

# Charlotte Brontë's Secret Love

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p 15-30

## I

The bells of the church of Saint-Michel and Sainte-Gudule strike twelve and you find yourself in the year 1842: a time when ladies' taffeta dresses rustle, the streets are illuminated by gaslights, the seed of married men must not be spilt and penniless girls sell their long plaits. You will witness a love story; a forbidden romance. Piles of letters bound with yellowy ribbons bear testimony to this clandestine love, this passion which was illicit, but could not be simply extinguished. The story takes place in a kingdom so small and absurd that it is difficult to believe it does not exist purely in the imagination: Belgium. The name seems to come from a fable, but indeed Caesar mentioned the Belgians and wrote that they were the bravest of all the Gauls. However, this tiny country, a louse in the coat of Europe, is particularly fertile, with lush meadows and fat cows and geese so big you can scarcely lift them. Although most farmers and labourers have only just enough to eat to keep the flesh on their bones, the gentry are plump and sturdy and the ladies have luxuriant hips and breasts and oval, rosy faces. The good people of Belgium cannot all understand each other, since the king likes to express himself in German, the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie speak French, the common people in the south of the country use a French patois and in the north they speak Flemish – a rich dialect of Dutch. So much Babylonian twittering brings confusion and disunity. If you come across a specimen of the repressed Flemish working class, note the strong but obstinately shrugged shoulders: the head thrust a little forward in an attitude of eternal suspicious attention, the eyebrows set in a frown above a look of silent rebellion. Belgium: where division reigns. And although it is a ridiculously small country, it has a capital that is growing at frightening speed: Brussels! A city with a heart of spacious squares and wide avenues that intersect at right angles, of palaces and mansions and a splendid park with shady walks – a worthy domicile for the rich and the bourgeoisie. From the edges of this heart wind the streets of the common people overripe with increasingly numerous damp alleyways. And through the canals of the city, between the houses of both noblemen and paupers a narrow river flows, muddy green in colour and stinking fearsomely.

But before you travel with the heroine of this story to the rampantly growing Brussels – by steamer across the North Sea and by stagecoach through the Flemish countryside – I shall give you one glimpse of her future there.

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See how the young teacher wanders restlessly through the streets of Brussels. The day has been exhaustingly hot and darkness has still not fallen. She does not want to return to the boarding school yet. A booming of bells catches her attention. It is the hypnotic voice of the church of Saint-Michel and Sainte-Gudule calling the faithful to vespers. She does not know what possesses her, but she hurries towards it, along the rue de la Chancellerie and up the many white stone steps to the church. Next to the porch a beggar puts out his hand towards her and she gives him a coin, not for his salvation, but for hers. How cool it is in the church. A few women are sitting praying with rosary beads between their fingertips. She wished she could sink down onto the flagstones, but she goes and sits at the side to wait until evening prayers are over. In a deserted corner of the church, confessions are being heard. Confession! She is a sinner and she must tell her story. Someone must listen to her. A working-class woman approaches the confessional; she tidies her greasy hair by smoothing it against her skull and straightens her apron. Can the priest see her then? Isn't confession anonymous?

She can still change her mind: she can go back to the streets where no one knows her. However, she remains seated and waits. The woman emerges from the confessional with the trace of a smile on her lips.

She gets up, scarcely knowing what she is doing. The tradition is alien to her: how should she address the priest? She creeps into the confessional, lets the red velvet curtain fall behind her and is almost overpowered by the smell of incense, pipe tobacco and old sweat. Just enough light enters to be able to vaguely make out the face behind the wicker grille.

'*Mon père,*' she says and the blood rises to her head. 'I have sinned.'

'Are you a foreigner?' asks the priest severely, obviously surprised by her accent.

She answers in the affirmative, and adds that she was brought up as a Protestant. He wants to know if she is still a Protestant and she nods, which he appears not to see, so she clears her throat and whispers: '*Oui, mon père.*' He says that in that case she cannot confess. Tears well up in her eyes. If he dismisses her without letting her tell her story, she will be close to despair. She tells him this and begs him to listen to her.

'*Ma fille,*' says the priest tenderly, making her almost choke on her tears. 'Confess and let this be your first step towards the true Church.'

She tells him everything, at a furious tempo. About the safe but oppressive life in her father's house and how she escaped from it. How she thought she would be able to enjoy freedom in Brussels, but allowed herself to be shut up in a boarding school. The priest's face comes closer to the grille: she feels his breath on her cheek.

'Tell me what your sin is.'

And she tells him. She tells him everything.

# The Journey

## II

Cast an eye over England and look for the windy, treeless hills of West Yorkshire. There, in the small, but overpopulated industrial town of Haworth, at the top of the steep, blustery main street and behind the church with its careless draughts board of mossy tombstones, lies the parsonage, where a young woman of twenty-five is taking her white petticoats down from the washing line in the back garden. Her name is Charlotte Brontë and she is, as yet, unaware of the fame that will one day be hers— and of the passion that awaits her in distant, dissolute Brussels.

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Charlotte is busy with the washing, which gives us the opportunity to observe her at our leisure. She is not beautiful, that should be made clear at once; she is not exquisite, rich and spoiled like Blanche Ingram or seductive like Ginevra Fanshawe— characters from her later novels. No thick golden hair falls in waves over her shoulders; no rosy mouth waits to be kissed. But isn't the importance of physical beauty greatly exaggerated? Sit with me at the window of the White Lion or the Black Bull, two popular taverns in Haworth, or even a random café in a metropolis like Paris, and let us watch the passers-by. How many beauties are there among them? How many women with completely symmetrical features and noses without the least bend in them, how many classical athletes, muscular and with a healthy head of hair and perfect skin? We can sit there for hours without seeing one—and then all of a sudden, a pearl. They are rare, beauties, and how ridiculous it is to get worked up over prettiness when it is simply not given to most people.

She may not be beautiful, this Miss Brontë, but she is certainly not unattractive. Her rich, soft hair (rabbit brown, mixed with a drop of fox red) has a severe centre parting, and two braids fall over each ear in a low loop which is gathered at the back with the rest of her hair. Her face is an almost virgin canvas, on which the only colour is supplied by the lively, dark eyes and sensitive mouth. There is a certain charm in her features, and the way she moves is feminine. She takes the wooden peg from the line and bends gracefully to put the petticoat into the basket. She stretches to catch hold of the second petticoat and reveals her ankles—in her haste she has forgotten to put stockings on, and is wearing only wooden gardening clogs—and her ankles are slim and elegant. What a delicate woman; the wrists of her white hands are scarcely broader than those of a child. Although it is only February, spring is in the air and for a moment Charlotte turns her face towards the sun.

'Emily!' she cries in the direction of the open kitchen door. 'Come here a moment.'

Her sister does not come, and Charlotte takes her leave of the geese by herself, and when Keeper, Emily's dog, pushes his head against her belly and growls softly she scratches his neck and gently tugs a fold in his skin. Is there still time for a walk on the moor? The melancholy she feels about leaving her home tomorrow is greatly tempered by her impatience to depart. There won't be time, she knows, and she puts down the basket and goes to the front garden: a lawn with a couple of overgrown brambles against the low wall, a lilac and a few rough pines.

A gap between the pines affords a view of the church of St. Michael and All Angels, and she has never known any different: it is the church where her father preaches and in her childhood she thought the tower was the highest in England. Since she has seen York Minster, the church tower has come down in her estimation and its brown colour reminds her of a rotten tooth. Between the church and the garden wall is an extension of the cemetery; there are a few standing tombs here and there, but most stones are flat on the ground, as if the living want to prevent the dead from creeping out of their graves. Charlotte's mother and her older sisters Maria and Elizabeth are buried in the family vault near the altar in the church. Her mother was thirty-eight when she died—not that young when you consider that most inhabitants of Haworth die at a much younger age. Maria and Elizabeth were only eleven and ten when they succumbed to typhus.

She opens the garden gate and in the look that scans the view there is a certain affection, although she cannot wait to put as great as possible a distance between herself and the town. She will not return; if she has her way she will never return.

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‘I hope the mild weather continues.’

She turns and there comes her father, a clergyman in the Church of England, holding his Bible and prayer book for the evening service. At sixty-four he is still an impressive-looking man: slim and handsome, his coarse red hair almost completely silver-white now. He still takes the same long steps, but recently a touch of hesitancy has crept in. The northern blue of his eyes is increasingly troubled by cataracts.

‘Daughter, are you taking your leave?’

When she hears his deep, calm voice the emotion wells up in her and she cannot answer. He puts his hand on her shoulder and seems to lean on her for a moment, although she is small and delicate.

‘This is a bad moment for me to leave my congregation,’ he says. There are grumblings about church taxes, which are supposedly too great a burden for many people. She feels she should say something about the poor in Haworth—about how terrible she finds it that people have to endure so much. She lacks the courage. In the last few weeks she has put much time and energy into collecting money and subsequently distributing clothes, blankets and the fifty pairs of clogs, a hundred sacks of oats and two hundred loads of coal. She has seen so many grey faces, so many thin, trembling hands... And then there is the coughing, the clearing of the throat and the sneezing in all those dark cave-like rooms! She is ashamed of the discomfort she feels in her dealings with the poor and of the resentment she harbours against the mothers who despite their penury give birth to a child every year. A child who in turn will grow up to become a badly-paid labourer in one of the textile mills on the river, will spend long days at a hand loom or combing wool in a stuffy upstairs room. She wishes that she could muster more sympathy, but she is unable to forget herself. During a visit to a dying father—she was bringing the family coal, bread and eggs from the geese at the parsonage—she suddenly felt the slimy hand of a child sliding into hers. The toddler was wearing a grubby nightshirt and green snot was running out of his nose, and in pure disgust she had tugged her hand free.

Disease is everywhere in Haworth. The workers’ cottages are overcrowded; often various families live in one hovel. Along the street are the wooden privies that are shared by various families, and their contents flow downhill in an open sewer. Her friend Ellen once remarked that the air in Haworth was bound to be good, since the town lies high in the Pennine hills; but it is a chilly, windy place where it often rains and snows.

Although Charlotte has never been out of the north of England and apart from a few years at boarding school has spent all her time in Haworth, in her imagination she has fled almost daily. When she sits at the table in front of the fire and takes up her pen, distance and lack of funds are no longer obstacles and she can travel wherever she wants. Then come the images of Mediterranean coast with olive groves, palms and vanillascented flowers. Or she loses herself in the lanes and alleys between the churches and mansions of cities like London and Paris.

‘Tomorrow evening we’ll be in London, papa,’ she says, louder than intended, and resolutely turns her gaze from the brown church and the graves, walks past her father and goes back in through the kitchen door.

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Although it is not yet anywhere near morning, Charlotte cannot get back to sleep. The bed is too hot for her; she sits up carefully and throws back the bedspread on her side. Emily’s breathing ends in long squeaks, like the wind whistling in through the broken pane of glass in the church tower. It was a bad idea to share a bed with her again. She is like an old maid in bed with her sister. There should be a man lying beside her; her husband.

There is a restlessness in her legs and she wants to get up, but the floorboards tend to creak so terribly and she will wake Emily. She turns onto her back and takes it into her head that she wants a husband, but without children. Without the sour smell of milk, the measles and the croup and the eternal, irritating crying in the night. She has seen enough fresh young girls in the first year of their marriage turn into nervous drudges with a cotton cloth tied carelessly round their heads and a whining baby on their arm. But there is no way of escaping the responsibilities of motherhood and the household if you join with a man in marriage.

Charlotte runs her fingertips along the fringe of the blanket and pulls two tassels apart so hard that it causes a tear in the wool. She must sleep, because tomorrow the first leg of their journey awaits her. Her father will accompany her and Emily, first to London and three days later on the packet boat to Ostend. He wants to be sure that they arrive safely, although there is not really cause for concern, since her friend Mary and her brother John will accompany them and they have made the crossing several times already.

By the first dim light of morning she can see their travelling dresses hanging from the wardrobe. Is simple Yorkshire clothing suitable for a worldly city like Brussels? Emily refuses to leave behind her dresses with their enormous puff sleeves, which are completely out of fashion; she does not give two hoots about her appearance, but does not realise that there they will be judged by it in the first instance. Come to that, there are a number of reasons why their stay in Brussels could be a difficult one. The bourgeoisie speak French, a language she herself can write quite reasonably but has spoken only with teachers who have never set foot on the continent of Europe. Emily can read some French, but cannot conduct a conversation in it. In addition, Belgium is a Catholic country, where different morals and customs apply.

Suddenly Emily starts coughing. She sits up and coughs against the sleeve of her raised arm.

‘Are you all right?’ Charlotte piles up both their pillows, so that her sister can lie in a more upright position.

‘Em, are we doing the right thing going to Brussels? I’m suddenly not sure.’

‘Do you want to be a governess again then?’

She knows how to put her finger on the sore spot.

‘Do you want to work like a slave again and be bossed about by someone like Mrs White?’

Charlotte looks at the contours of her sister’s body: her long thin legs pulled up and her profile like a ship under sail, her nose the full sail, her chin the stubborn bow.

‘No, no, you know I don’t. And what will happen with papa?’

‘He will miss me.’ Emily clears her throat. ‘He’s used to having me to look after him, but he’s got Aunt Elizabeth and Martha. And we’ll be back in six months, won’t we? You promised. We don’t need to stay away longer than that.’

‘You’ll be coming home in any case,’ says Charlotte. ‘I may stay a little longer in Brussels, but I’m not sure yet.’ She gives a halting sigh. ‘Am I a fool?’

‘Not a fool, no.’ Emily peevishly tosses one of the pillows over the foot of the bed. ‘Your plan will bear fruit in time. We’ll learn French and German and I’ll brush up my piano playing. With all that knowledge we’ll soon be able to open a school. Anne can teach the girls to embroider. That way we’ll never have to leave.’

Charlotte listens to her own arguments. Strange how her sister intones them almost verbatim, as if in an attempt to convince herself.

‘Perhaps Branwell can help out too,’ she suggests.

‘Branwell is a wastrel,’ says Emily sternly. ‘He’ll never amount to anything.’

‘I miss him, though.’

'What do you miss? The smell of drink?'

Emily rolls onto her stomach, facing the other way.

### III

Charlotte drinks her coffee and enjoys a growing feeling of excitement. It is time: she is leaving.

There is a knock at the door of the dining room and her father's curate comes in. He shivers and rubs his hands together, because the night-time cold is still persisting outside.

'Well, well, Mr Weightman,' says Charlotte, 'Up so early?'

She likes teasing the young clergyman, because there is something about him of a puppy jumping around wanting to play with you. With a face finely modelled by the Creator, lively eyes and long, shapely legs, he is an attractive man. On this, all the women in Haworth are agreed. William Weightman is aware of his physical beauty, like a child that takes for granted the fact that he is perfect and sweet; there is nothing presumptuous about him. Charlotte is immune to his charms, which for her are too feminine; but she knows that Anne has a soft spot for him.

'Davy from the Black Bull is here.' Martha wipes her hands on her apron and starts noisily stacking the plates from the table. Her milky-blue eyes are full of tears.

Aunt Elizabeth helps Emily into her cloak and ties the ribbons of Charlotte's bonnet. She throws a shawl hastily over her shoulders and follows them outside.

'Time to go!' says Patrick Brontë firmly. He takes his sister-in-law by the elbows and kisses her on the cheek.

'I'll be home in a week or two.'

Elizabeth strokes his hand and then reaches out to her nieces. Charlotte kisses her with affection, but Emily's embrace is wooden and absent. Elizabeth has looked after the offspring of her sister Maria for over twenty years, and she knows the children through and through. Anne, the youngest, is her favourite, an angel, and Branwell, the only son, still seeks out her company when he is at home. However, the two oldest sisters seem to see her increasingly as a conventional, stupid woman. In Charlotte the disdain is tempered by her warm feelings, but Emily sometimes makes fun of her openly. The children are truly fond of her, she does not doubt that, but they have never come to love her as a mother and that is one of the great disappointments of her life.

At the time she left everything behind to support her brother-in-law: her home town of Penzance in Cornwall ('The sun shone so beautifully, Patrick!') and her chance of having a family of her own. There was no other solution, since as a widower with six young children Patrick Brontë could not find a respectable woman to marry him. In the first years in the parsonage Elizabeth fell deeply in love with her brother-in-law and she watched him fighting his growing desire. Like that day in the kitchen when she stood at the draining board and he put his hand on hers—and left it there for minutes on end. Until, with a grimace of frustration, he ran out of the kitchen and emptied one of his pistols into the fence. There was no future for them as man and wife, since the law forbade a widower to marry the sister of his dead spouse. Gradually their love gave way to affection, and it is consequently with warmth that she hands him the basket of sandwiches and tells him to button up his coat.

Aunt Elizabeth sees Charlotte look round one last time as the horses start moving, to take her leave of the parsonage, the church and the graves. She calls out to her, but her niece is already far away in her thoughts, in a world where she cannot follow her. She stands and watches till the carriage has disappeared over the brow of the hill.