

# HEATHER FROM HAWORTH

By KATHERINE EARLE

ON my desk, as I write, lies a sprig of white heather. Flattened and lifeless it is, but I have only to look at it to recall the steep, cobbled street and the wide moors stretching up and away from Haworth. I live again the moment when I stepped across the threshold of the Bronte Parsonage where Charlotte, Emily and Anne spent their short but fruitful lives. Did we hear a resentful rustle of ghostly skirts as we joined the Bronte pilgrims at the door? I shouldn't blame you, Emily, if we did. Of late years, the annual total of these pilgrimages has exceeded fifty thousand.

Haworth means "high farm" and lies in the high moorlands connected with the Pennine Range. Today's Haworth has grown considerably since that chill February morning when the stony streets resounded to the rumble of the seven heavily laden carts bearing the Reverend Patrick Bronte, his wife, six small children and his household chattels to the Parsonage at the top of the hill. The old Haworth, with its ancient streets and its shops from which peer faces which might well be the descendants of the characters of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, is fascinating. The newer part, with its trim park, neat houses and public buildings, is out of character and mildly disappointing.

The Parsonage was made a Museum in 1928. The Museum sign over the gate is a silhouette showing one of the gifted sisters writing at her desk. Of early Georgian architecture, the house faces east. It is of Yorkshire sandstone, with a wide front door opening into a stone-paved hall. The brass tablet at the right tells us that this is "Haworth Parsonage, Home of the Brontes."

The Reverend Patrick Bronte's study, roped off from the hallway, is the only room which the Museum visitors are not allowed to enter. Over the eighteenth century hob-grate fireplace hangs a gilt-framed portrait of Patrick Bronte himself. Here he had his solitary meals, and here one day he was given the manuscript of *Jane Eyre* to read, of which he later reported to his daughters that it was "better than likely."

In the alcove at the left is the small table on which Charlotte wrote the greater part of *Jane Eyre*, the book which had its inception under such inauspicious circumstances. In the grey town of Manchester, sitting in her narrow room while she waited for her father to recover from an operation for cataract, with the rejected manuscript of *The Professor* at her elbow, her jaw aflame

with toothache, Charlotte Bronte had written, "There was no possibility of taking a walk that day." The rest is inevitably woven with Haworth history, the paces around the dining room table, the yellow gorse and the purple heather, the tragic force of the wind on the moors. Only in Haworth could it have been completed.

From the wall at the right the enigmatic eyes of Emily look down on the sofa on which she died on that wintry afternoon six days before Christmas in the thirtieth year of her life. The sofa is covered with a quilt of velvet and silk patches, and on it lie Emily's pillow and her red shawl. She was the musical one of the family, and on her piano, which she acquired at the age of fifteen, is an open song book, its leaves yellowed and tattered with age. Tall brass candlesticks wait for a light that will never bloom again in the little study at Haworth.

The room across the hall, once the dining room of the Brontes, houses the manuscripts and drawings bequeathed to the Bronte Society in 1893 by the American collector, Henry Houston Bonnell of Philadelphia, owner of the finest collection of Bronteanana in the world. Here much of the published work of the Brontes was written; here are the glass cases containing their childish manuscripts. One, a tiny booklet by Branwell, in the infinitesimal Bronte script, is entitled, "Poems by Young Soult the Rhymer". Another is styled, "Napoleon and the Spectre, a Ghost Story by Charlotte Bronte."

Skilfully executed water colours of birds and animals by Emily, and portraits by Charlotte, adorn the walls of the Bonnell room. Here also is the rosewood writing desk of Emily, the little box desk with the flat quill pen and the seals lying where she dropped them when writing was no longer a pleasure but a task, and she was forced to lay them down forever.

When Charlotte married Arthur Bell Nicholls, the last of the curates in her life, she gave him as a study the little peat house which had once been the abode of Victoria and Adelaide, the two pet geese. Thoroughly cleaned and renovated, it made a charming study; and there is no record that Mr. Nicholls resented the fact that its former occupant was a goose instead of a curate.

Enclosed in their glass cases in this study are Charlotte's wedding wreath and, saddest sight of all, a lock of her hair. It seemed strange to see that straight, light-brown lock, glossy and bright, whose famous wearer had been dead almost a hundred years.

Under the chancel floor of the Church of St. Michael and All Angels, all the Brontes but Anne, who sleeps at Scarborough, lie buried. The monument on the west wall of the church gives the history of the family. This is not the original church which the Brontes attended, although it is on the same site, but its beauty will not soon be forgotten by him who stands within its doors.

On our way back to the Bronte Guest House, we turned into one of the quaint shops which line the main street of Haworth.

"Wait a minute," said the witch-like old proprietor of the shop, as we were leaving.

She went into another apartment and came back with something in her hand.

"I thought," she said, "that ye'd like a bit o' white heather from Haworth to remember us by."

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