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Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

Excerpt

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## LIFE OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË.

## CHAPTER I.

THE Leeds and Bradford 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

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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

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## KEIGHLEY AND HAWORTH.

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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 farm-house and outbuildings, it can hardly be called "country" any part of the way. For two miles

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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 background 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

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## HAWORTH PARSONAGE.

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“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 quiet 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

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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. Brontë'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

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## HAWORTH CHURCH.

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refer inquirers concerning the date to the following inscription on a stone in the church tower:—

“Hic fecit Cænobium 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 common-place; 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

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LIFE OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË.

tablet on the right-hand side of the communion-table,  
bearing the following inscription:—

HERE  
LIE THE REMAINS OF  
MARIA BRONTË, WIFE  
OF THE  
REV. P. BRONTË, A.B., MINISTER OF 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 BRONTË, DAUGHTER OF THE AFORESAID;  
SHE DIED ON THE  
6TH OF MAY, 1825, IN THE 12TH YEAR OF HER AGE,

AND OF  
ELIZABETH BRONTË, 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 BRONTË,  
WHO DIED SEPT. 24TH, 1848, AGED 30 YEARS.

AND OF  
EMILY JANE BRONTË,  
WHO DIED DEC. 19TH, 1848, AGED 29 YEARS,  
SON AND DAUGHTER OF THE  
REV. P. BRONTË, INCUMBENT  
THIS STONE IS ALSO DEDICATED TO THE  
MEMORY OF ANNE BRONTË,  
YOUNGEST DAUGHTER OF THE REV. P. BRONTË, A.B.  
SHE DIED, AGED 27 YEARS, MAY 28TH, 1849,  
AND WAS BURIED AT THE OLD CHURCH, SCARBORO’.



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TABLETS OF THE BRONTË FAMILY.

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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. BRONTË, A.B., INCUMBENT.  
SHE DIED MARCH 31ST, 1855, IN THE 39TH  
YEAR OF HER AGE.

## CHAPTER II.

FOR a right understanding of the life of my dear friend, Charlotte Brontë, 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