
Opening Extract from...

The Taste of Sorrow

Written by Jude Morgan

Published by Headline Review

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THE TASTE OF SORROW

headline
review

First published in Great Britain in 2009 by
HEADLINE REVIEW
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 0 7553 3889 4
Trade paperback ISBN 978 0 7553 3899 3

Typeset in Bembo by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable
and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform
to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

PART ONE

1

Salvage

'Oh, my children. Oh, God, my poor children.'

The woman in the upstairs room cries out often in the madness of pain and extremity. Broken words, regrets, even – and her kneeling, praying husband shudders to hear them – violent curses. But this is the recurring cry that rises to a scream, just as the dry, loutish wind idles and grumbles about the house and then will assault it suddenly with a gust and a shriek.

'Oh, my children. What will become of *my children* . . . ?'

And this is his fight, his greatest fight – this austerely handsome man, lean and spare in clerical black, who has become who he is by a long exercise in will and conquest. Now he must fight the devil. Because nothing else, not even the delirium of mortal sickness, could make his gentle forbearing wife say the things she is saying. The devil is seizing his moment, when the fate of the soul is in the balance, and entering her.

(Entering her . . . He must put aside the dark surge that is like jealousy at that thought. The possession of her soul, that is what is at stake.)

Sometimes the pain is such that it thrusts her into terrible acrobatics, her chin digging between her breasts, her clawing feet scaling the wall behind her bed. Then he grips and holds her, speaking soothingly, entreating her to be calm, to offer the pain to the Lord. But tonight – the last night, it must surely be – as he holds her down on the pillow and inhales her so-familiar breath, her rolling eyes meet his and lock. And she begins to laugh. Madly, devilishly.

'Oh, Patrick, do you seek the freedom of my bed *now* – even *now*?'

He jolts away from her, his fingers loosening their grasp on her wasted shoulders. But he remembers the devil, and grips her again; and tries to ignore what the candlelight is doing with their shadows on the wall, making that familiar humped union.

'Oh, my dear, you must pray. Pray with me now,' he urges. 'Oh, great God in heaven, the old adversary is with us, here in this room. I know his voice – I hear him speak through your poor suffering lips . . .'

'But what if—' She stops, and he sees that she is hoisted on a great spike of pain; but she rides the obscene impalement, gasps and gags, speaks on. 'What if it is *me* speaking? What then?'

'Dearest, hush. Fight it, fight it. I fear for your soul—'

'I don't care about my soul!'

She spits it at him in her croaking voice, a blasphemy of consonants. And he is so baffled – no, tired, it must be tiredness, these endless sickbed nights – that he can only stagger back to the chair and bury his head in his hands.

At last he says: 'Remember, my dear. Remember how you were. You always walked with God.'

She turns from him, grinding her head against her pillow. 'You know nothing of the matter.'

He tries to leap across the terrible distances opening up. 'My dear, I understand – you are thinking of the things of this world. But the time has come to let go of them. You cannot go to your Maker still clinging to the things of this world, you must—'

'*They* are not *things*.'

Oh, she is fighting him hard: or, rather, the devil is. But he has his answer, even though he doubts she is equal to it: yes, they are. Certainly he loves them, as one must, but these little lives, like all lives, are only loaned to us. We must be prepared to give them back, at any time. Why won't she see that?

See . . . She keeps mentioning the sea – her sea, the place she came from, far from this northern moor. When they were courting, and when they were first married, she used to tell him stories of her youth in Penzance, the lively little port on the soft under-tip of Cornwall. The great glittering bay, the coming of the pilchard shoals with their miraculous millions of fishes, her father's warehouse smelling of tea and pepper. Hard to recall now when she stopped mentioning it. (He is a busy man, with a large scattered parish to see to, and he must ration his attention.) Perhaps indeed it was when they came here . . . His old parish of Thornton, where the children were born, had been a gentler and kindlier place altogether – but this was a better living and a bigger parsonage-house. He was pleased with it from the beginning. Cool sturdiness, stone stairs – no flammable

timber, thank heaven, for he had a horror of fire – and a roomy study. He has always spent a good deal of time there, separating himself from the messy contingencies of six young children. It is necessary to him; and he is sure his wife has always understood. She is nothing if not dutiful.

He knows there are things that perturbed her about this place: the dun barricade of moorland, the crowded churchyard with its flotsam of tombs jostling to the very windows. But of course you stopped noticing these things. One of the important lessons he has taught her, he thinks, is that one place is much like another. Learn self-sufficiency, and you can pick it up like a tent and move it anywhere.

He is comfortable with severance. When they were courting he didn't mind telling her his own story: the rustic Irish cabin where he had been born, his father and mother devotedly toiling to raise ten children on a little acreage; their pride in his book-learning as he outstripped everyone at the village school and at last set up his own; the clergyman who took him as tutor to his own family, applauded his energy and ambition, and pointed him in the amazing direction of Cambridge. Yes, that is the story; and it is a thing finished and put behind him.

But her dying mind seems to be dwelling on the sea of her youth, and it is another disturbing hint that she is not properly preparing to leave this world. And then the matter of the children . . . The baffling thing is that now her time approaches she will not see them.

Yesterday morning, when she had seemed a little calmer, when her sister – staunch Miss Branwell, come all the way from Penzance to nurse her – was brushing her hair and quietly setting aside the great soft lumps that came away, he had tried again. 'Perhaps you might see them today, my dear?'

'No, I . . . Perhaps.' She lay flat. 'Perhaps just one at a time. All together I think would be – too much for me.'

Just then came the sound of them, the high fluting voices, the competitive torrent of footsteps down the stairs.

The tears, he saw, did not flow. They simply, perfectly covered her eyes, like watch-glasses.

'No – no. Perhaps tomorrow . . .'

Now tomorrow is almost here, its light melting through the shutters, and she dozes again and mumbles of the sea and then, opening her eyes and speaking clearly, says: 'Something must come of this. There must be a purpose. There must – somehow there must be redemption.'

His heart leaps. 'Oh, my dearest, yes – lay hold on that. Our redemption in Christ – there, there you will find the strength to support you, to take you triumphant and joying into the next world—'

'Not for *me*. My children.'

'My dear, I beg you not to keep thinking on that. I've told you—'

'They will have no mother!'

He pauses, struggling with his disappointment. 'They will have a father.'

Her laughter at that is horrible – throaty, long, almost sensual. But what comes next is worse. She cocks her head, eyes roaming the room. 'You said the devil is here, didn't you? Very well, then. I want to make a bargain.'

'Stop – your pain is making you mad—'

'Yes, I know. Hush a moment.' Her eyes roam again, her face all bone and sockets. Something like a smile forms. At last she sighs, and says, as if in contented answer: 'Very well.'

The surgeon has made his morning call, and gone away, and it is as he suspected. His wife will not live another night.

Her sister is with her now, and the children are with their nurse, and he can claim the sanctity of the study for a while. He tries to pray, but fear and memory between them squeeze prayer out.

What she said about the bed – the marital bed . . . Yes, he is a man of strong desires, he cannot deny it. And so the children came swiftly. Woman's lot. But she found the children so beautiful and adored them so – did not that atone for everything that happened in the darkness? From the strong, sweetness.

It is so terrifying to find her fighting him like this. Always she trusted him to be her guide in everything. He remembers during their courtship walking with her beside the River Aire, and a sudden fog coming down. She panicked. Where was the road? Where were they? They might blunder into the river—

'Here – this way.' Though he is short-sighted, he has always had a perfect sense of direction. 'See? Here is the road.'

'Oh! Yes, I see.' She laughed, and held more tightly to him. 'I was all at sea for a moment.'

Not a long courtship: they were so very well suited. She was twenty-nine, he thirty-five; she had a little income, he had recently gained a perpetual curacy in the district. They would not be rich, but neither of them cared about that. She was, he found, blessedly serious. That

was what had brought her to Yorkshire: her parents had died, and she had found living with her sisters as maiden ladies on fifty pounds a year rather aimless. She had an uncle and aunt who ran a school in the West Riding, and she had travelled there to help them and be useful; and he knew the uncle, and came to the school to examine the boys in classics. And they had met.

For them to have been brought together from such far-flung places was, it seemed, the work of Providence. He was sure of it, and he thought she was sure of it too, then.

'Just think,' she said excitedly, as they planned the wedding, 'I shall have your name. I was always a little disappointed that mine was not one of the real Cornish ones – a Pol or a Pen or a Tre. I shall be glad to have such an unusual name. It is distinctive.'

'Well, it was spelt differently in Ireland – where it was spelt at all. People were baffled by it when I came to England, so I thought it best to familiarise it. To avoid confusion.' Severance. It was Pat Prunty who arrived at Cambridge to grind through his studies on a starveling pittance, but it was not Pat Prunty who left it with a degree and holy orders.

He tries, seriously, to consider whether she grew unhappy with him later. Of course marriage is a process of revelation, and he knows he has his singularities. The fear of fire that makes him insist on no curtains or rugs – but in Ireland he saw what fire could do. A wooden cabin, gone in minutes. The people inside just shapes – shapes of themselves in soot. So terrible it was almost thrilling. And he knows she never felt easy about his pistol. But he began the habit of carrying it in the days when the Luddites threatened the district, and it came to seem sensible to have it by him at night, because you never know. And he makes sure it does not lie about the house loaded during the daylight hours by firing it from the window first thing every morning. He likes to do that. Somehow it breaks open the day.

From upstairs the wail comes again: 'Oh, my children. Oh, my poor children . . .'

Almost maddening. He starts out of his chair, grips the back of it, for several seconds has a clear, compelling vision of himself picking it up and smashing it against the wall. He sinks down again. The fact is, he is very proud of his son and very fond of all the children in his way – not a demonstrative way, perhaps, but he must keep the citadel of self intact. And the children, young as they are, seem to know that. They understand there must be separation.

Suddenly his own sob takes him by surprise, and he hides his face in his hands. The sorrow is for her defying him. The rest he can bear.

Unheard, the children tiptoe past the study, like ghosts.

The surgeon, Mr Andrew, descends the steep village street pensively. Hardworking thirtyish provincial sawbones, he is neither grand nor jaded enough to view with equanimity the inefficacy of medical science; and the failure hits harder where there is friendship. In the parsonage study he had come out with it. 'I am afraid, sir, you must prepare yourself.'

The husband of the dying woman paced back and forth between the twin windows. Keen, strong-boned profile, with a kind of flourish in its moulding suggestive of the carving on a ship's prow. 'I am prepared, Mr Andrew,' he said at last, and his glance was dark. 'I can only pray that she is.'

The religious mind. Well, friendship leaves a margin around such things: witness Mr Andrew's medical mind, which has long concluded, *Too many children, too quickly*. Cancer is the last inhabitant of that overworked womb.

A heavily loaded wagon is struggling up the street. Mr Andrew steps over the little tea-coloured river of human and animal excrement, slops, suds and rot that gurgles on its merry way down to the village wells, steps up on to the sliver of raised pavement, and finds himself beside young Hartley, the butcher's son. An idle, gawking fellow, and fat. He makes no room. 'Parson's wife is dying hard, they say,' he remarks, brightly, with a nod to the top of the hill.

Mr Andrew does not answer this. The wagon lurches up a few yards, then stops again, the old sunken-necked horse in the shafts struggling for purchase on the flagstones. The driver swears, slashing and slashing with his whip. Mr Andrew meets the horse's rolling eye.

'Not as we ever saw much on her, mind.' Young Hartley watches the agonising progress of the horse with dispassionate interest – but, no, not dispassionate. Something blackly gamesome, as if it were a race or a ratting-match. 'Short-winded, look. Not far off foundering, I'd say. He'll be the one tekking the ride next.'

And now Mr Andrew sees that the wagon belongs to the knacker and fellmonger from Oxenhope, and another desperate lurch brings the load into view. A stiff tangle and dangle of hoofs, wagging.

'This is a miserably hard sort of place,' Mr Andrew finds himself saying.

The butcher's son looks blankly. 'What dost mean?'

Oh: the world, I suppose, thinks Mr Andrew, shouldering past him. And he thinks of those children, up at the parsonage; and wonders what in God's name will become of them.

Sarah Garrs, the nurse, has gathered the children in the parlour, cloaked and booted for their afternoon walk, but is unsure what to do. Something brewing – surely the inevitable – in the room above: the master, white as his cravat, has shut himself in his study, and she hesitates to disturb him, even more than usual. The children are restless. They must know, poor creatures, yet like Sarah they edge round the mention of their mother, afraid to fall in.

'Tell us a story, Sarah.'

'Yes, tell us a story.'

'I don't know any stories,' she says. Well, only grim anecdotes of boggarts and fairishes, stealing live children and leaving corpses in their place. The silence of the house, the ceiling overhead with its light freight of death, seem to bear down and crush her. Desperately she begins: 'Once there were three sisters, and they lived – they lived in a beautiful palace all made of glass—'

'Not a sister story. Not sisters, brothers.' A fractious protest, from the one boy of the six. It twists into tears. 'I don't like it today, it's not right. I want to go out . . .'

Sound of the study door opening, footsteps. And though they do not start or turn, suddenly you can see something in them all, like the faint twitch of a dog's ears as it lies sleeping on the floor: ready to move in an instant. The ripple of Papa.

He is here, looking in, if not seeing.

'Oh, sir, I was wondering – I wasn't sure whether . . .'

'Yes, Sarah?' The master does not pick up hints: he lets them lie, so you have to stoop and scrabble to retrieve them.

'I was just wondering whether the children should go on their walk, sir.'

'By all means.' He consults his watch. 'Not too long, though, if you please.'

Soon they are out of the parsonage, and climbing the path behind it to the high moors. This is the way the children like to go, and Sarah partly understands it – space for roaming, and so on. Yet if they went down the street instead they might peer in at windows, see a horse shod, watch bales of wool go swinging up on a great hoist. Out here

there's nothing to look at, scarcely even a tree. Oh, they push and shove, skip and dawdle like other children, but sometimes Sarah, following them, quails to find them so purposeful. As if, without her to call them back, they would go on for ever into that wide nothing.

And thinking of the house, and what it will be like when her mistress is gone, she almost feels it would be better if they did.

Mr Andrew's prognosis is correct. As the September day dwindles, Miss Branwell comes down to fetch her brother-in-law, announcing with characteristic precision, 'I fear the crisis approaches.' And so at last – there is no choice in the matter now – the children are ushered into the room, and range around their mother's bed.

Except that, being children, they do not range. The solemnity impresses them, but death is not tidily punctual like family prayers: there is boredom in the room, as well as fear, sadness, bewilderment. The smallest girl toddles and gazes, purely investigative, pulling at the counterpane: even gives a chuckle when the ravaged face turns on the pillow: peek-a-boo. Sarah Garrs, urging her back, sees the master's frown. Not angry, just perplexed, as if he does not comprehend that they are children at all. The boy stays at Papa's side, as he feels he ought to, but cannot help looking restlessly over: what are the others doing? The two eldest girls, sensible, are united in their resolve to be still and quiet. Not so the middle two, one wriggling up on the bedside chair, the other trying to copy her. Miss Branwell clucks her tongue. They scratch their spindly stockinged legs. Their dying mother opens her eyes.

Her husband bends to her. 'They are here, my dear. Do you see . . . ?'

Muscle performs a last task, and she slowly nods, then turns her head away, as if she has done everything she can, now. Snip the thread.

The transmutation of flesh, the transmutation of names. Patrick Prunty, who crossed the sea to become the Reverend Patrick Brontë and to marry Miss Maria Branwell of Penzance, clutches his dead wife's hand and suppresses a howl (as he must, for howls must be suppressed, there is no knowing what rents and passages they may make) and prays for her soul, and tells the children to pray too; and falls on his knees, appalled at the future that had to come and that is here now. Somewhere in his mind is the thought – no bigger than the pea under the princess's bed – that he must, if it be at all possible, marry again: six children, and his work, and above all his need to be himself . . . Dear God, what can come of this?

Miss Branwell – Aunt, as she is aptly and everlastingly called now – closes her sister's eyes and mouth with a needlewoman's neatness.

The two eldest girls shed tears of knowledge: Maria and Elizabeth. The next in age, Charlotte, wriggles off the chair, and nudges her younger sister Emily to do likewise. The boy, between them in age, bearing a name that was brought all the way from the sea, the name his mother surrendered, Branwell, looks desperately from face to face to see what he should do. And the infant, Anne, smiles about, quite at ease with death: after all, she has lately arrived from oblivion herself.

The children obediently fold their hands in prayer – they all know how to do that. Still they do not range themselves. Rather they draw together in a peculiarly precise huddle, as if they stand on a rock, just big enough for them, above an encircling sea.

2

Belongings

Being in the middle, Charlotte thought she was protected.

The first shade of doubt was cast on this by Branwell. But he did it in his clever, crowing way and so it seemed, for now, a question without threat.

'But if there are six of us, you can't properly be the middle one,' he said, 'because— Oh, well, look here.' He wrote their names across a sheet of paper, in order of age. Maria. Elizabeth. Charlotte. Branwell. Emily. Anne. To his own name he added a little flourish. 'There. See? There are two older ones on one side of you and three younger ones on the other side. With six you don't have a middle because . . .' he frowned, doodling '. . . because it's arithmetic.'

Charlotte peered dubiously. 'But I *feel* in the middle.'

'Oh, well, to be sure,' Branwell conceded. Among the six of them, feeling was always accepted.

Being in the middle you could look both ways. Behind, you saw the younger ones treading a path you had already trodden – losing that tooth, suffering that temper fit. There was a safe feeling in that. And ahead of you, Maria and Elizabeth led the way, scanning the land, clearing the obstacles – oh, that was safety.

They were not grown-up, but to Charlotte they had a splendid capability that was just as impressive. When they said they would do a thing, they did it. Once she made a cobble of her sewing and Aunt, in severe mood, scolded; inattention, she said, was the devil's gateway. Maria, discovering Charlotte in tears, said she would unpick it and set it right for tomorrow. Going to bed, Charlotte could not help confiding to Sarah Garrs: 'Maria might not come to bed yet. She's going to mend my sewing.'

'Aye, well, now, I'm sure she would if she'd the time, but don't go counting on it.'

What Sarah feared (it was always easy for Charlotte to tell what

people were thinking) was that she would be disappointed. But Charlotte knew better. And in the morning there was the sewing, healed, just as Maria had promised. Such vindication.

Not that she wanted to crow about it. That moment was simply one of contentment: this was how things should be. Some years ago – before she could understand years – here had been a cataclysm. It was called Mama's Death, and it had changed everything. It was that time, she guessed, that had let loose the darkness: the darkness that was lurking and waiting for you all around the edges of life. But Maria and Elizabeth were bearers of light, and could always keep it at bay.

There were some places where you couldn't sense the darkness at all. In the kitchen on a winter morning when Nancy Garrs, Sarah's sister, was baking, and you could sniff the floury, yeasty smell that was also somehow the smell of Nancy herself. Or in the little upstairs room they called their study, especially when Maria took up the newspaper and read to them, and her cool, careful voice only added to the grandeur of it: Mr Peel, and the Duke of Wellington, and the House breathless. And especially when Papa bought a new book, and Branwell was permitted to cut the pages: the book lying beautiful on the table, waiting for the knife to set it free.

But sometimes even in good places the darkness might steal up and take you by surprise. Even on the moors during the purple flush of summer, when Emily went too near the beck, hopping, even deliberately wobbling; or crept up to the old ram and looked into his devil's face, and dared Charlotte to do it too. And you knew that she was, if only a little bit, laughing at you.

Or at the tea-table when Papa, who generally took his meals alone and undisturbed in his study because of his digestion, decided to join them. And in between his long, pouting sucks of tea – as if it were soup – he would say, half winking in memory, 'Now this reminds me,' or 'Now that was a curious occurrence,' and tell them tales of the strange country called Ireland. And you were honoured and impressed and yet at any moment you knew the tale might take a black and terrifying turn, and you would feel his eye on you, impassively studying you, examining your fear.

Fear: that the darkness might reach out and get you. Thank God she was protected, she was in the middle. She looked again at Branwell's piece of paper, the sum of enchanted names. No, it still worked out. She was comforted.

Of course, this family arithmetic did not include Aunt and Papa. They stood above and beyond, in their separate and solitary spheres: Aunt with her Bible, her genteel shivers, her reminiscences of her youth in Penzance when ladies still wore hair-powder and she was the belle of the assembly ball. And Papa with his sorrows.

The sorrows of Patrick are real. They are made no less real by the fact that within three months of his wife's death he had asked another woman, a family friend, to marry him.

Haste, perhaps; but consider, the children – what was he to do with six children? The question whirled him about until he was dizzy and frantic.

The lady's refusal was indignant. So he thought hard before writing to an old flame from his very first curacy in Essex, years ago, with whom there had once been something approaching an engagement, though at the time it had seemed best to disentangle himself . . . Was she, he courteously enquired, after fully describing his circumstances, by any chance married?

A letter of superb crushing contempt came back. And forced him to accept his ineligibility. But acceptance is not natural to Patrick. Sometimes still, turning over in bed, he reaches out and expects; and sometimes it really is, for a few seconds, as if his wife is there – the imprint of her warm, breathing shape, like spots seen after looking at the sun. And sometimes, realising, he punches the empty half of the bed with great swinging overarm blows. The real punches, not the boxer's dabbing, that men use in real fights: as a boy he used to see them at it outside the shebeen-houses in Drumballyroney, and marvel, disgusted, half longing.

Acceptance is weak and passive. Better to embrace. The true martyr calls lustily for more boiling oil and arrows. Patrick must learn again the sharp, complex pleasures of self-denial. I cannot have it: I may not have it: I shall not have it. Remember his cold rooms at wintry Cambridge, ice on the windows, pennies in his pocket. Then the news that he had won a college exhibition and was suddenly richer by five pounds a year: surely the moment to buy a bucket of coals. Now I can have a fire. But Patrick did not. Once more he tucked his hands under his armpits and pored over Tacitus through the mist of his own breath. I shall not have it. A victory.

So he embraces his own deprivation. But there are other sorrows that cannot be transmuted. Six motherless children to be educated and

provided for; five of them girls, with no money to entice husbands. A dark lake of future, and sailing we cannot see the banks. There is, thank heaven, the one boy: the son. Ah, he has it in his power to change everything. But Patrick, who is far from crude, would not say this to anyone, and even prevents himself dwelling on it when he coaches Branwell in his study. Those loose small shoulders hunched over the book: the weight they must bear. Though if someone had said to Patrick when he was a boy, packed with nine siblings in the smoky Irish cabin, 'It all depends on you', he would have said: 'Yes, yes, please.' With fire. He would have embraced it. And, thinking of that, he almost envies his son, for the riches of struggle.

Curiously he cannot bring to mind the faces of his brothers and sisters, though he can clearly see his father – at the plough, digging and stacking turves, sharpening his scythe on the whetstone: always doing something. Choosing a sucking-pebble before beginning to cut his way into the hayfield. The sucking-pebble stopped your mouth going dry. That is the taste of sorrows: the hard, necessary pebble in your mouth. And Patrick goes busily out into his own field, his large, scattered parish: work keeps you going. There is plenty of it. Sick visits, marriages, christenings, funerals – funerals above all. Again and again he stands by the cakey hole where pallid roots protrude and exposed worms flail, again he speaks the words, the pebble of sorrows in his mouth. Again the cut grass topples and falls.

Ask Mr Andrew, the surgeon, about the frequency of those funerals. After the first touch of defensiveness – for he is peculiarly fond of the place and has done good work here – scientific honesty will compel him to admit that the mortality rate of Haworth is comparable with that of the worst London slums. Press the point, and he may concede that in many respects Haworth *is* a slum. But the squalor is not that of decay: rather it is the raw and ruthless confusion of a place on its way up.

All across the West Riding you can see tight, perching, sweating little towns like this, where time is money and money is wool. Mr Andrew still has to resist fainting when he enters the dark swelter of a woolcomber's cellar, where the woolcomber and his family crowd and live and work and breathe mould while the stove blazes unventilated. But the combing process needs the heat and the manufacturers are hungry for the combed wool. Haworth is thriving – in a way that involves a lot of sickness and dying. Mr Andrew has had such frequent

occasion to write 'typhus' in his journal that now he abbreviates it to 'T'. The trouble with the water supply, he will tell you, is that it has remained suitable to a medieval village, not an industrial population. There are just two public wells, so the women begin queuing with their pails long before dawn – which at least has this advantage: that they cannot see the colour of the water. The busy citizens of Haworth empty their privies on to the midden heaps, which totter and ooze; at the top of the hill the crammed churchyard adds its stock to the soup of the gutters.

But, then, we are making a new world here. Modernity always feels harsh. Time may cure many of these ills, soften sharp edges, bring ripeness. But even Mr Andrew will admit that Haworth is not a place you can ever imagine feeling romantic about.

'It is better to be good than to be clever,' Aunt told Emily, who had been trying to copy Branwell's Latin lesson, and had given up with a wail that she wasn't clever enough. 'That is the most valuable lesson you will ever learn.'

Anne, who slept in Aunt's room, and spent a lot of time in her shadow looking trustfully up, went around repeating it in her faintly annoying lisp. 'It is better to be good than to be clever.' And sometimes getting it mixed up: 'It is better to be clever than to be good.' Which was wrong; and knowing it to be wrong, Charlotte heard it with a secret excitement. It was like the time she shared the two-seater privy in the yard with Sarah Garrs, and Sarah made a rude noise and said, 'Eh, the wind's in the south,' and began laughing. Charlotte dared not laugh: this was wrong, But it was exciting to know that the wrong existed. Always it was there, alongside prayers and washing and obedience.

But surely you could be good *and* clever – like Maria. Once Aunt was embarked on a well-worn reminiscence of a Cornish gentleman whom she might have married: '. . . a high degree of regard. There was that difference between our attitudes to devotion, which my conscience could not accommodate, but still, a high degree of regard. He lost his fortune in the funds when Bonaparte escaped from Elba, and went into a swift decline. It remains one of my regrets at leaving Penzance, out of duty to my sister's children, that I cannot visit that good gentleman's grave now and then, and lay flowers.'

'But, Aunt,' said Maria, looking up from her sewing, 'you told us that that gentleman died at sea.'

For several seconds Aunt was caught in a narrow-lipped silence. 'He was brought home. His body . . . Maria, that hem is a shambles. You might attend to your work instead of showing disrespect to your elders.'

Later, on their walk up to the moors, Maria was subdued and silent.

Elizabeth said: 'Well, she does keep changing that story.'

'It was wrong, I shouldn't have spoken like that.'

'It was only the truth.'

Charlotte was walking between them, in the middle, gazing up at their fascinating faces: Maria dark-browed and sharp-featured, like a lady; Elizabeth softer, her delicate long-lashed eyes always looking out for the good side. Charlotte was flanked by strength and tenderness.

'Well, yes. That's why I said it – I mean, why I couldn't stop myself. But a reason is not the same as an excuse. Aunt gave up her home and her friends to come here and look after us. I was disrespectful, and that is the same as being ungrateful for her kindness.'

'Never mind.' Elizabeth put a hand on Maria's shoulder, ruffling Charlotte's hair on the way. 'She will soon forget about it.'

As Maria, both clever and good, would not. When she was sorry, she really meant it; whereas when Charlotte was sorry, it was the smooth reverse side of prickly resentment, like an inside-out garment. Of course one should be respectful and grateful to Aunt – but still Charlotte could not help noticing the way she showed her little pebble-grey teeth when she talked of the devil and damnation, or the face Nancy Garrs made behind her back when Aunt unlocked the cellar to ration out the servants' single mugs of beer. Charlotte had to hold a book up close to her face to read it, but she saw things; and she suspected that this seeing was a failing in her. That night of the tremendous thunderstorm, when Branwell came running into the girls' bedroom to yell his excitement: 'Did you hear it? That was the loudest . . . !' and then, looking down at himself in perplexity: 'Oh, Lord, it's happened again. It does that sometimes when I'm in bed.' Charlotte saw: something, some part of him, was sticking out under his nightshirt like a nail. But Maria did not see – or by some effortful virtue, which Charlotte could not match, she was able not to see. She simply took command, hushing everyone, reassuring Emily, who was bolt upright and trembling, urging Branwell back to his own room. 'Don't be frightened, Emily,' he cried, turning back at the door. 'It's only thunder.' With his crackle of red hair and jittering white legs he seemed himself like some wild electric splinter of the storm. 'That's what our name means, you know – Papa told me, it's Greek.

That's us. Brontë means thunder.' The thing under his nightshirt, Charlotte saw, had gone.

She also saw, in another sense, that you could not ask about it. Elizabeth might not know, but out of kindness would find out for you; Maria, who could hold a detailed discussion with Papa about Catholic Emancipation, would surely know, and out of her regard for truth might tell you. But to ask them would be to presume, and Charlotte had no wish to do so: she reposed in their wisdom; they were demigods, linked to the mythical past. They could remember Mama.

Charlotte had a few sketchy images, but she could not be sure whether they came from memory of Mama or what she had been told about her. Branwell, who was a year her junior, was bold in assertion: 'I can remember Mama – I can remember everything about her.' But the memories did not survive scrutiny. This was just Branwell leaping up to be king of the castle again. Once Anne tore her petticoat, and cried long and desperately about it, until Sarah Garrs helplessly sighed: 'Dear Lord above, there never was such crying!' And Branwell, hearing, closed his book on his place-marking finger and rose to the challenge. 'Oh, I cried more than that once. Much more. It was when I picked up the fire-tongs, and I burned myself so badly I nearly fainted, in fact I did faint, and I fell down in the grate, and afterwards . . .'

Then the tale began, but you didn't mind it, because it was not so much a lie as a decoration of time. And, besides, as he told it he kept a kind of grin in reserve – and besides again, that was Branwell: he fitted in, they all fitted in. Charlotte in bed, adventuring her warmed feet into earth-cold sheets, would picture them all about the house, Branwell with his collection of talismanic objects – a watch-glass, string, buttons, the horrible mouse's skull – on the night-stand, Papa awesomely alone (and not fully imaginable), Anne in her little bed at the foot of Aunt's; and it was as satisfying as a sewing-box or – most beautiful and desirable of all – that drawer in Papa's desk, with the compartments for ink and wax and penknife and silver-sand. And often the wind made muscular groans and mutterings under the eaves, as if it would lift the roof off and look in at Charlotte and her family in their compartments; perhaps disorder, rummage, destroy. But, no, the lid of the box was tight, and that could not happen.

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