

HAWORTH

By HUMFREY MICHELL

A VISIT to friends in Yorkshire in the summer of 1950 afforded me an opportunity long desired, of going to Haworth, the home of the Brontës. I wanted to see for myself the place where that tragic family had lived their short unhappy lives. I wanted to be where they had been, to look with my own eyes at what they had seen, the moors they had loved so passionately, the little town, the house that had been their home. I felt that if I could do that I might, perhaps, come a little nearer to an understanding hitherto denied me, of the tragedy of those strange people. I do not think my curiosity was morbid; I just wanted very much to go to Haworth, and when my host suggested driving there, I gratefully accepted his kindly offer.

On the morning we started the sky was overcast and rain was threatening. The Yorkshire dales can be very beautiful under a shining sun when the heather is blooming, but the prospect was gloomy as we drove along. We climbed Greenhow Hill, the scene of Private Learoyd's unfortunate encounter with Primitive Methodism in Kipling's story. The hills are precipitous and the dales low lying, and over and over again we climbed and descended to pass through little stone built villages. I do not know how the Yorkshire stone affects other visitors, but I must confess that it oppressed me. I longed to see red brick or white-washed houses, hedgerows bright with wild roses of the South of England, and not the neverending grey walls, hard and unlovely, that turn black when the rain beats upon them. But by the time we reached the end of our journey the clouds had cleared, the sun was shining, and the oppression of gloomy skies had passed. High on the top of the last hill we climbed was Haworth, which Charlotte called "a miserable little village, buried in dreary moors and moss-hags and marshes." It has grown a good deal in the last hundred years and can hardly be called a village but a small town of some 4000 inhabitants. I thought it was far from miserable, but rather a bright, neat place which gives a decidedly favourable impression to the visitor.

We walked up the street as far as the Black Bull, the tavern in which Branwell used to carouse. We were there during closing hours, so I could not offer a libation to his memory, and we turned and walked up the path by the churchyard

so crammed with tombstones that not an inch is left vacant, exactly as Charlotte described it. The parsonage stands on a slight rise of ground to the East, so close to the churchyard as to be almost in it. My host, who had been there before, resolutely refused to enter the house again; it was too painful, he said. I was a trifle surprised, but after my first visit I agreed with him and sympathised with his reluctance to have his feelings lacerated once more.

Outside, the house is gaunt and ugly, but since the Brontes' day considerably enlarged by a new wing. The whole place is now a museum beautifully kept by the Bronte Society, so I entered and paid my sixpence to the custodian. I had expected the interior to be gloomy and dark, but I was agreeably surprised to find it otherwise. There are many large windows, two to each room, and all was bright; tastefully furnished I can imagine the house might be quite attractive. So the first of my preconceptions had been proved false. But I hated the stone floors and staircase, which called for bright hued carpets to hide their unlovely surfaces. The entrance hall is rather fine, much more imposing than Mrs. Gaskell's description would suggest. Turning to the right I entered the dining room where the family, with the exception of Mr. Bronte, who always ate alone, had their meals and where much, if not all, their later writing was done. A large fireplace must keep the room warm, and before it on the hearthrug the mind's eye can see Emily seated, her little writing desk on her knees, the grim and unlovely dog Keeper on one side and on the other the old cat Tiger, perhaps the only friends that dark soul ever had. "She never showed regard to any human creature; all her love was reserved for animals," said Charlotte.

Between the windows stands the old-fashioned upright piano on which the sisters played, Emily with more than ordinary ability. In the centre of the room is the large mahogany dining table on which meals were served. Again the mind's eye sees the three sisters pacing round and round and round on these strange walks, talking endlessly, comparing notes on the progress of their writings and arguing on this or that point in their stories.

Against the wall stands the sofa on which Emily died. The sight of it gave me what old-fashioned people call a "turn"; it gave me the horrors and I hastily averted my eyes. It was unbearable to me as the vivid scene that Charlotte called "Emily's terrible death" was presented to my imagination.

Everyone knows the story of the passing of that poor tormented woman, indomitable, asking no pity or succour. I thought of that morning when she rose and tried to dress herself, coming downstairs and picking up the needlework her glazing eyes could no longer see, fighting grimly to the very end. I thought of Charlotte hurrying out to the moor to find a sprig of the heather she had loved so passionately and her anguish when she saw that Emily could not see it. The last scene was very grievous as the poor woman stood leaning on the table, surrendering at last to whisper that she would see the doctor she had so resolutely refused to have before; the final collapse and her being borne to the sofa where she died. I could not bear it and turned hastily from the room.

I am sorry I entered the dining room first. I think the rest of the house would not have oppressed me so much if I had left it to the last. I did not feel comfortable in any part of the house; but at least the other rooms, with the exception of Emily's little bedchamber, did not so acutely distress me. I even smiled when I glanced into the wretched dark little hole that had been turned into Nicholl's study. It had been used before to store peat and firewood: but I reflected that it was quite good enough for one of the curates that Charlotte despised so heartily. That she should marry one at last has always seemed to me slightly incredible; just as I have found George Elliot's marriage hard to believe.

The parlour was the Rev. Patrick Bronte's study, a place of awe to the children who never dared enter it unbidden. I do not think I have ever really understood or comprehended that remarkable man. That he was a morose hypochondriac seems certain; but it is equally certain that he was never unkind to his children. He seems to have been more or less indifferent, until they achieved fame when he took a lively interest and great pride in them. Perhaps after all he was only the stern ascetic Victorian father, who carried what he considered his duty to his family a little further than usual and achieved a good measure of tyranny over them. But I have often wondered what was the real reason for his refusal to be present at Charlotte's wedding; that perhaps is an engima that will never be solved.

I went to the staircase and looked at the corner, at its foot where Emily chastised Keeper for jumping on her bed, and where the fierce dog bit her wrist. I pictured her going to the kitchen to heat the poker red hot and cauterise the wound,

with never a cry or whimper at the pain. No coward soul that. I thought of her again in the little room at the head of the stairs which had been the children's nursery when young, and on whose walls can still faintly be seen little drawings of heads and figures scratched in the plaster. Later this was Emily's bedroom, a cold, austere little chamber, a monastic cell, unadorned and ugly, but a very fitting one for its occupant. I felt there that I was intruding with inexcusable rudeness in prying on the privacy of the dead woman, and that I must instantly leave the room with stammered apologies for my clumsy intrusion.

The room for so long Aunt Branwell's, later occupied by Charlotte and her husband and where she died, contains many relics. In glass cases hang two of her dresses, a bonnet, some shoes and stockings, a few little articles of simple jewellery and her workbox, filled with threads, needles and pins, just as she had left it. Again in this room I felt uncomfortable. I felt I should not be looking at these intimate possessions, and that my curiosity was tactless and lacking in the courtesy due to a sensitive lady.

I went into the room which had been occupied by Mr. Brontë and Branwell and where both died. I thought of the unhappy, tortured paranoiac boy and the tragedy of his life, the slow disintegration of his powers and his final miserable end. Surely it is not true that Branwell died in Delirium Tremens, as some have asserted? I most sincerely hope not for the sake of the poor father and horrified sisters. I would much rather believe that he died peacefully, not without some measure of dignity, as Charlotte tells. Or was she purposely concealing the truth? I do not know.

I went downstairs after little more than a glance at the rooms in the new wing. I had had enough and I wanted to get out. I felt that the whole house was haunted and the place, though actually bright, was dark and gloomy. The feeling of oppression was unbearable; I was ill at ease and felt unhappy, so I left the house. I did not want to stay there any longer.

I went round to the back and walked to the gate in the fence, and gazed over the rising moorland before me. That was, perhaps, the only place where I felt a lightening of the spirit and a feeling of tenderness of perception. It was pleasant to think of that little band of children wandering out together hand in hand, Charlotte the little mother helping the tiny Anne. And I thought when they were older of the three sisters

going off on their long walks, utterly fearless of any molestation, to sit by the spring in the dell and being happy and contented, perhaps the only happiness that poor Emily ever enjoyed. The heather was not in bloom when I was there, so I missed its exquisite purples and browns. I would have liked to have gathered a little bunch of it.

I turned away and walked down through the graveyard to the church which is modern, that of the Bronte's time having been pulled down and a much larger and finer one built, only the original tower remaining. The family vault in which they are all buried, except Anne, is by the chancel steps. I did not linger there, I wanted to get away, and I sought my host who was waiting for me. We drove away down the steep and narrow street, the steepest I am told, in all England except that of the Cornish Clovelly, and over the road to Keighley four miles away. I thought of the sisters trudging to the library there to bring back the books they so eagerly coveted. It was a long walk for young girls, and I thought they must have been very weary after they had climbed that cruelly precipitous hill laden with their burdens.

So ended my visit to Haworth. I really hardly know whether I am glad I went there or not; but I suppose on the whole I am glad. But I never want to visit it again; I had had enough, and more than enough, of that distressing house. I felt as I might have had I witnessed a painful sight, been present at some grievous incident which harrowed my susceptibilities and aroused acute feelings of pity and commiseration. And all the time I felt I was intruding, thrusting myself upon the seclusion, the shrinking reserve of the lonely sisters. I could almost feel the pained and protesting eyes fixed upon me in mute remonstrance at my unfeeling invasion of their privacy.

It is always futile to try and imagine what might have been if fate had ordered otherwise. But I could not help wondering whether the tragedy of the Brontes might not have been averted, or perhaps mitigated, if the father's cure of souls had been in a more gracious, blander, climate, perhaps by the sea, perhaps at Penzance so fondly remembered by Aunt Branwell. I am sure Emily would have loved the sea as passionately as she loved her lonely moors, and we know how deeply it affected Charlotte and Anne. But the motherless children were shut up, imprisoned in the wild country, where the winters are hard, and the rain and snow and raging winds are relentless. It was no climate for delicate, frail creatures in whom was the

taint of tuberculosis and mental instability. There the children had seen Maria and Elizabeth die. They had been just old enough for the bitter memory of what they thought was the harsh treatment they had both received at the detested school at Cowan Bridge to sink into their souls. There they had seen an admired brother sink slowly into a drunken sot, beaten by that same world that was so cruel. There they had been shut up with a father that shunned them and an Aunt who, for all her kindness and care, had preached a harsh, unlovely religion.

They looked from their windows upon the crowded churchyard; they heard the passing-bell toll from the tower; they had seen the little coffins of their dead sisters borne from the house to their graves, and they became obsessed with death. Only on the moors, alone, clinging to each other for mutual comfort and succour, could they escape the dreadful world that killed innocent children and ruined fine young men; for them it was a world of hatred and cruelty. An obsessing shyness, an invincible shrinking from contact with others beset them. If life was to be worth living at all it must be a life remote and secluded, peopled with the creatures of their own fancies.

The tragedy of the Brontes was that these fancies did not bring them peace; the creatures of their imagination were not benign and gracious. They could not create for themselves a dream world of light and happiness, love and tenderness. Their over stimulated imaginations created images that haunted them; they were hag-ridden and they sank into early graves. Haworth killed them all; it was no place for young girls such as they. When they left the shelter of the parsonage, the only shelter they knew, they could not find release or happiness. So they crept back, like wounded animals, to be alone once more, to find in that brooding loneliness no serenity, only a protection from the buffets of life, a retreat from the cruelties of the world. It killed them all, sent Branwell mad, and turned Emily into a misanthropic introvert. I think it was the tragedy of Branwell's death that finally crushed Emily. To have him dying like that in his own home, was too much for her. If he had died in a distant place she might have borne it; but to watch his slow disintegration, the wreck of his mind, the dissolution of his powers, was unbearable. She could not contemplate the beloved brother sinking into a drugged misery. It killed her.

Anne seems the only one who in her last hours realised the fatal effect of their home upon them all and tried to escape. If she could only get to Scarborough, to the sea, to a scene totally

unlike the bleak moors, to a place where the destroying influence of the house could not conquer and kill her, she would be all right. She could make a last stand against the disease that had fastened upon her, even perhaps triumph over it, and defy death and live. Her passionate insistence on getting away came from an instinct denied the others. Anne made one last forlorn attempt to escape, but too late. Charlotte, too, made a fight for her life in her own way. She was of tougher fibre, spiritually and physically, than the others. Ever since Maria's death she had been a mother to the younger children and the altruism imposed upon her by this had saved her from the fate of Emily. Even the episode of her infatuation for Constantin Héger had really kept her going; it did at least take her mind away from the hypochondriacal father, the besotted brother and the morbid Emily. She too made one last desperate bid for life—she married Nicholls. It was a true instinct that made her do it; just as Anne's instinctive flight from Haworth had been a right one. But again it was too late. A few brief months of happiness were all that remained for her. Her marriage was a success, as the last letter she wrote to Ellen Nussey shows, and the pitiful words she whispered on her death bed, "I'm not going to die am I? We have been so happy." Haworth had killed her too, the last of them, the last of the children to die.

I was told that, next after Stratford-on-Avon Haworth is the most visited literary shrine in England, and that over 50,000 people go to the parsonage every year. I suppose it is all right for the Bronte Society to preserve it as a museum, charge sixpence to enter it and sell picture postcards and guide books there. I am not criticising them; I am sure the opportunity of visiting the place must be prized by many reverent and deeply sympathetic pilgrims. But I want to shut the place up. I want to close it forever, so that no human foot should ever pass the threshold again, no curious eyes behold the pitiful relics of the poor unhappy sisters, no blundering sightseer ever again intrude upon their passionately guarded privacy. Perhaps then, in the serene tranquillity of the hushed and waiting hours, the spirits of the dead women might return and find peace.

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