

Chapter I

The Lives of Mrs. Gaskell & Charlotte Brontë"

Mrs. Gaskell

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, though her life has been described as an uneventful one, had some remarkable powers in herself. The Winkworths once wrote in their memoirs about her :

" When we first knew Mrs. Gaskell she had not yet become celebrated, but from the earliest days of our intercourse with her we were struck with her genius, and used to say to each other that we were sure she could write books, or do anything else in the world that she liked. And the more we knew of her the more we admired her -----
All her great intellectual gifts — her quick, keen observation, her marvellous memory, her rare felicity of instinct, her graceful and racy humour — were so warm and brightened by sympathy and feeling, that when actually with her you were less conscious of her power than of her charm. No one ever came near her in the gift of telling a story ----- When, a few years later, all the world was admiring her novels, we felt that what she had actually published, was a mere fraction of what she might have written, had her life been a less many-sided one; so that fine as it was it scarcely gave an adequate idea of her highest powers; but her other occupation left her little time for literary work. Her books, indeed, were only written when all possible domestic and social claims had been satisfied "1

She was born in Chelsea on 29th September 1810, christened Elizabeth after her mother, and Cleghorn after her father's associate, in East Lothian.

From her father, a Unitarian minister, William Stevenson, she inherited some part of her talent. For he was known to be studious at school and scholarly at his theological college; also, when still in his early twenties, he had been classical tutor at Manchester Academy. In addition to these qualities, his contributions to the Edinburgh Review, and his editorship

1 Mrs. Gaskell by Yvonne Ffrench

of The Scots Magazines clearly proved his literary ability which, without doubt, had some influence on developing his daughter's literary interests, even though the evidence of her talent did not appear until many years after her marriage.

Elizabeth's mother (née Holland) died when the daughter was only thirteen months old, an age too young for her to be under the care of such a young man as Stevenson, who soon got married a second time to a woman in whose company Elizabeth felt unhappy. So Chelsea was no more than her birthplace. She was entrusted to her aunt, Mrs. Hannah Holland Lumb, at Knutsford in Cheshire, a small town in the south of England. Her upbringing in a semi-rural environment was another important source of inspiration for her work. She was very happy in her new, or we should say, her real home, where everybody was kind to her. Her happy home-life with her aunt and the bitter memories of Chelsea, where her father and step-mother lived, enabled her to understand human nature thoroughly and to be able to sympathize with both sides; the happy, tender-hearted people whose lives were easy and those poor, suffering wretched souls who toiled long hours in factories and so on. So there is no doubt why she endeared herself to everyone who came near her. She could be friends with the most reserved or the most shy person in the world. Charlotte Brontë¹, after their first meeting, described her in a letter dated August 26th 1850 to Ellen Nussey :

" A woman of the most genuine talent - of cheerful, pleasing, and cordial manners, and, I believe, of a kind and good heart. "1

Knutsford, where Elizabeth's childhood was spent, is the original of the town of Cranford in the book of that name, of Hollingford in Wives and Daughters, and of many other towns in her other novels. She lived there until 1825. During her time at Knutsford she used to accompany her uncle, Dr. Peter Holland on his rounds

1 Elizabeth Gaskell by Gerald De Witt Sanders.

and later created in his memory the pattern of the old-fashioned country doctor which was also very useful to her writings.

Her first schooling began when she was fifteen years old. She spent two years at the Avonbank School at Stratford-on-Avon where she was taught Italian, French, drawing, music and deportment, the standards of which must have been exalted, if the etiquette of the young lady in My Lady Ludlow is representative. The Misses Byerley were her teachers. Though she stayed there only for a short time, the instruction she received there had a considerable effect on herself for she grew up to be a lady of refined manners and remained so to the end of her life.

Elizabeth was called to London immediately after she had returned to Knutsford in 1827, because her brother, John Stevenson, had vanished on a sea voyage; she went to live again with her father in the Beaufort Street household which became deeply impressed on her memory owing to the loss of her brother. Later, in her writings she often created characters who, for different causes, sooner or later disappear, leaving their loved ones unhappy. For example, Peter in Cranford, Will Wilson in Mary Barton and Roger Hamley in Wives and Daughters. She did not live with her father for more than two years, for then he died and there was no reason why she should go on staying in the same house with her step-mother, who did not love her or make her feel at ease.

In 1827 Elizabeth moved to Newcastle on Tyne with William Turner whose young daughter, Ann, her cousin, needed her companionship. She observed the situation of her new surroundings and of the character of Mr. Turner, whose profound charity and faith were later embodied in her novels. A cholera epidemic broke out and Elizabeth and Ann were packed off to Edinburgh for some months, after which the former came down to Manchester on a visit to Ann's elder sister. There she met William Gaskell, an assistant minister of the Cross Street Unitarian Chapel. He was a serious young man with a promising future. It was not surprising that they fell in love, for both of them were good -

looking and distinguished. Moreover, he was intellectual and she, besides being extremely entertaining, was equally talented. The two married in 1832 when Mr. Gaskell was twenty-seven years old and Elizabeth, twenty-two. They were, as everyone would agree, a very suitable pair — though Mrs. Lumb wrote to her niece after hearing of his proposal :

" How could the man ever
take a fancy to such a
little giddy, thoughtless thing
as you? "1

Their married life was passed in Manchester, which even then was a big industrial town. There was nothing dramatic about it. She spent most of her time in domestic affairs and she had a calm life with her husband who often remained shut up in his study for hours at a time and did not bother her much. She was a good mother, a dutiful wife and a sympathetic friend; therefore she was naturally constantly involved in social activities. While still at Knutsford, she had given lessons in Sunday School, done charitable errands and called on the poor — the usual activities of young women of respectable upbringing at that time. Being the wife of a minister in the industrial north, Mrs. Gaskell met with conditions of poverty much more terrible and completely different from what she had seen in Knutsford, where there were tender, kind people who mostly led comfortable lives harmonizing with the soft climate. In Manchester, on the contrary, the working people suffered tragically. Mrs. Gaskell's nature was sympathetic, so she felt sorry for the victims of financial self-seeking, though at first she could not help them as much as she wished, because she was not yet accustomed to such harsh circumstances. However, she did not try to escape from reality — she learned little by little the reality of the evils of that industrialized district. The more observations she made, the more she sought an outlet for her compassion. She did not begin to write until 1837; but before that time her ideas had already been formed. She had in mind both the problem

1 Mrs. Gaskell by Yvonne Ffrench

of the injustices done to the working class in Manchester and the nostalgia she felt for the peaceful rural life she had enjoyed with her aunt at Knutsford. She understood the differences between the two situations and she wished to share her former experience of the calm happiness of country life with her generation.

The Unitarians were considered far away superior to any other group of people in Manchester in intellect and refinement of manners. As the daughter and wife of Unitarians, Mrs. Gaskell somehow unconsciously received some of their qualities. In Manchester, she had already made friends with some intellectual society people — for example with the Winkworths, the memoirs of one of whom have given us much of interest about Mrs. Gaskell, including the passages already quoted in this chapter.

Though it is obvious that Mrs. Gaskell must have had the ability and materials to write long before she actually began, she did not devote all her time to writing. Her babies began to make their appearances from the year following her marriage, which made it difficult for such a good mother and dutiful wife as herself to spare the time for other work outside household affairs. She loved the children dearly and took care of them willingly; so, for a long time, she was not very serious about her literary work. First of all, she tried to contribute only articles to Blackwood's as a collaborator with her husband. In 1837, she wrote Sketches Among the Poor (no.1) which later was developed into Mary Barton. Unlike other famous writers who have to isolate themselves in order to concentrate on their work, Mrs. Gaskell could work even when she was surrounded by her playful children. This was rather surprising to Charlotte, who once indicated her disapproval of subordinating art to social and domestic life in a letter to Mrs. Gaskell,

" A thought strikes me. Do you, who have so many friends, so large a circle of acquaintance — find it easy, when you sit down to write, to isolate yourself from those ties, and their sweet associations, so as to be your "own woman", uninfluenced or swayed by the consciousness of how your work may affect other minds;

what blame or what sympathy it may call forth? Does no luminous cloud ever come between you and the severe Truth, as you know it in your own secret and clear-seeing soul? In a word, are you never tempted to make your characters more amiable than the life, by the inclination to assimilate your thoughts to the thoughts of those who always "feel" kindly, but sometimes fail to "see" justly? "1

In 1844, Mrs. Gaskell became really serious on her writing — this change occurred when her only son died while she and her husband were visiting North Wales. Being a loving mother and especially fond of this particular child, Mrs. Gaskell was hardly expected to survive the shock. She was seriously ill for weeks and, after that, her husband suggested a work of fiction in order to distract her from this deep sorrow. His advice caused a change in her whole future. Hence Mary Barton, a tale of Manchester life, was begun.

The appearance of Mary Barton caused some controversy. The story was criticized as being unfair to the mill-owners in that ^{it} made the workmen even poorer than they really were in real life and the rich too heartless towards their distress; but Mrs. Gaskell has been recognized since then as having reported the conditions of that period accurately.

She had, as we have seen, already begun to contribute to magazines before Mary Barton was published. Three short stories appeared in the pages of Howitt's Journal, namely: Libbie Marsh's Three Eras and The Sexton's Hero in 1847, and Christmas Storms and Sunshine in 1848. The first resembles Mary Barton in some respects. It describes Manchester operatives and the industrial scene. The second concerns heroism and sacrifice based on episodes picked up from stories of her acquaintances. The last is much lighter and full of delightful humour like that which was later to appear in Cranford and Wives and Daughters.

She was now definitely committed to literature as a profession. The following shows her close relationship with

1 Mrs. Gaskell by Yvonne Ffrench

important literary figures of her day.

" In May, 1948, she went to London and received a cordial welcome. At the home of Samuel Rogers, where she breakfasted, on May 7th, she met Mrs. Dickens. Of the party also was John Forster, who had recommended to Chapman and Hall the acceptance of her novel. On May 12 she was at the dinner which Dickens gave to celebrate the publication of David Copperfield, and there met among others the Carlyles, Thackeray, and Douglas Jerrold. Shortly afterwards she was received by Carlyle in his home at Chelsea, and by John Forster in his chambers at the Middle Temple. At Monckton Milnes's, the same year, she met Guizot, Maurice and Archdeacon Hare; and during the summer vacation, which she spent at Skelwith, near Ambleside, she met Wordsworth. These literary acquaintanceships brought her admission into the best literary circles of England and established her among her own kind as one of the recognized writers of the age. "¹

In the latter part of 1847, the Gaskells moved from Upper Ramford Street to No. 42 (now 84) Plymouth Grove where her descendants continued to live until 1913. The house was frequently used to entertain many distinguished people, among whom were Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Ruskin, Lord Houghton and the Carlyles, etc.

In 1850, Mrs. Gaskell was invited to contribute some works to Household Words, the magazine belonging to Dickens. Many of Mrs. Gaskell's short stories and serials appeared in it. In August of the same year, there was a meeting between herself and Charlotte Brontë at the home of Sir James and Lady ~~Ray~~-Shuttleworth at Briery Close. The two women were almost immediately attracted to each other. Charlotte was "truly glad of her companionship."²

1 Elizabeth Gaskell by Gerald De Witt Sanders

2 A letter from Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, dated Aug. 26, 1850 quoted in Elizabeth Gaskell by Gerald De Witt Sanders

As a result of the meeting, Charlotte and Mrs. Gaskell became warm friends and, because of this friendship, it was Mrs. Gaskell whom Mr. Brontë¹ chose to write the life of his daughter, which was begun soon after Charlotte's death.

In 1851, the sketches in Cranford began to appear in Household Words, and later this series was collected to form the book which has become the most widely read of Mrs. Gaskell's works, although most of the sketches are deficient in plot and story. She used to write under strange conditions for a serious writer, as the following quotation shows:

" She always wrote at the dining-room table at Plymouth Grove, after breakfast was cleared away and while daughters skipped in and out of the room, talking, planning, discussing arrangements all together. Instructions were required by maids about meals, by the gardener about fruit, a dressmaker wished to fit a skirt or Meta (her daughter) needed advice about a sketch. Bonnets had to be trimmed, and headaches had a tiresome persistence throughout, which was perhaps not surprising. Privacy at all events was undreamed of. "¹

In that same year, Charlotte visited Mrs. Gaskell and her family in Manchester for two days on her way to London. Charlotte described her visit to Mr. Smith in a letter written in 1851 :

" She (Mrs. Gaskell) lives in a large, cheerful airy house, quite out of Manchester smoke; a garden surrounds it, and, as in this hot weather the windows were kept open, a whispering of leaves and perfume of flowers always pervaded the rooms. Mrs. Gaskell herself is a woman of whose conversation and company I should not soon tire. She seems to me kind, clever, animated, and uneffected; her husband is a good and kind man too. "²

In 1853 Mrs. Gaskell published Cranford and Ruth, and she paid a late September visit to Charlotte at Haworth. Such exchange visits between the two writers brought them closer to each other.

1 from Mrs. Gaskell by Yvonne Ffrench

2 Elizabeth Gaskell by Gerald De Witt Sanders

They talked over events of their childhood, especially of Charlotte's. The latter related a great deal about all the Brontë sisters. She spoke of Maria's death which was like that of Helen Burns) of the character of Emily, which she had represented in Shirley, and so on. Mrs. Gaskell described that visit as follows :

" We were so happy together; we were full of interest in each other's subjects. The day seemed only too short for what we had to say and to hear. I understood her life the better for seeing the place where it had been spent — where she had loved and suffered. "¹

In 1855, North and South was published. Mrs. Gaskell's name did not appear on the title page, but the writer was identified as " The Author of Mary Barton, Ruth, Cranford, etc. " This novel, which deals with the events of a period subsequent to that of Mary Barton, was written in 1854. During Mrs. Gaskell's visit to the home of Florence Nightingale's family at Lea Hurst, the peaceful and spiritual atmosphere of the house enabled Mrs. Gaskell to consider clearly and decide about the social problems involved in her forthcoming book. The novel appeared serially in Household Words during the winter of 1854.

The friendship between Mrs. Gaskell and Charlotte grew warmer through their exchange of correspondence. Their last meeting was when Charlotte went to Leeds to buy her trousseau, during which time she spent three days at Plymouth Grove in 1854. Mrs. Gaskell was one of the few to be invited to the wedding, though she did not attend it. Nine months later Charlotte was dead! And in 1855 — that same year, Mrs. Gaskell was requested by Mr. Brontë to write the Biography of Charlotte. After that the materials for The Life of Charlotte Brontë were collected and prepared. The book was finally published in 1857 after two years spent in looking for the material and doing the actual writing. It grew to be highly appreciated from a literary point

1 The Life of Charlotte Brontë by Mrs. Gaskell

of view and was especially important because it cleared up some misunderstandings about Charlotte on the part of her contemporaries. Charles Kingsley wrote a letter to Mrs. Gaskell, congratulating her on the success of this book :

" Let me renew our long interrupted acquaintance by complimenting you on poor Miss Charlotte's Life. You have had a delicate and a great work to do, and you have done it admirably. Be sure that the book will do good. It will shame literary people into some stronger belief that a ~~simple~~, virtuous, practical home life is consistent with high imaginative genius, and it will shame, too, the prudery of a not over cleanly, though carefully whitewashed age, into believing that purity is now (as in all ages till now) quite compatible with the knowledge of evil. I confess that the book has made me ashamed of myself. Jane Eyre I hardly looked into, very seldom reading a book of fiction — yours, indeed, and Thackeray's are the only ones I care to open. Shirley disgusted me at the opening : and I gave up the writer and her books with a notion that she was a person who liked coarseness. How I misjudged her! and how thankful I am that I never put a word of my misconceptions into print, or recorded my misjudgements of one who is a whole heaven above me.

Well have you done your work, and given us the picture of a valiant woman made perfect by sufferings. I shall now read carefully and lovingly every word she has written ----- "1

This book was published while Mrs. Gaskell was on the Continent with her two elder daughters and Catherine Winkworth. First, they went to Italy and stayed at the home of William Wetmore Story in Rome and, after that, they visited the Brownings in Florence. Mrs. Gaskell met Madame Mohl in Paris, and Charles Norton in Italy. The latter accompanied her party when they left Rome and he was frequently with them on their sight-seeing trips.

Upon her return to England, she produced several stories, one of which was My Lady Ludlow which first appeared in Household Words. It contains two or three excellent characters. Lady

1 Life of Charles Kingsley quoted in Elizabeth Gaskell by Gerald De Witt Sanders

Ludlow is a fine old aristocrat who believes in upholding all the traditions and who is absolutely domineering.

This book is one of Mrs. Gaskell's more well-known works.

Between 1858-1864, Mrs. Gaskell wrote a great number of short stories and also travelled a great deal. She went to Whitley on the coast of Yorkshire to gather material for Silvia's Lovers. In 1863, she toured France and met Swinburne in Rome. In 1864, Cousin Phillis and Silvia's Lovers were published. Mrs. Gaskell also planned a new novel for The Cornhill at the invitation of George Smith. The result was Wives and Daughters, the first part of which was soon ready for publication.

By November of 1865, Wives and Daughters was near its end. Mrs. Gaskell was writing the final installment in Dieppe. Before it was completed, she went to the Lawn, at Holy-bourne, the home she had bought the previous summer as a Christmas surprise for her husband. She was accompanied there by her three younger daughters and Mr. Crompton, her son-in-law. On November, 12th all of them were sitting together having tea. While Mrs. Gaskell was discussing future plans with all the rest, she suddenly stopped talking; her head fell forward; and in a moment, she was dead! The cause of death was diagnosed as heart disease. She was buried on November 16th at Knutsford, in the yard of the Unitarian Church. In 1866, Wives and Daughters, though not quite finished, was published posthumously.

Charlotte Brontë

It is impossible to write about Charlotte Brontë without a brief description^{of} Haworth, the isolated Yorkshire village where Charlotte lived with her parents, brother, and sisters and remained during almost the whole of her life from the age of four onwards. The scenery and isolation exercised a profound influence in moulding the genius of Charlotte and that of all the Brontë children. Haworth parsonage is described as follows:

" They (the Brontës) passed the church, and following the "little and the lone green lane," came in sight of their new abode --- a narrow,

grey, oblong house, built of stone. It was pierced with five windows on the upper storey, placed at symmetrical intervals. Below were four other windows, two on either side of the front door. Before it was a plot of land, called by courtesy a garden, with a low stone wall running round it divided in the lower portion by a door that was always kept locked and was only opened for the transmission of a coffin. The house stood at right angles to the road, facing the great tower of St. Michael's Church, and the slopes around, and about it were filled with tombstones — black, grey, or white according to their age — that looked almost like discoloured foam upon the heathery turf."¹

The village was thinly populated. The parsonage in which the Brontës["] lived was built of millstone grit, grey, two-storeyed, heavily roofed with flags in order to resist the winds which might have stripped off a lighter covering.

Brought up in such surroundings and having few contacts with human beings outside their own family, the Brontë["] children grew up in isolation. However, life at the parsonage was not really unhappy because the family was at first a large one, consisting of six children, besides the parents and the servants. The father and mother did not give them enough loving attention, care and sympathy, for the first did not naturally love children, while the latter's health declined after the birth of Anne, the youngest of Charlotte's sisters. The children, therefore, had to take care of themselves and of their younger sisters. They were all intelligent and loved each other as much as brothers and sisters can possibly love.

Charlotte Brontë["] was born on the 21st of April 1816, the eldest daughter of Patrick Brontë["], an Irish rector who had raised himself from obscurity to enter Cambridge and take Holy Orders. It is interesting to learn about him from studying Charlotte's life because, of all his six children, she alone remained with him until near the end of his life. He was rather domineering

1 Haworth Parsonage by Isabel C. Clarke

and somewhat eccentric. According to Mrs. Gaskell :

" His opinions might be often both wild and erroneous, his principles of action eccentric and strange, his view of life partial, and almost misanthropical; but not one opinion that he held could be stirred or modified by any worldly motive; he acted up to his principles of action; and if any touch of misanthropy mingled with his view of mankind in general, his conduct to the individuals who came in personal contact with him did not agree with such a view. It is true that he had strong and vehement prejudices, and was obstinate in maintaining them, and that he was not dramatic enough in his perceptions to see how miserable others might be in a life that to him was all-sufficient... "1

Charlotte's mother, born Maria Branwell, was a devoted and fervently pious Methodist with a mind of sense and taste. She died in 1821 after giving birth to six children : Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte, Patrick Branwell, Emily Jane and Anne, respectively. Mr. Brontë["] did not remarry; though he intended to marry Mary Burden or Elizabeth Firth both of whom he had known years before, but the two women rejected his proposals. It seemed that fate preferred him to be lonely all his life. Although he had many children, they usually shared their thoughts and feelings among themselves rather than come to their father who loved to keep himself alone in his room, because he felt their appearance to be a tiresome interruption to his comfort.

All of them moved to Haworth parsonage in 1820. They had an aunt, Miss Branwell, to take care of and educate the children. Charlotte and the rest were extraordinarily intelligent. They did not want any society but their own, in which they created their dream worlds to satisfy their loneliness. Charlotte's father gave this picture of them in his letter to Mrs. Gaskell :

1 The Life of Charlotte Brontë["] by Mrs. Gaskell

" As soon as they could read and write, Charlotte and her brother and sisters used to invent and act little plays of their own, in which the Duke of Wellington, my daughter's hero, was sure to come off conqueror,"¹

And Mrs. Gaskell also relates :

" They (the Brontës)["] took a vivid interest in the public characters, and the local and foreign as well as home politics discussed in the newspaper. Long before Maria Brontë["] died, at the age of eleven, her father used to say he could converse with her on any of the leading topics of the day with as much freedom and pleasure as with any grown-up person. "²

These descriptions show quite well the Brontës' precocity. They first went to Cowan Bridge School, but before this they had already learnt how to read and write at home and they had read a great deal of books from the local library. Branwell, being the only boy, and the pride and hope of the family, was left to be educated at home by his father; and Anne, being too young, did not go to school like the other girls. Cowan Bridge was impressed painfully upon their hearts because Maria and Elizabeth died there owing to malnutrition and the insanitary conditions. The events at Lowood, the orphan asylum in Jane Eyre, were based upon Charlotte's experience of the cold, hungry, comfortless place where she used to be at the age of eight.

Charlotte and Emily returned to Haworth in 1825 after studying at Cowan Bridge for nine months. For a time the four remaining children stayed together at home. During that time, they shared their dreams together and wrote about their imaginative world. Their writings included plays such as Islanders, Young Men, and Our Fellows. Since Charlotte and Branwell were older than the other two, they were the prime movers of the plays and inspired the adventures described in them. These plays had

1 The Brontë Story by Margaret Lane

2 Life of Charlotte Brontë by Mrs. Gaskell

their origins from the books they had read, from their toy wooden soldiers and sometimes from their imaginations. Charlotte wrote her early works in tiny-sized volumes : her laborious eye-destroying script many have been due to her desire to make it proportionate to the wooden soldiers, or else it was because she wanted to economise paper. The works were kept secret for more than a century. As Charlotte had observed :

" Best plays mean SECRET plays, they are very nice ones. All our plays are very strange ones. "1

What was extraordinary about the Brontës' games was that they produced an extensive and precocious literature, and, as the children grew up, they provided a fantasy world which for all of them, at various times, became a substitute for life.

They enjoyed creating their own world until Charlotte was sent to Miss Wooler's school at Roe Head in 1831, alone. This new school had a comfortable family atmosphere and Charlotte was less homesick than before. She had a respectable teacher of some education and refined manners and also two close friends to whom she could confide anything. The number of pupils was not more than ten girls; this made individual interest and training possible. But, unfortunately, Charlotte was by nature very shy — too shy to be happy among people. She was trained to be a governess, a profession she would never be able to pursue successfully owing to her character and health, but which she could not avoid. Charlotte as a school-girl was thus described by Mary Taylor and Ellen Nussey :

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" We thought her very ignorant for she had never learnt grammar at all, and very little geography. She would confound us by knowing things that were out of our range altogether. She was acquainted with most of the short pieces of poetry that we had to learn by heart; would tell us the author, the poem they were taken from, and sometimes repeat a page or two, and tell us the plot Some of us once urged her

1 Emily Brontë by Muriel Spark and Derek Stanford

to be on our side in a game at ball. She said she had never played, and could not play ----- She always showed physical feebleness in everything ----- She made poetry and drawing at least exceedingly interesting to me ----- We used to be furious politicians ----- She said she had taken interest in politics ever since she was five years old. She did not get her opinions from her father — that is, not directly — but from the papers and so on, he preferred."¹

In 1835 she became a governess at Roe Head, with Emily who stayed there with her for only three months because she could not bear being homesick. Emily, who loved the moors more than anything else, had to return to Haworth; for as Charlotte said, she would have died, had she gone on staying away from home — Anne, the youngest, took Emily's place at Roe Head.

During the six years from 1835-1841, the Brontë girls had to fight against their own natures. The three sisters earned their living in the outer world by being governesses and teachers, which was contrary to the solitary and unartificial mode of life they loved. Charlotte, however, could endure the new life of disciplined routine better than the others, because she was always conscious of her responsibility. She realized the strength of her obsession and its dangers and tried not to yield to her desire of being always at her own home with her beloved brother and sisters. This is also seen in their writings — Emily's one point of superiority was her full surrender to the creative spirit which Charlotte fought with all the strength of her mind.

In 1842, Charlotte and Emily went to Brussels to study French in a school conducted by M. and Madame Héger, because Charlotte had decided to start a school after some six months of training on the Continent. In Brussels, Charlotte enjoyed being a student under the care of M. Héger who could provide her with intellectual satisfaction and who was very kind to her.

1 The Brontë["] Story by Margaret Lane

From her letters to M. Héger, written after she had been forced to return to Haworth on account of her father's ill health, it is evident that she had fallen in love with her Belgian professor. She suffered cruelly from being so far away from him and, worst of all, from his silence. Charlotte knew that she should not be in love with a married man and she tried hard to conquer her irresistible passion. A letter to M. Héger a year later proves that her condition was still as bad as before :

" I tell you frankly that I have tried meanwhile to forget you ----- I have done everything; I have sought occupations; I have denied myself absolutely the pleasure of speaking about you --- even to Emily; but I have been able to... conquer neither my regret nor my impatience -----, Why cannot I have just as much friendship for you, as you for me --- neither more nor less ? Then should I be so tranquil, so free --- I could keep silence then for ten years without an effort ---- . To write to an old pupil cannot be a very interesting occupation for you, I know, but for me it is life. Your last letter was stay and prop to me --- nourishment to me for half a year. Now I need another and you will give it me; not because you bear me friendship --- you cannot have much --- but because you are compassionate of soul and you would condemn no one prolonged suffering to save yourself a few moments' trouble. To forbid me to write to you, to refuse to answer me, would be to tear from me my only joy on earth, to deprive me of my last privilege ----- So long as I believe you are pleased with me, so long as I have hope of receiving news from you, I can be at rest and not too sad. "I ----- and so on.

Her miseries were growing at home and adding to the sorrow of this disappointment in love. Mr. Brontë's sight was failing more rapidly. Branwell, the promising young man who was the darling of the family, fell in love with Mrs. Robinson, a woman twenty years older than himself, and Mr. Robinson, his employer, dismissed him. He began giving himself up to brandy and opium and declined all work. His odd behavior grieved all

the three sisters. Moreover, the school which Charlotte intended to start did not go on successfully — not a single pupil offered herself, because of Haworth's remote situation.

As a cure for grief Charlotte set herself to write poems. Moreover Emily and Anne tried to write too. In 1846, a volume called Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, was published. They used men's names to avoid the mid-Victorian prejudice against "Female" writers. Emily's poetry is by far the best.

Charlotte took her father to have a cataract operation in Manchester, where she began to write Jane Eyre without letting him know. Though Jane Eyre was her first published work, she had written another before it was begun. This was The Professor which had been offered to publishers and refused six times; finally it appeared in 1857, after her death.

Jane Eyre was published in October 1847, and achieved a great and immediate success — such people as Leigh Hunt, George Henry Lewes and, above all, Thackeray (who was greatly admired by Charlotte) praised it as the best novel of the season. At the same time, Emily and Anne produced Wuthering Heights and Agnes Grey, but these two books were not so popular at the time as Jane Eyre. However — Wuthering Heights is now considered the most original among the books of her time, and it is so full of poetic expression that many critics regard its writer as far greater than Charlotte and Anne.

The names Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell at once became known in the English literary world, but to whom they belonged was still a mystery. Some people thought the three names belonged to one person, but whether to a man or a woman they did not know. Jane Eyre was causing excitement in London. Thackeray, one of those who enjoyed reading this book, was sure that Currer Bell was not a man

"Who the author can be I can't guess. If a woman, she knows her language better than most ladies do, or has had a "classical education"

----- it is a woman's writing, but whose?"¹

¹ The Brontë Story by Margaret Lane

The sisters continued to protect their incognito until July 1848, when the American publishers of Jane Eyre, who had signed a contract for Currer Bell's next novel, found another publisher selling the works of Ellis and Acton Bell both of whom they took to be the same person as Currer. So Smith and Elder wrote to Haworth for an explanation. Thereupon the three sisters agreed to make themselves known to Charlotte's publisher to confute the accusation. They resolved that Charlotte and Anne should go to London that very day. Later, Charlotte wrote a letter to Mary Taylor, who had been taken into her confidence concerning the identity of the Bells, about the events of that day in London,

" At last we were shown up to Mr. Smith ----- I then put his own letter into his hand, directed to Currer Bell. He looked at it and then at me again. ' Where did you get this ? ' he said. I laughed at his perplexity., a recognition took place. I gave my real name : Miss Brontë". We were in a small room, ceiled with a great skylight, and there explanations were rapidly gone into, Mr. Newby, being anathematised, I fear, with undue vehemence. Mr. Smith hurried out and returned quickly with one whom he introduced as Mr. Williams, a pale, mild, stooping man of fifty ----- Another recognition and a long, nervous shaking of hands. Then followed talk - talk - talk."¹

The sisters spent/^a few days of excitement in London. They visited the Royal Academy and the National Gallery, went to the Opera, dined with Mr. Smith, had tea with Mr. Williams and so on. This for them was an important, although exhausting experience and, at the same time, there was much pleasure in that visit to London. Having contact with literary society and beginning to enjoy the taste of fame were the fulfilment of Charlotte's dreams, but she was doomed to be disappointed in other ways all through her tragic life because of the force of

1 The Brontë Story by Margaret Lane.

circumstances. The hopeless Branwell's health declined more and more and he died in September, 1848, after a brief and painful struggle. This incident brought anguish to all the Brontës, for they still remembered that he had once been very dear to them. His funeral took place on September 24th 1848, the very last day for Emily to be outdoors, for she caught cold and began to lose her appetite. This time Charlotte and Anne grew doubly worried, for Emily refused to take medicine. She died in the following month of that same year. The parsonage was now very sad and quiet indeed.

"Some sad comfort I take," wrote Charlotte on Christmas Day, "As I hear the wind blow and feel the cutting keenness of the frost, in knowing that the elements bring her no more suffering — their severity cannot reach her grave — her fever is quieted, her restlessness soothed, her deep, hollow cough is hushed forever."¹

There was no respite from the grief of loss for poor Charlotte, for the same fate shortly overtook Anne, who (like so many members of that family) seems to have suffered from acute tuberculosis. It was decided that Anne should go to a warmer place than the cold, unhealthy Haworth. Anne herself had a desire to go to Scarborough — it was a dying wish which Charlotte felt unwilling to refuse. So leaving Mr. Brontë with two servants at the parsonage, the two sisters, accompanied by Ellen Nussey, went off. Four days after they left home, Anne died and was buried at Scarborough apart from the other Brontës, for Charlotte wished "to save Papa the anguish of the return and a third funeral."²

Now Charlotte was left alone in awful solitude; day by day, she had no one to speak to who understood her. Success could no longer give her the pleasure she had dreamt of — it could only nourish her desire to survive.

1 The Brontë Story by Margaret Lane

2 The Brontë Story by Margaret Lane

Charlotte took more interest in her writing — Shirley, which had been begun while Emily and Anne were alive, was now finished and was published in 1849. It was well-received and increased the reputation of its author. Mrs. Gaskell, Harriet Matineau and even Thackeray wished to meet her, so Charlotte, although lonely at home, could find some pleasure in associating with those people. She was finally able to throw off her reserve, though at first she felt rather unhappy to be among famous literary men whom she thought were far more intelligent than herself; for in her own estimation, she was "fearfully stupid" Charlotte spent some time in London and had personal contact with the Smiths, Rogers, Richmond, and other critics, including Sir James ~~Ray~~-Shuttleworth who invited her to Briery close where she met Mrs. Gaskell. She returned to Haworth with pleasant memories, but the noiseless life became more oppressive to her than ever. When spring appeared and the moors invited her as they had done in the past, she found the solitude intolerable :

" ----- everything reminds me of the time when others were with me, and then the moors seem a wilderness, featureless, solitary, saddening. My sister Emily had a particular love for them, and there is not a knoll of heather, not a branch of fern, not a young bilberry leaf, not a fluttering lark or linnet, but reminds me of her. The distant prospects were Anne's delight, and when I look round she is in the blue tints, the pale mists, the waves and shadows, of the horizon. In the hill-country their poetry comes by lines and stanzas into my mind: once I loved it; now I dare not read it. "¹

1 The Life of Charlotte Brontë by Mrs. Gaskell



Her unhappiness was deepened when Shirley was castigated by The Times as "at once the most high flown and stalest of fictions." and by an article in the Edinburgh Review headed "Mental Equality of the Sexes ? — Female Literature," stressing the author's sex in almost every line.

Charlotte's lonely life was interrupted by two proposals, which she could not accept, however hard she tried to consider all the advantages of marriage — security, escape from solitude and so on. One was from Mr. Taylor, a partner in the firm of Smith Elder, with whom Charlotte thought she could not have been happy; for, " He is second-rate -----

Were I to marry him, my heart would bleed in pain and humiliation ----- "1

The other was from George Smith, who was an agreeable young man about six or seven years younger than Charlotte. They would have married " were there no vast barrier of age, fortune, etc. .. "2

Her father's curate, Arthur Bell Nicholls asked Charlotte to be his wife in 1852 — he won her hand by loving her as a woman, not as Currer Bell whom Smith and Taylor cared for as a writer. They were married on the 29th of June 1854 at Haworth. She knew more after her marriage about life, discovering "that it was a strange and perilous thing for a woman to become a wife."

" Providence offers me this destiny. Doubtless then it is the best for me ", she wrote to Ellen. "3 Mr. Nicholls proved to be formidable authoritative and possessive; he even censored Charlotte's letters to her close friends. She seemed, however, pleased with her married life; but "Providence" again did not allow her much more than nine months of happiness, for she caught cold after

1 A letter to Ellen Nussey written in 1851 quoted in The Brontë Story by Margaret Lane

2 Ibid

3 The Brontës by Phyllis Bentley

walking to look at a waterfall with her husband and returning under a rainy sky. Her condition of early pregnancy weakened her, in addition to the long spell of cold. She died on 31st March 1855, whispering these last words :

" Oh! I am not going to die, am I ? He will not separate us, we have been so happy. "1

A Comparison of the two Lives

From their early childhood, both Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë["] were motherless. Mrs. Stevenson, Elizabeth's mother died when her baby was not even one year old, and Mrs. Brontë["] died when Charlotte was only three. They might have become more alike if their backgrounds and surroundings had not been so different. Each of them was taken care^{of}/by an aunt: Elizabeth Gaskell was put in charge of Mrs. Lumb, a kind, tender and loving woman who mothered the young orphan so carefully that she never felt as lonely as other children in the same condition; while Miss Branwell, a sister of Charlotte's mother who came to take charge of the little Brontës["], was aloof, fault-finding and tyrannical. However, she was a gentlewoman who brought up her nieces to be admirable housewives with a strong sense of duty. She was not a mother or at all like a mother towards Charlotte and her sisters. Charlotte lacked what every **child** profoundly needs — motherly affection. As a consequence, she suffered from awful loneliness from early childhood. This was the first great difference between the lives of the two women novelists.

Knutsford in Cheshire, where Elizabeth went to live with her aunt, was situated in a charming, soft countryside very

1 The Life of Charlotte Brontë["] by Mrs. Gaskell.

unlike the rainy, snowy, cold, grey, and windswept Haworth (Yorkshire) where Charlotte lived nearly all her life. The contrasting atmospheres of Knutsford and Haworth widened the gap between the two women's characters and influenced their works. Mrs. Gaskell grew up to be friendly, charming, peace-loving and every inch a typical Victorian lady. She has given us a delicate picture of the society of a small provincial town in Cranford, which is not so much a novel as a description, thinly disguised in fiction, of actual conditions in a sleepy country town of that period. This book proves its writer to have been a tender and gentle humorist. Her other novels, which deal with social problems and are based on her close observation of the realities she encountered in Manchester and elsewhere, show her sympathetic kindness and her attempt to bring about cooperation between manufacturers and operatives.

As her friends, the Winkworths, have told us :

" Her books, indeed, were only written when all possible domestic and social claims had been satisfied." ¹

Charlotte, on the other hand, was wild, passionate, imaginative and did not display sympathy so readily. She was shy in front of people. She often wrote of adventures of the spirit, rather than describing actual everyday events, because she had strong powers of imagination which needed this outlet. This observation does not include Shirley, an exception to the rest of her works, as it concerns more or less the same problem as that dealt with by Mrs. Gaskell in Mary Barton.

Concerning hereditary traits, Mrs. Gaskell was born of an intellectual father who used to contribute literary articles to a famous magazine, The Edinburgh Review, while Charlotte's father was much interested in politics and his duty as a parson. So

1 The Brontës by Phyllis Bentley.

Mrs. Gaskell, though, as far as we know, she never wrote anything when she was young, knew something about writing. Charlotte, thanks to her father's taste for literary and political magazines, was able to begin writing when she was only ten years old. We know this exactly because, in her notebook, History of the Year 1829, she wrote -

" Our plays were established :

Young Men, June 1826; Our

Fellows, July 1827; Islanders,

December 1827 ----- "1

As we have seen, the Brontës were precocious - they did not like to play as ordinary children; instead they created a world of their own to escape from the monotony of loneliness. Their father, Mr. Brontë, was not very friendly towards children. He wished to make them hardy and indifferent to the pleasures of eating and dress. His strong, passionate Irish nature was, in general, repressed with resolute stoicism; and he brought up the children to be like himself. That is why they had to associate exclusively with their elders, and to read newspapers and magazines suited to adults. Besides running wild on the moors, they had nothing else to do, so they began early as writers of their own magazines and of the imaginary cycle-saga of Angria. Charlotte had no other literary background, whereas Mrs. Gaskell, soon after her marriage, came into contact with many well-known writers. But Charlotte was a born writer, and her natural talent was supported by her talented sisters and brother; so we know her as Miss Brontë, not as Mrs. Nicholls, because her works were well-known before her marriage. On the other hand, we know of Mrs. Gaskell by her married name and seldom think of her as Miss Stevenson.

1 The Brontës by Phyllis Bentley.

Mrs. Gaskell received her education from Avonbank School, a very good school for young girls of society. Charlotte, after being at Cowan Bridge — a dirty and unhealthy place — for a short period, was also fortunate enough to be sent to a fairly good school — Miss Wooler's at Roe Head. The headmistress, Miss Margaret Wooler, became a friend whom Charlotte loved and respected. She also gained two more life-long friends there, Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor, to whom Charlotte wrote many letters that are of great use in tracing her personal affairs.

Mrs. Gaskell married; at the age of twenty-two, a distinguished Unitarian who taught history and literature at New College, Manchester. Thenceforward, she had to busy herself with her husband, sharing the activities of a minister, taking care of her babies, paying visits to her father and so on, whereas Charlotte had plenty of time because she was in complete isolation. Of course she had to run the house and look after her ailing father; but, in spite of that, she had enough leisure to feel lonely. So she created her dream-world which had a supremely important result — because she was able to put it into writing. In 1835, Charlotte wrote of this in lines full of poetic expression :

" We wove a web in childhood
 A web of sunny eir;
 We dug a spring in infancy
 Of water pure and fair;

" We sowed in youth a mustard seed,
 We cut an almond rod;
 We are now grown up to ripe age;
 Are they withered in the sod ?

" Are they blighted, failed and faded ?
 Are they mouldered back to clay ?
 For life is darkly shaded,
 And its joys fleet fast away! "¹

1 The Brontës — arranged and introduced by
 Phyllis Bentley

She was a teacher at Miss Wooller's for a short time in 1836, but she was unhappy there — as she usually was anywhere away from home. She was rather an intellectual snob, like most ambitious people. Unfortunately, having been born in a very poor family, she had to support herself. The choice of a career for respectable girls of the Victorian period was limited. They could be teachers or governesses and that was about all. Charlotte did not like children and hated monotony and drudgery. The contrast was very great between her actual life as a plain, poverty-stricken teacher and her dream-life of beauty and love, intellectual fame and reasonable wealth. In 1837, she took her first situation as governess in a private family. Jane in Jane Eyre, suffering misery during the luxurious house-party at Thornfield, reflects Charlotte's own unhappiness, for she suffered as Jane did while governessing the little Adèle Varens.

In 1842, Charlotte and Emily were escorted to the "Mansion d'Education Pour les Jeunes Demoiselles", conducted by M. and Madame Héger in Brussels — there the great adventure of Charlotte's life took shape. In spite of her shyness, which from the first kept her awkwardly apart from the other pupils, Charlotte at least felt happy in her new surroundings :

" I was twenty-six years old a week or two since," she wrote to Ellen, " and at this ripe time of life I am a school girl, a complete school girl, and on the whole very happy in that capacity. I felt very strange at first to submit to authority instead of exercising it — to obey orders instead of giving them; but I like that state of things. "¹

Charlotte learnt well and quickly because she possessed the characteristics mentioned by M. Héger to Mr. Brontë :

" Cette assurance, cet aplomb si nécessaire dans l'enseignement. "²

1 The Brontë Story by Margaret Lane

2 The Brontë Story by Margaret Lane

She stayed in Brussels for ten months and was summoned home because of Miss Branwell's death. Charlotte and Emily returned to Haworth; but, only one month later, Charlotte went to Brussels again, travelling alone, Margaret Lane tells us about this return as follows :

" There is no doubt that her emotional response to M. Héger played its part in her determination to return; it is equally clear that she had no idea where her feelings were taking her. She sincerely believed that her sole reason for going back was to complete her training for the profession she had chosen, and it was not for many months that she began to suspect the true nature of her emotional predicament. "1

This time was a contrast to the first, for she lacked Emily's company, and Madame Héger seemed less kind. Moreover, she did not feel happy about having fallen in love with a married man. Mrs. Gaskell did not have any problems as tragic as this; she met Mr. Gaskell when she was twenty-two; both fell in love and they were happily married. Like most Victorian women, she led a calm life with her husband and many children. The only differences were that she travelled widely, made friends with many famous people, and finally did some important work in writing for social purposes.

Charlotte returned to Haworth again after one year of governess-ship at The Pensionnat Héger, during which she had been miserable. Yet Haworth seemed a dreadful place because she still longed for M. Héger's love and friendship, so she thought of writing something in order to satisfy her loneliness. Thus The Professor was begun after she had tried writing works of poetry with limited success.

Mrs. Gaskell's first novel was inspired by an equally unhappy circumstance: for when her only son died suddenly,

1 The Brontë Story by Margaret Lane

she was so stricken with grief that she began to write to keep from giving way to it too much. But the contents of Mary Barton and The Professor are very different. Charlotte did not get away from herself; for, whenever she wrote, she chiefly concentrated her mind and memory on what had happened ^{to} herself, so that all her novels ^{are} to a greater or lesser extent autobiographical; they concern herself (disguised as a man or a woman) and the circumstances of people around her. Mrs. Gaskell's main theme is completely outside herself — she was more concerned with classes of people rather than with individuals — it was only sometimes that she permitted her own experiences to become involved in her books, such as the disappearance at sea of John Stevenson and references to her own pet superstitious beliefs.

Both Mrs. Gaskell and Charlotte had many literary friends, but Charlotte travelled less. When she went to London, it was only to see her publishers. It was on those occasions that she met Mr. Newby, Mr. William, George Smith, and Mrs. Gaskell. Mrs. Gaskell was invited to join literary people many times and at different places. She knew Dickens, Thackeray, Newman, Florence Nightingale, the Winkworths and many other people of note. Her house was often frequented by these people. Charlotte and Mrs. Gaskell first met each other at the home of Sir James ~~May~~-Shuttleworth and immediately became fast friends. After that they sometimes exchanged visits and correspondence.

In their writings, both were criticized cruelly at first; Charlotte in that her books concern original characters who are strong, emotional and passionate, whose actions usually seemed shocking to the Victorians. Many critics assumed that such characters could not have been created by a young woman entirely innocent of the experiences they underwent. Mrs. Gaskell's

novels, Mary Barton, for example, were thought to be unjust to the rich because of what some readers called her over ~~sympa-~~thetic treatment of the poor. Mrs. Gaskell understood Charlotte's circumstances and felt sympathetic towards her, so she was glad to be asked by Mr. Brontë["] to write a true account of his daughter's life. The famous Life of Charlotte Brontë["] enabled many people, including writers of that period, to understand Charlotte and made them admire her much more than ever.

Between 1848 and the year of her death in 1855, Charlotte was left in misery, for her brother and sisters died one after another. She had no one even to talk to in Haworth. So she spent most of her solitary hours writing. The only brief intervals she had were her visits to London and her few contacts with literary friends such as Mrs. Gaskell who led a completely different life. The latter was warmly surrounded by husband, daughters, sons-in-law and many friends. She did a good deal of travelling towards the end of her life, because, as she grew older, she found the Manchester climate in winter too rigorous for her health. She also felt that Manchester was not a quiet place in which to write. Besides, her life there always kept her busy as a minister's wife and a hostess. During her trips, she was usually accompanied by daughters, sons-in-law and friends. Up to the moment of her death, she was seldom alone, and she died surrounded by her family.

It was not until quite late in life that Charlotte married Arthur Bell Nicholls who had entered upon his first curacy at Haworth in 1844. How he came to love Charlotte we do not know, but in 1852, she became conscious of his love and his proposal followed in that same year. He was rejected at first by Mr. Brontë["], but his constant correspondence won Charlotte's heart

and they were married on 29th June 1854. She was lonely even on her wedding day; her father did not wish to go to the church, so she was given away by Miss Wooler. On Charlotte's side, only eighteen guests attended the wedding.

Mr. Nicholls was punctual and practical and he wanted his wife to be submissive to him, so Charlotte found little time to write because he liked her to share his occupations. However, her married life was fairly happy. Only nine months later, she died of tuberculosis, the old Brontë "enemy", on 31st March 1855.