of the dry facts forced daily upon her

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notice, poor Maria suffered constant punishment, involving loss of food as well as bodily pains

and penalties. No allowance was made for her increasing physical weakness, and to the horrified eyes of the little sisters she grew daily more thin, and ill, and suffering. Suddenly a thunderbolt fell on the school. Forty girls sickened with low fever, brought on no doubt by underfeeding and defective drainage. The Brontë children were untouched by it, but, probably through happening to come under the doctor's notice, Maria's condition began at length to alarm the authorities. Mr. Brontë was sent for, and the child was found to be in the last stages of consumption. He took her home in the Leeds coach, which passed the school cottages, towards which she waved a little thin hand in farewell to the clustering heads at the doorway. Within a week she was dead.

The next child, Elizabeth, who is only remembered at Cowan Bridge for the patience and silent pluck with which she endured a severe cut on the head, arising from a fall, next came under the doctor's notice. Another sorrowful farewell was said and Elizabeth was sent home in a servant's charge. Five weeks after her sister's death, she was laid by her side in Haworth church.

When Charlotte and Emily returned to Haworth for the half-yearly holiday, it must indeed have seemed that their happy home-world was gradually melting away from their longing gaze. Those holidays must have been sad enough, but sadder the return to school, although better conditions now prevailed. The rough and ready treatment, both mental and physical, was utterly unsuited to nervous, highly-strung, clever children, with free, wild, passionate hearts hidden under their outwardly calm exteriors. To their great joy they were sent home for good in the autumn of 1825, as their health too was beginning to fail.

And now Charlotte, barely ten years old, found herself in the position of elder sister and mother to the rest. Once again the "Study" resounded with eager voices, and busy heads bent over books and papers in absorbed happiness. Mr. Brontë, when at leisure from parish affairs, taught his son Branwell, a clever boy who should have been at a good school, and occasionally guided the studies of his daughters; otherwise they were free to do as they liked.

These five years were some of the most strenuous in Charlotte's life. The gift within her was already stirring, and piles of treasured scraps of blank paper were covered by her eager [p 136]

pen; it was an excellent apprenticeship to her future craft. Tales, poems, whole magazines, character sketches, plays—all these appear about this time in astonishing quantity and no less surprising quality. There were unmistakable signs of a glowing and vivid imagination, and Charlotte describes with remarkable exactness the contour, arrangement and government of the imaginary spots or "Islands" peopled by heroes of history and biography. A modern girl would have strained after publication, but the Brontës hugged their writings to themselves in delicious secrecy; not even their father had any idea of their favourite amusement.

In 1831 Charlotte, now nearly fifteen, was still short and slight, with very small hands and feet; a tiny head crowned with a quantity of soft brown hair, a large nose, and quick glancing eyes like a bird's. And now it seems to have dawned upon her father that a year's schooling before she was nine years old was all the formal education given as yet to this clever child of his. So Charlotte went to school again, at Roe Head, some twenty miles away; appearing there "very cold and miserable, short-sighted, shy and nervous," as her old friend Mary describes her. She soon won for herself a position in the school, which was a very different place from Cowan Bridge. At first the girls were astonished at her ignorance, for she

“had never learnt grammar at all and knew very little geography.” But to their amazement she not only knew the contents of all their poetry books by heart, but could tell them all about the authors and what else they had written. She soon proved herself a magnificent weaver of stories, and on one occasion these became so thrilling, after the lights were turned out and the girls were supposed to be asleep, that one of the audience was forced to “scream out loud” with terror! This year of school life passed happily away, and only served to intensify the girl’s love of reading and study. The “standard authors,” as she called them—Milton, Shakespeare, Goldsmith, Scott, Byron, Wordsworth—were her great delight at this time, and in her letters to her school friend, Ellen Nussy, she discusses them with a critical though reverential spirit, which showed that they were far more than tasks of literature to her.

At the end of the year she returned home to teach her younger sisters. Life in the quiet Parsonage must have seemed a trifle dull after all the fun and companionship of school. She sketches a day for her friend in these words:—“An account of one day is an account of all. In the morning, from nine o’clock till half-past

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twelve, I instruct my sisters and draw, then we walk till dinner-time; after dinner I sew till tea-time, and after tea I write, read or do a little fancy work, or draw, as I please.”

She never mentions her aunt in these letters, and she never complains more than once of the difficulty of getting the books she wants. Her chief joy, and that of her two sisters, was a survival of the days of childhood. Hand in hand the three would go up to the moors, where a long walk led to a waterfall splashing over rocks to a hollow below. Next to this came the delight, sanctioned by her father, frowned on by her aunt, of tramping to the nearest town for books from a circulating library. These she shared with her sisters, of whom Emily was now a lanky, silent girl of sixteen, and Anne a shy little thing a year younger. Branwell, his sisters’ pride, who was going to make the whole family renowned by his artistic talent, was even in these days too popular in the tap-room of the neighbouring tavern, the “Black Bull,” to have much time for their society. This clever boy, spoilt by his aunt’s indulgence and by his father’s mistaken ideas of education, was now agitating to be sent to the Royal Academy. Money was short, as usual, in the household, and so at the age of nineteen Charlotte, in order to help matters on, went as a teacher to Roe Head, taking Emily with her.

Charlotte was not sorry to get some variety from the monotonous home-life. To Emily, in many ways the more striking and original character of the two, the change was heart-breaking. What happened is well described in her sister’s own words:—

“My sister Emily loved the moors. Flowers brighter than the rose bloomed on the blackest heath for her; out of a sullen hollow on a livid hillside her mind could make an Eden. She found in the bleak solitude many and dear delights, and not the least and best loved was—liberty. Liberty was the breath of Emily’s nostrils without which she perished. The change from her own home to a school, and from her own noiseless, very secluded, but very unartificial unrestricted mode of life, to one of disciplined routine, was what she failed in enduring. Her nature proved here too strong for her fortitude. Every morning when she woke, the vision of home and the moors rushed on her and darkened and saddened the day that lay before her. Nobody knew what ailed her but me. ... In this struggle her health was quickly [sic] broken; her white face, attenuated

form, and failing strength threatened rapid decline. I felt in my heart she would die if she did not go home. She had only been three months at school, and it was some years before the experiment of sending her from home was again ventured on."

So Emily gladly returned to her moors, to her beloved Anne, and no less beloved dogs, and to those long silences and inward thoughts which were of a depth more profound and of a nature

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more remarkable than those of any other of this gifted band. She was no idler, however. Their old servant "Tabby" had now become very infirm; whereupon Emily undertook most of the cooking and all the household ironing and breadmaking, studying German meantime "out of a book propped up before her as she kneaded the dough, and nevertheless," says Mrs. Gaskell, "her bread was always light and excellent!"

Meantime Charlotte, though hating what she called the drudgery of teaching, stuck to her post at Roe Head. But the girls were full of ambition, and their vivid imaginations were already sketching out plans of life which would keep them together and enable them to fulfil some long cherished hopes.

In the long dark evenings of the December holidays of 1836, when nine o'clock struck and father and aunt and maid had gone off to bed, so that they had the room to themselves, they were wont to walk up and down in the firelight, arm in arm, discussing and planning for the future. They had all three kept up the childish affection for expressing themselves on paper, and the "rage for scribbling" was upon them; but they were uncertain as to the merit of their work.

They had lived so long, however, in the company of great writers, through the loving study of their works, that it was the most natural thing in the world for Charlotte to send a little budget to the poet Southey asking him his opinion of the contents. He wrote back kindly, but without encouragement, giving good advice as to self-discipline, and cultivation. Charlotte received the letter wisely if sorrowfully; and then putting away the cherished manuscript with a sigh, returned to school, taking Anne with her as a pupil.

Another year saw them together in holiday time once more, and on this occasion something like a mutiny broke out at the Rectory. For Tabby, the faithful old servant, had slipped on the steep frozen street and broken her leg, whereupon Miss Branwell decided that she must go to her home and, being past work, must return no more. The girls objected. They would nurse Tabby and undertake the housework themselves. Miss Branwell, having enlisted Mr. Brontë on her side, renewed her command; whereupon the girls sat silent and pensive, having made up their minds to touch no food until their aunt gave way. This was altogether too much for Miss Branwell, and Tabby remained to be nursed and petted by her former charges.

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A few more months of uncongenial school teaching broke Charlotte down. Anne's health had already given way in an alarming manner, and it seemed but too true that these wild birds could only live in their free moorland air. In the case of Charlotte and Emily, indeed, it was also a case of big, fiery, original souls fretting against and wearing out the frames which were forced to unnatural primness and self-restraint among strangers.

The spring of 1839 saw them all at home again—and saw, too, Charlotte's first offer of

marriage from a young clergyman, supposed to be the original of "St. John" in "Jane Eyre." She tells us her characteristic reasons for refusal: "He knew so little of me ... it would startle him to see me in my natural home character; he would think I was a wild, romantic enthusiast indeed. I could not sit all day long making a grave face before my husband. I would laugh and satirise and say whatever came into my head first." No, certainly the grave and priggish St. John was no mate for our wild-hearted little Jane Eyre, calm and quiet though she might appear to his unseeing eyes.

Yet the girls must do something. The thin family purse forbade them to stay idle at home, and Branwell, though he had not "entered the Academy," was a heavy burden both financially and otherwise. He had left a post in a little school because the boys laughed at his red hair, and returned to lounging habits in the village tap-room. Still, his sisters, and especially Emily, his "chum," looked to him to retrieve the fortunes of the family; and Charlotte and Anne went off meantime, with heavy hearts, to teach in private families. Not for long, however, could they endure what to them, with their small love for and understanding of children, must indeed have been a weariness to the flesh; and 1840 saw the whole family together again.

This was an unusually happy year for them. Branwell's laziness and bad habits were condoned as a sign of genius, and his gay talk, and magnificent plans for the future deceived even his austere old aunt. When the girls begged for a loan to enable them to set on foot their scheme for keeping a little boarding school at the Rectory, she refused on the score that her little savings were put aside to help her nephew towards a career. Thrown back on herself, Charlotte began to write again; then cast her pen aside to take another uncongenial post, during which time the brilliant idea flashed upon her that the one thing essential to make a school of their own a real success was that she and Emily should by

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hook or by crook get six months' education in a foreign school. Emily's heart must have sunk at the prospect; the very notion of leaving the moorlands was torture to her; but she was accustomed to conceal her feelings and to follow the lead of dauntless Charlotte, and so it came about that after much discussion of ways and means, in which Aunt Branwell came nobly to the fore, the two girls found themselves installed as boarders in Madame Héger's "Pensionnat des Demoiselles" at Brussels.

Charlotte gradually fell under the spell of the genius of the fiery, masterful, excitable little professor of French, M. Héger, to be painted in glowing colours as "M. Paul" in "Villette." Emily disliked him from the first, and openly rebelled against his dictatorial ways. She was as homesick as ever, and utterly unable to share in Charlotte's absorption in her new life and work. She prided herself on her English ways, her ugly English frocks; her mind was full of Haworth, and her overflowing heart found expression in lines carefully guarded from the sight of others:—

"... As I mused, the naked room,  
The alien firelight died away;  
And from the midst of cheerless gloom  
I passed to bright, unclouded day.

A little and a lone green lane

That opened on a common wide;  
A distant, dreary, dim blue chain  
Of mountains circling every side:

Even as I stood with raptured eye,  
Absorbed in bliss so deep and dear,  
My hour of rest had fled by,  
And back came labour, bondage, care."

But we must not linger over these days in Brussels, for those who have grown to love the Brontës will find a faithful record of them in "Villette" and "The Professor." Just at the time that M. Héger, in order to keep his two most promising pupils, had appointed one as English mistress and the other as music teacher on his staff, an urgent message arrived from Haworth. Miss Branwell was very ill. They hastened to pack their clothes and set off, but before they could do so, a second letter arrived; their aunt was dead. This news did but hasten their departure; for Anne was fairly happy as governess and their father was alone. They hastened back to find worse than the shadow of death in the lonely Parsonage. Branwell, the gifted, the genius who had for some time past been working as a clerk for a railway company, had been dismissed for drunkenness and careless neglect of duty, and

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had returned home to bring a grief to the old aunt, who so firmly believed in him, which probably shortened her days. Still, the sisters renewed their faith in him and his repentance, refusing to recognise the weakness of his nature; and three months of peaceful life with moorland walks and household duties followed. Then Anne went back to her post and Branwell obtained a situation as tutor. Charlotte returned to Brussels alone and Emily, to her secret joy, was left alone in her beloved Haworth. Alone with the dogs,—Anne's old Spaniel and her own bull-terrier "Keeper," fierce to others, gentle to her,—the cats, and all the dear dumb creatures of the moorland, which appealed with such strength to the heart of this grave, silent, austere woman.

But dark days were at hand. Mr. Brontë's sight began to fail; Charlotte hastened home; a sense of depression fell upon the sisters. Mr. Brontë grew blinder every day, and became very peevish and irritable; Charlotte grew daily more nervous, with a sense of approaching ill; Anne returned home full of misgivings as to Branwell's conduct; then suddenly the blow fell. Branwell returned home, disgraced and scarcely sane, to become a confirmed drunkard and to break his sisters' hearts. All thoughts of school-keeping were given up; Anne, always morbid, delicate and easily depressed, sank into a state of dejection; Charlotte, her soul burning with indignation at the cause of all this misery, refused to speak to him or treat him with anything but contempt; Emily alone was strong enough to shoulder the burden. Night after night, when all were in bed, Emily sat up waiting for the unsteady walk and fumbling hand upon the latch which heralded her brother's return from the public-house. She it was who gave him a cheering word; who saved him from being burnt to death in drunken sleep, carrying him like a child to her own bed, while she herself slept in the kitchen; and who sat up at night after Mr. Brontë had insisted that his miserable son should sleep for safety in his room, listening with strained ears for the pistol shot with which Branwell often threatened the blind old man. Never perhaps has history shown

us a case of more heroic devotion; never have sisters had to undergo a more terrible strain than during those two years. They could have no visitors, and they scarcely dared to leave their home even for a week. It was small wonder the pent-up emotion found its vent in lyric verse. A little volume of verse was made up of various treasured manuscripts; the sisters hid their identity under the names of Currer, Ellis, and  
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Acton Bell; and the packet went its dispiriting round from publisher to publisher, until at length one was found who undertook to bring out the little book of verse for the sum of £30.

But it brought no fame to the Parsonage home, and little by little their dreams of glory faded away in the hard, matter-of-fact light of everyday troubles. Yet each had still her secret store of comfort and relief. Charlotte sent "The Professor" on his travels, and Anne was busy over "Agnes Grey," while Emily was laying bare her proud and passionate soul in the pages of "Wuthering Heights." The evenings were still their own. Marching round the room in the old childish fashion, the three sisters talked over each other's characters and plots.

Meantime Mr. Brontë's sight had so far deteriorated that an operation was ventured on; and Charlotte took her father to Manchester in June, 1846, to have it done. It was during the weeks that followed, in her father's darkened room, that Charlotte, sore at heart over the ill fortunes of "The Professor," began "Jane Eyre." She herself said at this time,—"'Currer Bell's' book found acceptance nowhere, nor any acknowledgment of merit, so that something like a chill of despair began to invade his heart." The origin of the green-eyed Jane was a discussion between the girls as to the impossibility of making a plain heroine acceptable to the public. "I will prove you wrong," said Charlotte, "by showing you a heroine as small and plain as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours."

Soon after she returned home the news of the acceptance of "Wuthering Heights" and "Agnes Grey" arrived to cheer the drooping spirits of Emily—worn out by her unhappy charge—and gentle Anne, who had never recovered from the shock of his disgrace. The terrible part of "Wuthering Heights," the most powerful of all the Brontës' works, is that it forms largely a study, half unconscious no doubt of the wretched Branwell. All the sisters and Emily most of all, possessed the gift of sincerity so strongly that they could only write faithfully of what they had actually come across in their own experience. We have seen how very limited that experience was; and the whole secret of the power and attraction of the novels lies in the fact that they were very largely autobiographical. But the stern insight of Emily's writing did not appeal to the public, they failed to see that the very spirit of the moorland was incarnate in the book. No word of praise was heard; and its author, accepting the verdict of  
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failure with stoic fortitude, tried to soothe an aching heart with harder tasks of housework, more watchful devotion to her wretched brother.

But "Jane Eyre," more melodramatic and unrestrained emotionally, met with instant success. It is of course the most autobiographical of all the Brontë works, in so far that it reflects very closely the personality of Charlotte herself, and describes as we have seen most vividly the early experiences of herself and her sisters at Cowan Bridge. The weak portrayal of its so-called "heroes" does little to spoil the essential truth and rapid movement of the story; nor is the latter defect to be wondered at when we remember that with the exception of a few despised curates, Charlotte's only male acquaintances of her own class were her father and her



brother.

Greatly encouraged by her first success Charlotte set to work on "Shirley" of which Emily, or rather a very fanciful portrait of Emily, was to be the heroine. Shirley is indeed a highly idealised character, but every now and then we get a glimpse of the real Emily, the silent, stern, great-hearted woman whom not even Charlotte herself could altogether understand and appreciate. It is Emily who always sits on the hearthrug of a night reading, with her hand resting on the broad head of her great bull-terrier "Keeper"; Emily who punishes the same "Keeper" for his misdemeanours, though warned that a blow would make him fly at her throat; and who, after thoroughly cowing him, brings water and foment his bruises; she too it is who, bitten by the mad dog to whom she had offered water, goes calmly to the kitchen and cauterises the horrid wound with a red-hot poker.

Meantime the real Emily was steeling herself to support Branwell in the miseries of his last hours. Of herself she never thought, though her hard hacking cough was a source of great anxiety to her sisters. "It is useless to question her," says Charlotte; "you get no answers. It is still more useless to recommend remedies; they are never adopted."

One Sunday morning in this sad year 1848, Branwell Brontë died—died on his feet posing to the end to show his strength of will. His death should have lifted a burden from the shoulders of those whose loving hearts he had broken, but it was too late. It seemed as though Emily had kept up by sheer force of determination as long as he needed her help and protection, and now she gave way altogether. No words but Charlotte's can tell the [p 144]

touching tale:—"My sister Emily first declined. Never in all her life had she lingered over any task that lay before her, and she did not linger now. She sank rapidly. She made haste to leave us. Yet, while physically she perished, mentally she grew stronger than we had yet known her. Day by day, when I saw with what a front she met suffering, I looked on her with an anguish of wonder and love. I have seen nothing like it; but indeed I have never seen her parallel in anything. Stronger than a man, simpler than a child, her nature stood alone. The awful point was that while full of ruth for others, on herself she had no pity; the spirit was inexorable to the flesh; from the trembling hand, the unnerved limbs, the faded eyes, the same service was exacted as they had rendered in health. To stand by and witness this and not dare to remonstrate was a pain no words can render. Two cruel months of hope and fear passed painfully by, and the day came at last when the terrors and pains of death were to be undergone by this treasure, which had grown dearer and dearer to our hearts as it wasted before our eyes. Towards the decline of that day we had nothing of Emily but her mortal remains as consumption had left them." She died December 19th, 1848. They laid her beside the brother she had loved so faithfully, and returned to the house where "Keeper" lay at the door of his mistress's room and howled piteously for many days. Downstairs the two lonely figures sat in the calm of heart-broken resignation. "The anguish of seeing her suffer is over," writes her sister, "the spectacle of the pains of death is gone by; the funeral day is past. We feel she is at peace. No need now to tremble for the hard frost and keen wind. Emily does not feel them now." So wrote Charlotte in the bleak December, little dreaming that before midsummer her gentle little sister Anne, with her quiet religious ways and clinging affection, would be taken from her also. Anne grew gradually worse; Charlotte took her to Scarborough in May, 1849, in the hopes that the change would do her good. They left home on May 24th, 1849, and she died

May 28th. Her life was calm and spiritual: such was her end. She was buried at Scarborough.

Now Charlotte was left alone in the sad deserted Parsonage, where her father grew more and more solitary in his ways, and the pervading silence became a burden of horror to the nervous, overwrought, sad-hearted woman. To walk in loneliness round and round the fire-lit room, craving for human companionship, listening to the moaning of the wind as it swept down from Emily's

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moorland with a wild impetuous rush, and sobbed round the casement for the remembrance of patient little Anne—such was Charlotte's dreary lot. Harder still was her self-imposed task of editing her dead sister's books, writing a biographical sketch of each in the very room in which those stories had been read aloud by their writers. No wonder the labour left her, as she says, "prostrate and entombed."

Fortunately, her publishers kept her supplied with the newest books, and gradually she allowed herself to go for occasional visits to the "great world." She was persuaded to visit London and there met Thackeray, her literary hero, whom she idealised to an extent that made him decidedly uncomfortable. The excitement of meeting, hearing, and sitting next to a man to whom she looked up with such admiration as she did to the author of "Vanity Fair" was of itself overpowering to her frail nerves. She writes about this dinner as follows: "As to being happy, I am under scenes and circumstances of excitement, but I suffer acute pain sometimes,—mental pain, I mean. At the moment Mr. Thackeray presented himself, I was thoroughly faint from inanition, having eaten nothing since a very slight breakfast, and it was evening; the fear, excitement and exhaustion made savage work of me that evening. What he thought of me I cannot tell." Hastening back to Haworth, she poured forth her soul in recollections of the happy year at Brussels, in the pages of "Villette."

By this time Airedale, Wharfedale, Calderdale and Ribblesdale all knew the place of residence of "Currer Bell." She compared herself to an ostrich hiding its head in the sand; and says that she still buries hers in the Heath of Haworth moors; but "the concealment is but self-delusion." Indeed it was. Far and wide in the West Riding had spread the intelligence that "Currer Bell" was no other than a daughter of the venerable clergyman of Haworth; the village itself caught up some of the excitement. In 1851 Charlotte came to Ambleside to stay with Miss Martineau. She had stayed the year before near Bowness; she loved the Lake District and had great admiration for Miss Martineau.

Now comes the one bit of romance in the sad, starved existence. Yet scarcely romance, for the lover who appeared upon the scene was the most unromantic of curates—a Mr. Nicholls, who had served her father faithfully in the parish for some time. He had loved her for a long time with a silent, faithful affection which only with difficulty expressed itself in words. Charlotte

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seems to have ardently returned his love. At first Mr. Brontë would not hear of the marriage, but soon he saw that if he persisted he could hardly hope to save Charlotte from her sisters' fate. Suddenly he withdrew all opposition and was eager to hurry matters on as fast as possible. Far better than fame to her was the peaceful joy of married life, still spent in the old Parsonage, that no change might trouble her father's last years. But it was not to be for long. She was married in June, and on the last day of the following March she died.

As with wild moorland birds, it seems as though the souls of the three sisters could not bear even the restraint of the happiest home, the most gilded cage. Disgrace it is true had broken the wings of the gentle Anne; but endurance had never tamed the wild heart of Emily. And with Charlotte it was the same. Happiness had come too late: it was unnatural to the eager, restless soul to be loved and cared for; the cup of joy overflowed, and she too escaped into the unknown. And so when we read those wonderful novels, so full of life and emotion, we begin to realise the secret of their power, for they were written with the piercing dart of experience. Yet even they fall far short in interest and pathos from the lives of those three sisters themselves in their lonely home among the Yorkshire moors.

Books.—Mrs. Gaskell's "Life of Charlotte Brontë."  
"Some Eminent Women of Our Time.' [sic]  
Preface to "Wuthering Heights."