

LIFE OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË.

CHAPTER I.

DURING this summer of 1846, while her literary hopes were waning, an anxiety of another kind was increasing. Her father's eyesight had become seriously impaired by the progress of the cataract which was forming. He was nearly blind. He could grope his way about, and recognise the figures of those he knew well, when they were placed against a strong light; but he could no longer see to read; and thus his eager appetite for knowledge and information of all kinds was severely balked. He continued to preach. I have heard that he was led up into the pulpit, and that his sermons were never so effective as when he stood there, a grey sightless old man, his blind eyes looking out straight before him, while the words that came from his lips had all the vigour and force of his best days. Another fact has been mentioned to me, curious as showing the accurateness of

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02051-0 - The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Volume 2

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

his sensation of time. His sermons had always lasted exactly half an hour. With the clock right before him, and with his ready flow of words, this had been no difficult matter as long as he could see. But it was the same when he was blind; as the minute-hand came to the point, marking the expiration of the thirty minutes, he concluded his sermon.

Under his great sorrow he was always patient. As in times of far greater affliction, he enforced a quiet endurance of his woe upon himself. But so many interests were quenched by this blindness that he was driven inwards, and must have dwelt much on what was painful and distressing in regard to his only son. No wonder that his spirits gave way, and were depressed. For some time before this autumn, his daughters had been collecting all the information they could respecting the probable success of operations for cataract performed on a person of their father's age. About the end of July, Emily and Charlotte had made a journey to Manchester for the purpose of searching out an operator; and there they heard of the fame of the late Mr. Wilson as an oculist. They went to him at once, but he could not tell, from description, whether the eyes were ready for being operated upon or not. It therefore became necessary for Mr. Brontë to visit him; and towards the end of August, Charlotte brought her father to him. He determined at once to undertake the operation, and recommended them to comfortable lodgings, kept by an old servant of his. These were in one of numerous similar streets of small monotonous-looking houses, in a

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02051-0 - The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Volume 2
Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell
Excerpt
[More information](#)

MR. BRONTË'S BLINDNESS.

3

suburb of the town. From thence the following letter is dated, on August 21st, 1846:—

“I just scribble a line to you to let you know where I am, in order that you may write to me here, for it seems to me that a letter from you would relieve me from the feeling of strangeness I have in this big town. Papa and I came here on Wednesday; we saw Mr. Wilson, the oculist, the same day; he pronounced papa's eyes quite ready for an operation, and has fixed next Monday for the performance of it. Think of us on that day! We got into our lodgings yesterday. I think we shall be comfortable; at least, our rooms are very good, but there is no mistress of the house (she is very ill, and gone out into the country), and I am somewhat puzzled in managing about provisions; we board ourselves. I find myself excessively ignorant. I can't tell what to order in the way of meat. For ourselves I could contrive, papa's diet is so very simple; but there will be a nurse coming in a day or two, and I am afraid of not having things good enough for her. Papa requires nothing, you know, but plain beef and mutton, tea and bread and butter; but a nurse will probably expect to live much better; give me some hints, if you can. Mr. Wilson says we shall have to stay here for a month at least. I wonder how Emily and Anne will get on at home with Branwell. They, too, will have their troubles. What would I not give to have you here! One is forced, step by step, to get experience in the world; but the learning is so disagreeable. One cheerful

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02051-0 - The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Volume 2

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

feature in the business is, that Mr. Wilson thinks most favourably of the case.”

“ August 26th, 1846.

“The operation is over; it took place yesterday. Mr. Wilson performed it; two other surgeons assisted. Mr. Wilson says, he considers it quite successful; but papa cannot yet see anything. The affair lasted precisely a quarter of an hour; it was not the simple operation of couching, Mr. C. described, but the more complicated one of extracting the cataract. Mr. Wilson entirely disapproves of couching. Papa displayed extraordinary patience and firmness; the surgeons seemed surprised. I was in the room all the time, as it was his wish that I should be there; of course, I neither spoke nor moved till the thing was done, and then I felt that the less I said, either to papa or the surgeons, the better. Papa is now confined to his bed in a dark room, and is not to be stirred for four days; he is to speak and be spoken to as little as possible. I am greatly obliged to you for your letter, and your kind advice, which gave me extreme satisfaction, because I found I had arranged most things in accordance with it, and, as your theory coincides with my practice, I feel assured the latter is right. I hope Mr. Wilson will soon allow me to dispense with the nurse; she is well enough, no doubt, but somewhat too obsequious; and not, I should think, to be much trusted; yet I was obliged to trust her in some things. . . .

“Greatly was I amused by your account of ——’s flirtations; and yet something saddened also. I think

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02051-0 - The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Volume 2

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SUCCESSFUL OPERATION FOR CATARACT.

5

Nature intended him for something better than to fritter away his time in making a set of poor, unoccupied spinsters unhappy. The girls, unfortunately, are forced to care for him, and such as him, because, while their minds are mostly unemployed, their sensations are all unworn, and, consequently, fresh and green; and he, on the contrary, has had his fill of pleasure, and can with impunity make a mere pastime of other people's torments. This is an unfair state of things; the match is not equal. I only wish I had the power to infuse into the souls of the persecuted a little of the quiet strength of pride—of the supporting consciousness of superiority (for they are superior to him because purer)—of the fortifying resolve of firmness to bear the present, and wait the end. Could all the virgin population of —— receive and retain these sentiments, he would continually have to veil his crest before them. Perhaps, luckily, their feelings are not so acute as one would think, and the gentleman's shafts consequently do'n't wound so deeply as he might desire. I hope it is so."

A few days later, she writes thus: "Papa is still lying in bed, in a dark room, with his eyes bandaged. No inflammation ensued, but still it appears the greatest care, perfect quiet, and utter privation of light are necessary to ensure a good result from the operation. He is very patient, but, of course, depressed and weary. He was allowed to try his sight for the first time yesterday. He could see dimly. Mr. Wilson seemed perfectly satisfied, and said all was right. I have had bad nights from the toothache since I came to Manchester."

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02051-0 - The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Volume 2

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

All this time, notwithstanding the domestic anxieties which were harassing them — notwithstanding the ill-success of their poems — the three sisters were trying that other literary venture, to which Charlotte made allusion in one of her letters to the Messrs. Aylott. Each of them had written a prose tale, hoping that the three might be published together. “Wuthering Heights” and “Agnes Grey” are before the world. The third — Charlotte’s contribution — is yet in manuscript, but will be published shortly after the appearance of this memoir. The plot in itself is of no great interest; but it is a poor kind of interest that depends upon startling incidents rather than upon dramatic development of character; and Charlotte Brontë never excelled one or two sketches of portraits which she has given in “The Professor,” nor, in grace of womanhood, ever surpassed one of the female characters there described. By the time she wrote this tale, her taste and judgment had revolted against the exaggerated idealisms of her early girlhood, and she went to the extreme of reality, closely depicting characters as they had shown themselves to her in actual life: if there they were strong even to coarseness, — as was the case with some that she had met with in flesh and blood existence, — she “wrote them down an ass;” if the scenery of such life as she saw was for the most part wild and grotesque, instead of pleasant or picturesque, she described it line for line. The grace of the one or two scenes and characters, which are drawn rather from her own imagination than from absolute fact, stand out in exquisite relief

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02051-0 - The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Volume 2
Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell
Excerpt
[More information](#)

HER FIRST TALE — “THE PROFESSOR.”

7

from the deep shadows and wayward lines of others, which call to mind some of the portraits of Rembrandt.

The three tales had tried their fate in vain together, at length they were sent forth separately, and for many months with still-continued ill success. I have mentioned this here, because, among the dispiriting circumstances connected with her anxious visit to Manchester, Charlotte told me that her tale came back upon her hands, curtly rejected by some publisher, on the very day when her father was to submit to his operation. But she had the heart of Robert Bruce within her, and failure upon failure daunted her no more than him. Not only did “The Professor” return again to try his chance among the London publishers, but she began, in this time of care and depressing inquietude,—in those grey, weary, uniform streets, where all faces, save that of her kind doctor, were strange and untouched with sunlight to her,—there and then, did the brave genius begin “Jane Eyre.” Read what she herself says:—“Curren Bell’s book found acceptance nowhere, nor any acknowledgment of merit, so that something like the chill of despair began to invade his heart.” And, remember, it was not the heart of a person who, disappointed in one hope, can turn with redoubled affection to the many certain blessings that remain. Think of her home, and the black shadow of remorse lying over one in it, till his very brain was mazed, and his gifts and his life were lost;—think of her father’s sight hanging on a thread;—of her sisters’ delicate health, and dependence on her care;—and then admire as it deserves to be admired, the steady

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02051-0 - The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Volume 2

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

courage which could work away at "Jane Eyre," all the time "that the one-volume tale was plodding its weary round in London."

I believe I have already mentioned, that some of her surviving friends consider that an incident which she heard, when at school at Miss Wooler's, was the germ of the story of Jane Eyre. But of this nothing can be known, except by conjecture. Those to whom she spoke upon the subject of her writings are dead and silent; and the reader may probably have noticed, that in the correspondence from which I have quoted, there has been no allusion whatever to the publication of her poems, nor is there the least hint of the intention of the sisters to publish any tales. I remember, however, many little particulars which Miss Brontë gave me, in answer to my inquiries respecting her mode of composition, &c. She said, that it was not every day that she could write. Sometimes weeks or even months elapsed before she felt that she had anything to add to that portion of her story which was already written. Then, some morning, she would waken up, and the progress of her tale lay clear and bright before her, in distinct vision. When this was the case, all her care was to discharge her household and filial duties, so as to obtain leisure to sit down and write out the incidents and consequent thoughts, which were, in fact, more present to her mind at such times than her actual life itself. Yet notwithstanding this "possession" (as it were), those who survive, of her daily and household companions, are clear in their testimony, that never was

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02051-0 - The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Volume 2

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

TIME AND MODE OF COMPOSITION.

9

the claim of any duty, never was the call of another for help, neglected for an instant. It had become necessary to give Tabby—now nearly eighty years of age—the assistance of a girl. Tabby relinquished any of her work with jealous reluctance, and could not bear to be reminded, though ever so delicately, that the acuteness of her senses was dulled by age. The other servant might not interfere with what she chose to consider her exclusive work. Among other things, she reserved to herself the right of peeling the potatoes for dinner; but as she was growing blind, she often left in those black specks, which we in the North call the “eyes” of the potato. Miss Brontë was too dainty a housekeeper to put up with this; yet she could not bear to hurt the faithful old servant, by bidding the younger maiden go over the potatoes again, and so reminding Tabby that her work was less effectual than formerly. Accordingly she would steal into the kitchen, and quietly carry off the bowl of vegetables, without Tabby’s being aware, and breaking off in the full flow of interest and inspiration in her writing, carefully cut out the specks in the potatoes, and noiselessly carry them back to their place. This little proceeding may show how orderly and fully she accomplished her duties, even at those times when the “possession” was upon her.

Any one who has studied her writings,—whether in print or in her letters; any one who has enjoyed the rare privilege of listening to her talk, must have noticed her singular felicity in the choice of words. She herself, in writing her books, was solicitous on this point. One

B 2

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02051-0 - The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Volume 2

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

set of words was the truthful mirror of her thoughts; no others, however apparently identical in meaning, would do. She had that strong practical regard for the simple holy truth of expression, which Mr. Trench has enforced, as a duty too often neglected. She would wait patiently searching for the right term, until it presented itself to her. It might be provincial, it might be derived from the Latin; so that it accurately represented her idea, she did not mind whence it came; but this care makes her style present the finish of a piece of mosaic. Each component part, however small, has been dropped into the right place. She never wrote down a sentence until she clearly understood what she wanted to say, had deliberately chosen the words, and arranged them in their right order. Hence it comes that, in the scraps of paper covered with her pencil writing which I have seen, there will occasionally be a sentence scored out, but seldom, if ever, a word or an expression. She wrote on these bits of paper in a minute hand, holding each against a piece of board, such as is used in binding books, for a desk. This plan was necessary for one so short-sighted as she was; and, besides, it enabled her to use pencil and paper, as she sat near the fire in the twilight hours, or if (as was too often the case) she was wakeful for hours in the night. Her finished manuscripts were copied from these pencil scraps, in clear, legible, delicate traced writing, almost as easy to read as print.

The sisters retained the old habit, which was begun in their aunt's life-time, of putting away their work at