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CHARLOTTE BRONTË IN LONDON.

An Address delivered by Mr. Sidney Lee, D.Litt., LL.D.,
at the Fifteenth Annual Meeting of the Brontë
Society, held at Harrogate, on January 23rd, 1909.

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I.

For nearer forty than thirty years I have been a whole-hearted admirer of Charlotte Brontë's genius. I have a distinct memory of reading *Jane Eyre* as a boy, and of realising with a boy's impulsiveness the elemental force of feeling which gave the weird mystery life. The fiery glow of the impassioned language worked like magic on my youthful mind, and the impression has never faded from me.

Nor did my juvenile enthusiasm for Charlotte Brontë stop with her work. Mrs. Gaskell's sensitive pen taught me the grey pathos of the novelist's domestic distresses, which had a gloomy fascination for my early thought. In my young days, long before the Brontë Society was contemplated, I made a solitary pilgrimage to Haworth; I drained a glass to Charlotte Brontë's memory at the Black Bull Inn, sat there in the ill-starred Branwell's chair, and wandered in Charlotte Brontë's footsteps across the windy moor. I well remember how my interest was stimulated by reading on their first appearance Mr. Swinburne's fiery "Note" and Sir Wemyss Reid's sober monograph, both of which came out in 1877. I make no claim to have kept abreast of the vast sequel of critical and biographical

literature which has since circled round Charlotte Brontë's head. I respect the untiring labours of recent explorers; I have essayed no excavations on my own account. My old enthusiasm has been checked neither by independent research nor by close study of the ever-expanding commentary. Zeal, which is untutored by the new learning, may seem a poor credential for one who speaks to a band of learned disciples. In arrest of judgment on what may appear presumption, I offer two pleas of justification.

In the first place, I happen to be, for the time being, through the indulgence of my colleagues, the chairman of the Trustees of Shakespeare's Birthplace at Stratford-on-Avon. Comparison between Shakespeare and Charlotte Brontë is profitless. I merely urge that Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust has in a very general sense an aim in common with the Brontë Society. Both institutions endeavour to keep alive national interest in all that survives of two homes of genius. The problem of genius is insoluble, and speculation has as yet failed to account for the miracle of its birth. It comes into being in most unexpected places, more often in the cottage than in the palace, more often in the house of the poor parson than in the mansion of the rich merchant. Its manifestations are rare and mysterious. But with all emphasis should it be said that, at whatever hearth it take living shape, it is to the spiritual benefit of men and women to sanctify the place. It is good for every human being to recognise the obligation to reverence genius, and that sense of reverence will always be stimulated—at any rate in matter-of-fact minds, which are in the majority—by preserving haunts which genius has illumined. Haworth and Stratford-on-Avon may well be mentioned in the same breath, because the care locally bestowed on surviving memorials of their native heirs of genius draws visitors to both places from afar. The Brontë Society and the Trustees of Shakespeare's Birthplace engage in cognate work, in the work of quickening the national reverence for inspired writers. I am glad of the opportunity of offering a greeting to the

Guardians of the Brontë Museum from the Trustees at Stratford-on-Avon.

My second justificatory plea descends to a somewhat lower plane of argument. On March 31st next, fifty-four years will have passed away since Charlotte Brontë died. The number of persons who saw her face to face is now small; her intimate associates are now dead. Those who can boast acquaintance with her at second hand, who have heard of her from her personal friends, are happily still numerous. Many beside myself have learnt something of her from those who spoke with her and grasped her hand. But it was my good fortune to enjoy through great part of twenty years close relations with one who not merely presided over Charlotte Brontë's short feast of fame, but was the unconscious model of the most attractive of all the full-length portraits of men in her great gallery. Mr. George Smith, Charlotte Brontë's publisher, closed a long and honoured life nearly eight years ago. His publishing activities filled near six decades. Charlotte Brontë's friendly relations with him synchronised with the first decade only; my relations belonged to the last two. An amply filled interval of thirty years and upwards divides the publication of *Jane Eyre* from the planning of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. But Mr. Smith's powers of memory throughout his career were alert and vivid. In the comparatively recent period of my association with him, I gathered much from him of his early experience. Nor did his vigour know change or decay in his later years. In all essential features he was, I am persuaded, the same manly, keen-minded, sympathetic figure in my day as in Charlotte Brontë's. I therefore believe that I may without immodesty bring some personal knowledge and impressions of my own to bear on those classical episodes in the story of Charlotte Brontë's life and work in which Mr. George Smith played a foremost part.

Another friend of mine who saw Charlotte Brontë and talked with her is the daughter of the great novelist, Thackeray. Lady Ritchie, Thackeray's daughter, is still

in all the vigour of a sympathetic personality, which speaks illuminatingly of her father's genius. Concerning the impressions which Charlotte Brontë gave and received when in London, I can cite testimony which I owe to two first-hand witnesses, Lady Ritchie and Mr. George Smith. There are no higher authorities on the topic. I have no secrets to divulge. In all its main features the story of Charlotte Brontë in London has often been told before. But it has features of perennial interest, and perhaps I may be able to tell it again in a somewhat differently refracted light.

II.

Much has been written of the place which Charlotte Brontë's friendship with Mr. Smith fills in her biography. Less has been said of the station it claims either in his biography or in literary history. Yet, to take the last aspect first, it throws a very broad and healthy light on an important tract of literary territory. I have elsewhere styled Mr. Smith's association with Charlotte Brontë, "a publishing idyll." It is rare that the epithet "idyllic" figures in the joint chronicles of publishing and authorship. Publishers and authors are usually held to be linked together by no tie more sentimental than desire to make money out of one another. There are notable exceptions; but experience bears witness that few publishers and authors of eminence have throughout their working days been bound together in firm unbroken links of amity and trustfulness. It is a common failing on the part of publishers and authors to regard each other as mutual foes and preys. Yet the facts of Charlotte Brontë's connexion with Mr. Smith, her publisher, show with convincing harmony that there is nothing in the nature of the publisher's or the author's vocation to set them at variance. The conditions of amity may be difficult of attainment. But my present parable plainly points the moral that, given on the one hand a publisher of high principle, of alert human sympathy, of capacity to appreciate great literature, and given on the other hand an author of genius, of modesty, of shrewdness, of frankness,

and of honesty, there is no room for any sentiment between the two save genuine regard.

The manner in which Charlotte Brontë first made Mr. Smith's acquaintance is too well-worn a topic to merit repetition here. But for the sake of clearness a brief reference must be made to the episode. Everybody knows how Charlotte Brontë and her two younger sisters, while they were in their teens, filled reams of paper with poems and novels. Surviving specimens show a stilted juvenility of the vaguest promise. The domestic griefs of adult years stimulated rather than slackened the three ladies' literary energies, but their first youth seems to have passed before the ambition seized them to see themselves in print. It was not till 1846, when Charlotte was thirty years old, that she and her sisters commissioned a London publisher to publish at their own expense a first volume—a collection of poems. The book had no success. But the sisters had tasted blood, and they now each offered a novel to a London firm. The aim of Charlotte's sisters took effect. *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* were accepted. But her own effort of *The Professor* was rejected without thanks. The failure did not daunt her pertinacity. Five times she re-addressed her manuscript to London publishers, only to meet with as many rebuffs. A seventh trial bore different fruit. The ill-fated manuscript reached a sympathetic harbourage in the office of Smith, Elder & Co., of 65, Cornhill. There it attracted the notice of the firm's reader, Mr. Smith Williams, a thoughtful critic, a student of fine taste. Williams detected the promise of *The Professor*, and, while declining its publication, invited with kindly encouragement another specimen of the author's work. *Jane Eyre* was despatched on August 24th, 1847. The result is universally known.

The manuscript fascinated Smith Williams. Mr. Smith read it one Sunday from end to end in the little study of his mother's house at Westbourne Place. It absorbed him from early morning till late at night. He could not tear himself from it to keep the day's engagements or even to

take his meals. The book was quickly sent to press. Within a few weeks, on October 16th, 1847, Charlotte Brontë's genius was revealed to the world.*

Few will need to be reminded that Charlotte Brontë addressed the firm under the masculine pseudonym of "Currer Bell," and represented herself as a man in all her early correspondence. From the first Mr. Smith saw through the disguise. His shrewd instinct convinced him that "Currer Bell, Esq.," was a woman.

In the early months of 1848 some friendly correspondence passed between Mr. Smith and Charlotte Brontë in her assumed name, but they did not meet till July, nine months after the publication of *Jane Eyre*. The immediate cause of the meeting need only be briefly indicated. Charlotte Brontë began *Shirley* very soon after she had finished *Jane Eyre*. At the same time her sister Anne had just completed her second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and was arranging to publish it under the accepted pseudonym of "Acton Bell," with Mr. Newby, the publisher of her first book, *Agnes Grey*. Mr. Newby informed Smith, Elder & Co. of an unfounded suspicion that Acton and Currer Bell were one person. Charlotte Brontë deemed it a point of honour to prove their separate identities. Suddenly she resolved that she and her sister Anne should reveal themselves in person to Mr. Smith in London. They arrived late one Friday night in July, 1848; and next morning presented themselves at 65, Cornhill. Mr. Smith was busily occupied, and was for a moment puzzled by the intrusion. Charlotte drew from an envelope inscribed "Currer Bell, Esq.," a letter which she declared that the firm had sent her. Mr. Smith asked with some coolness what was a woman's title to a communication

* Mr. Smith has noted the small circumstance that Charlotte Brontë in sending to his firm the manuscript of *Jane Eyre* apologised for her inability to prepay at Haworth the cost of carriage. She asked the firm to let her know the amount which should be charged on delivery, and promised to remit the sum in postage stamps. The simple request showed innocent anxiety lest the author's high hopes might be thwarted by a trifling accident, and points to obsolete perils of communication between writers living in remote places and London publishers.

which the firm had addressed to a man. The needful explanation followed, and there and then was formed that chivalric friendship which only death terminated.

III.

A visit to London was always for Charlotte Brontë a stirring venture. From girlhood, long before she made personal acquaintance with the city, the name thrilled her with a sense of mysterious wonder. Reports of its splendours at once attracted and repelled her youthful mind. It was her Babylon, her Nineveh, her ancient Rome. When her friend, Ellen Nussey, spent a few days there in 1834, Charlotte's letters vibrated vicariously with excitement over the dread experience. Ellen wrote carelessly of the first sight of the capital. Charlotte in reply confessed, by way of rebuke, "astonishment" and "awe" at the imagined marvels of St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. The mention of St. James's Palace filled her with "intense and ardent interest." The thought of meeting heroes like the Duke of Wellington, Sir Robert Peel, and Daniel O'Connell in the London streets stirred her deepest feelings. At the same time she was femininely inquisitive about the Court and its ceremonies. Amid the dithyrambics with which she plied her fortunate friend on her first London sojourn, she asked with a comical bathos for "the number of performers in the King's military band." The smallest details of London life moved her eager curiosity.

London was indeed a word to conjure with among all the dwellers in Haworth parsonage. The dissolute, art-loving brother Branwell craved in boyhood for a sight of the metropolis of art and sport. He gratified it for a few unlucky months at the end of 1835, after studying under his sister's eyes every thoroughfare marked on the map of the City. Charlotte's conception of London was first put to the test of experience in February, 1842, when she was twenty-six. On her way with her sister Emily to M. Héger's school at Brussels, she then spent her first

night and day in London. Her father accompanied them. The three visitors stayed at an old-fashioned tavern in an alley off Paternoster Row, at the Chapter Coffee House, in the very heart of the City, within view, through a narrow passage, of St. Paul's Cathedral. That object of her early awe with its chimes and its dome—"a solemn orbéd mass, dark blue and dim"—dominated on her arrival her mind and heart. With passionate impressiveness she twice described her first nocturnal sensations of St. Paul's, in *The Professor*, and again in fuller detail in *Villette*. Next morning "the spirit of this great London" roused her to ecstasy. "At a bound," she said, she got into the heart of City life. She dared the perils of crossings with a light heart. The West End, the parks, the fine squares which she knew better at a later date left her cold. But the earnestness of the City held her spellbound. "Its business, its rush, its roar were such serious themes and sights and sounds."

Glimpses of London even more fleeting were caught during the next two years. She slept again in the City on her return from Brussels to Haworth in the autumn of 1842. On her second visit to Brussels early next year (1843) she drove straight from Euston Railway Station to London Bridge Wharf and spent the night, an unwelcome passenger, on the Ostend packet, an incident which she vividly sketched in *The Professor*. Nor does her stay in London seem to have been prolonged beyond a night and a day, when she finally quitted Brussels for Haworth at the extreme end of the year 1843. However great its passing fascination at this period of her life, she found no further opportunity of personal scrutiny. London was still a hazy dream of glorious possibilities when she paid her memorable visit to Mr. Smith at Cornhill in July, 1848.

Then, for the first time, her sojourn lasted for more nights than one. She and her sister Anne remained in the City for three full days. Their headquarters were still the Chapter Coffee House, off Paternoster Row. Two of their

evenings were spent at the West End of the town, at No. 4, Westbourne Place, where Mr. Smith resided with his mother and sisters. Mr. Smith did not see Anne Brontë again. She died in less than a year, on May 28th, 1849.

There quickly followed, during the next four years, four visits which finally brought London within Charlotte Brontë's full comprehension. During all these visits, she was Mr. Smith's guest beneath his mother's roof. It was under his auspices and in his society that she realised her long-cherished ambition of familiarising herself with London—its thrilling "themes and sights and sounds."

Only three months of her thirty-nine years were devoted to the City of her early hopes and fears. But those three months provided, as she acknowledged, some of the most stirring moments in her career. She taxed her strength by her persistency as a sightseer. Her courage was often tried by social intercourse with her literary compeers to whom Mr. Smith introduced her. She nerved herself for the encounters with the self-questioning rebuke: "Who but a coward would pass his whole life in hamlets?" But her spirit often quailed. Yet her study of human character gained in subtlety and generosity under the varied ordeals of the great City. In her maturest novel, *Villette*, she garnered the fruit of the broadened outlook on human nature which she owed to her London experience.

IV.

Mr. Smith was "the guide, philosopher, and friend" of Charlotte Brontë's London days. For full two-thirds of the nineteenth century he played an interesting and important part on the literary stage apart from her and her work. His association with her was but one link in his long chain of achievement. Yet students of Charlotte Brontë's history and work have an especially good right to ask what manner of man he was as she knew him.

Miss Brontë's junior by eight years, Mr. Smith had lately passed his twenty-fourth birthday, when she, at the

age of thirty-two, first introduced herself to him at his office in Cornhill. London-born, a child of Scottish settlers, he had already lived from boyhood a busy life, and had shown that large-minded spirit, that keen intuition, that sense of responsibility, that mercantile aptitude which characterised his remaining three-and-fifty years. In 1816, the year of Charlotte Brontë's birth, his father, a native of Elginshire, had opened (with a partner, Alexander Elder, a native of Banff) a booksellers' and stationers' shop in Fenchurch Street. "Booksellers" and "publishers" were then convertible terms, and Smith & Elder were publishers on a modest scale from early days. Soon moving to Cornhill, the partners grafted on their existing business an East India Agency, and for more than thirty years the firm pursued in ever-increasing volume the joint work of publishers and East India agents. Young Smith entered the twin business at the age of thirteen, and at first took more kindly to the publishing than to the East Indian branch. His pupilage was brief. When he was no more than twenty—in 1844—his father's retirement, owing to failing health, flung on him the responsible charge of the growing concern, and circumstances quickly constituted him sole proprietor and director. His father soon died. Encouraged by his mother, from whom he inherited much of his firm and sanguine spirit, he weathered formidable initial difficulties, and under his control Smith, Elder & Co. became the chief East India agents and one of the leading publishing houses in London.

Mr. Smith had been only four years the firm's responsible chief when Charlotte and Anne Brontë called on him. A period of prosperity was opening for him in all directions, and before long he was to become the publisher of the flower of contemporary literature. The firm was already acting for Ruskin, then an unknown man under thirty, and with Ruskin, Mr. Smith was already intimate. But at present the only novelist of any repute with whom Smith, Elder & Co. had been nearly associated was the grandiloquent writer of blood-curdling romance, G. P. R. James.

Of the first impressions that Mr. Smith made on Charlotte Brontë she has left a frank record in her letters. She wrote there of his youth, of his practical instinct, his caution, his sense of honour, his enterprise, his quiet raillery. But her final and comprehensive study of his character was made in the medium of fiction. There are grounds for regarding *Villette* as her crowning achievement in literature. The book is to a large extent a recension of her early effort *The Professor*. But her touch had grown far firmer, and her outlook on life had widened since she made that first attempt. The old canvas was painted anew. Characters, of which she had no previous conception, were brought into the foreground. Bright colour for the first time illuminated the settled gloom. The cause of the cloud-lifting is not far to seek. The radiance was clearly caught from the character of Mr. Smith, from her close study of London sights under his surveillance, and from the cheerful hospitality which she enjoyed in his London home. Dr. John Graham Bretton, and his mother, Mrs. Bretton, who shed on the novel its warmest human glow, are Miss Brontë's full and candid interpretations of the personalities of her London host and hostess. She bequeathed to posterity no more delightful gifts.

Miss Brontë has been charged with transcribing in all her novels her private experience somewhat too literally to satisfy the best canons of art. Of that charge I will speak briefly before I close. In *Villette*, at any rate, she paints with curious fidelity many portraits of those with whom she had been in living contact both before and after she grew familiar with London. *Villette* is Brussels; her own sojourn at M. Héger's school and her companions there form the staple of her argument. But with an ingenuity that may be fairly styled felicitous she weaves into her canvas all the brightest threads of her London life.

No one who either knew Mr. Smith or heard him speak of his mother can fail to detect their two likenesses in Mrs. Bretton and Dr. John. To the portrayal of the

son Charlotte Brontë brought her keen power of observation in its fullest blossom. The mother is sketched more lightly, but no less surely. No sign of either is given in the first sketch of the book in *The Professor*.

Some idealisation is inseparable from fictitious portraiture even when the artist draws the lineaments directly from life. In the setting of Dr. John in medical practice at Villette there is nothing which reflects any phase of Mr. Smith's career. Dr. John's environment is either imaginary or assimilates gleanings from another household. It may be difficult here and there to reconcile a feature in the counterfeit presentment with one's own impression of the original. But the discrepancies are negligible. For those who knew Mr. Smith, Dr. John is a speaking portrait. Nor does the resemblance end with the graphic presentment of character and outward aspect. In spite of divergence from actual fact in the surroundings, Dr. John and Lucy Snowe, the heroine of *Villette*, are involved in some digressive adventures identical with experiences which jointly befell Charlotte Brontë and Mr. Smith when the writer was visiting London.

V.

In personal appearance Dr. John vividly recalls his prototype. The well-proportioned figure, the handsome and manly face and brow, the imposing height, the blue eyes, the hair worn rather long, which are precisely described in the novel, come straight from the unmistakable model. There is an unusual flicker of humour in the stress laid on the indeterminate hue of the hero's hair—such as friends did not venture to specify except as the sun shone on it “when they called it golden.”

It is in psychological analysis of her friend and publisher's temperament that Miss Brontë shows her full strength. Admiringly sympathetic as is her prevailing tone, she was too critical and too honest an artist to indulge in unqualified panegyric. “Strong and cheerful, firm and courteous, not rash yet valiant,” are the salient

notes of her picture, and none who knew Mr. Smith can question the justice of the epithets' application. "Much feeling spoke in his features and more sat silent in his eye." Of Dr. John's "gay and sanguine" temperament, of his generosity, his good nature, his amenity, Miss Brontë's pages do not lack the proof. But to her penetrating vision "Dr. John was not perfect any more than I am perfect." She declined to credit him with the attributes of "a god." She had no intention, she wrote to Mr. Smith himself, of keeping Dr. John "supremely worshipful"—"a being unlike real life, inconsistent with real truth, at variance with probability." "Human fallibility leavened him throughout." But the shadows are not dark. They add value to the portrait almost as much from the light they shed on the painter's idiosyncrasies as from any inherent value that attaches to them in the way of portraiture.

Charlotte Brontë's sense of humour was not strong. Though no stranger to the playful mood, she strictly checked its working. She was usually too serious and too earnest to approve any tendency to levity. Raillery or gentle ridicule she suspected of insincerity or worse. Innocent fun lay outside the normal scope of her intuition. Primness was intertwined with her passionate fibre. Hence came the main misgivings of her friend and publisher. In Mr. Smith's letters and conversation she noted hints of a playful disposition which puzzled her. With characteristic frankness she wrote to him thus:—

I will tell you a thing to be noted often in your letters and almost always in your conversation, a psychological thing and not a matter pertaining to style or intellect—I mean an under-current of quiet raillery, an inaudible laugh to yourself, a not unkindly, but somewhat subtle, playing on your correspondent or companion for the time being—in short, a sly touch of a Mephistopheles with the fiend extracted.

She confessed that she was at times half afraid of the enigmatic smile of questioning rebuke to which Mr. Smith's features lent themselves in her eyes.

Dr. John is invested with the like traits, and she dissects them almost mercilessly. "One could not in a

hurry make up one's mind," she writes in one chapter of *Villette* "as to the descriptive epithet it (*i.e.* Dr. John's smile) merited. While it pleased it brought surging up into the mind all one's foibles and weak points." The sentence is an eloquent confession of the writer's own sensitiveness. Dr. John's "mischievous half-smile" at other times seemed to her to betray either "masculine vanity elate and tickled," or an "unconscious roguish archness," which dashed the observer's equanimity.

More subtle failings suggested themselves as her brush worked over the canvas. She was inclined to blame her hero for a lighthearted absorption in the pleasure of the moment and for a masculine self-esteem, which hovered in her judgment between a vice or virtue. While she amply acknowledged his consideration for others, she sometimes imputed to him slowness to apprehend the felicity of unsolicited benvolence.

Though a kind, generous man, with fine feeling, he was not quick to seize or apprehend another's feelings. Make your need known, his hand was open; put your grief into words, he turned no deaf ear; expect refinements of perception, miracles of intuition, and realise disappointment.

Censure so searching bears witness to the exacting terms which the author imposed on her *beau idéal*.

Every side of Mr. Smith's character was conscientiously surveyed under cover of Dr. John. With graphic literalness Dr. John's attributes reflect Mr. Smith's magnificent capacity for work and his methodical precision. While Charlotte Brontë was the guest of his mother in London, the calls of his heavy and incessant labours at Cornhill were often reckoned more than one man could sustain. It is obvious what Charlotte Brontë had in her mind when she made Lucy Snowe remark of Dr. John :—

I can hardly tell how he managed his engagements. They were numerous; yet by dint of system he classed them in an order which left him a daily period of liberty. I often saw him hard-worked, yet seldom over-driven, and never irritated, confused, or oppressed. What he did was accomplished with the ease and grace of all-sufficing strength; with the bountiful cheerfulness of high and unbroken energies.

Nor does Charlotte Brontë depart a hair's breath from her circumambient text when she describes how Dr. John, despite his professional preoccupations, found time to gratify the heroine's taste for sightseeing. There is something like irrelevancy and inconsistency in the emphasis, which is laid in *Villette* on Dr. John's perfect knowledge of the points of interest in that French town where, according to the fiction, he was an alien dweller. Mr. Smith's exhaustive acquaintance with London, and his own accounts of the watchful care with which, at her instance, he conducted Miss Brontë through the labyrinth of its wonders, supply the key to the riddle. Theatres, opera-houses, picture galleries, newspaper offices, prisons, banks, hospitals, Parliament house, were all open to her with him as her guide. The chief object of her adoration, the Duke of Wellington, became to her a familiar figure, owing to Mr. Smith's ingenious pursuit of him at church or in street. Well might Lucy Snowe say of Dr. John: "Of every object worth seeing he seemed to possess the Open, sesame! . . . He took me to places of interest in the town, whose names I had not before so much as heard." It was in one "happy fortnight" that Dr. John revealed to Lucy Snowe "more of Villette, its environs and inhabitants," than months could have shown her with a less efficient escort. Villette and London (as discovered to Charlotte Brontë by Mr. Smith) are here convertible terms.

Dr. John's minutest characteristics as *cicerone* are scrutinised with the same transparent significance. Dr. John would leave Lucy Snowe in a picture gallery or museum to study or meditate alone for two or three hours, and call for her when his business set him free. He did not oppress her with his own comment, nor pretend to connoisseurship which he did not possess. "He spoke his thought, which was sure to be fresh." His sensible criticism came from his own resources. It was not borrowed nor stolen from books, nor decked out with dry facts or trite phrases or hackneyed opinions. Pertinent details interested him. There was no superficiality about his power of observation. His talk was neither cold nor vague. "He never prosed."

A touching charm envelops all the relations which the book allots to Dr. John and his mother. Mrs. Bretton has practically no characteristics which tradition fails to trace in Mr. Smith's mother, and many of Mrs. Bretton's phrases are known to have fallen from Mrs. Smith's lips. On her first introduction to Miss Brontë, Mrs. Smith was fifty-one years old, and had been a widow less than two years. Her youthful spirit was undimmed, and her son, as he often remarked, owed to her shrewdness, vivacity, and sanguine temper a large measure of the confidence with which he faced and conquered the heavy and complicated responsibilities that devolved on his young shoulders when his father died. The perfect understanding which linked mother and son together Charlotte Brontë transferred to her canvas with rare luminosity.

In a letter to a friend Miss Brontë gave her earliest impression of Mrs. Smith as "a portly, handsome woman of her age," and of her younger children as "all dark-eyed, dark-haired, and having clear, pale faces." This is how Mrs. Bretton was first brought to the reader's notice in *Villette* :

She was not young as I remember her, but she was still handsome, tall, well made, and though dark for an English-woman, yet wearing always the clearness of health in her brunette cheek, and its vivacity in a pair of fine cheerful black eyes.

Throughout the book Mrs. Bretton is credited at fifty with "the alacrity and strength of five-and-twenty," with a self-reliant mood and a decided bearing. She never, we are told, made a fuss over trifles, and was always self-possessed in the presence of anxiety. Though she could be peremptory and commanding in manner, cheerfulness and benevolence possessed her being. Her son, who honoured her counsel, called her "old lady." His affectionate regard for her mingled at their hearth with a playful spirit of *camaraderie*. Hints are given in the book of a difficult pecuniary situation in the affairs of the family, which Mrs. Bretton and her son boldly met side by side. The reference to the half-told episode ends

in *Villette* with these words: "So courageous a mother, with such a champion in her son, was well fitted to fight a good fight with the world, and to prevail ultimately." None can doubt that Miss Brontë here was reproducing some confidences given her by Mr. Smith or his mother of the days when he first took the helm at Cornhill.

The best tribute that one can pay to Mrs. Smith is that no more charming type of matronhood than Mrs. Bretton is known to fiction. Charlotte Brontë's final judgment on the hospitality which mother and son offered her in London is found in these fine sentences:—

There are human tempers—bland, glowing, and genial—within whose influence it is as good for the poor in spirit to live, at it is for the feeble in frame to bask in the glow of noon. Of the number of these choice natures were certainly both Dr. Bretton's and his mother's. They liked to communicate happiness, as some like to occasion misery. They did it instinctively, without fuss, and apparently with little consciousness; the means to give pleasure rose spontaneously in their minds. Every day, while I stayed with them, some little plan was proposed which resulted in beneficial enjoyment.

VI.

There are incidents in *Villette* which are digressions from the main path of the story. Most of them are memories of Charlotte Brontë's sojourns in her publisher's London household. They at times imperil the just perspective of the novel. Yet they have intrinsic interest from the mode of presentation, and bear eloquent testimony to the depth of the impression that her London experience left on her. The minute description of the concert at the *conservatoire* in *Villette* is alive with touches derived from Charlotte's attentive hearing and observation of music recitals in London. It will be remembered that Mrs. Bretton causes her guest, Lucy Snowe, some alarm by suddenly bidding her to a concert at which royalty was expected, and that the girl's lack of suitable apparel was instantaneously met by her hostess's provision of a new pink dress. I have heard that the incident, in all the

minuteness of its detail, is true of an identical experience of Charlotte Brontë at Mrs. Smith's Bayswater home. Very familiar is the glowing description of Lucy's visit to the Villette theatre to see and hear the great tragic actress Vashti. The heroine tells how she was bewitched by that magician of genius, who drew her heart out of its wonted orbit, "who disclosed power like a deep swollen winter river, thundering in cataract, and bearing the soul, like a leaf, on the steep and steely sweep of its descent." Few more fervid tributes have been paid the histrionic art. The whole passage is Miss Brontë's reminiscence of the impersonations of the great French actress Rachel, which the writer witnessed in Mr. Smith's company at the London theatre in Covent Garden.

The Vashti chapter is long and highly strung. It closes with a vivid description of an outbreak of fire in the playhouse. In the panic, Dr. John, with his look of "comely courage and cordial calm," does an heroic deed of rescue, which ultimately brings him a wife. The episode is a curious idealisation of a personal experience, not of Charlotte Brontë, but of Mr. Smith, who narrated the circumstances to her in a letter. Charlotte Brontë had been, while in London, escorted by Mr. Smith to one of those famous amateur performances at the Duke of Devonshire's house in Piccadilly, in which Charles Dickens, John Forster, Wilkie Collins, and other men of letters were wont occasionally to take part. The theatre scene owes nothing—the concert scene in the *conservatoire* in *Villette* possibly owes something—to this dramatic entertainment which Charlotte witnessed with Mr. Smith. Soon, however, after Charlotte left for Haworth, Mr. Smith was again present at the Devonshire House theatricals with his sister and a lady friend. On this occasion some scenery on the stage caught fire, and for a few seconds a panic threatened. Mr. Smith gripped his two companions by the wrist and with all his force held them to their seats. They complained bitterly of his roughness, but he helped thereby to stem the general alarm. The smouldering flame was extinguished and confidence was restored. Mr. Smith

wrote of the episode to Charlotte Brontë, and his story of the happily slender accident and of his own conduct bred in her throbbing mind the shocks and perils of the burning playhouse in Villette.

VII.

The last illustration which I give here of Charlotte Brontë's literary use of her London visits concerns not Mr. Smith alone, but also and more immediately Thackeray, the most eminent of the authors whom he made personally known to his guest.

Thackeray's fame was finally assured by the publication of *Vanity Fair* in 1847, a few months before the appearance of *Jane Eyre*. Thackeray's masterpiece filled Miss Brontë with enthusiastic admiration, and the author became at once an adored hero. She dedicated to him the second edition of *Jane Eyre* early in 1848. It was while Thackeray's second great novel *Pendennis* was nearing the close of its original monthly issue that Miss Brontë gratified one of her cherished ambitions by meeting Thackeray in person. The occasion was a dinner given by Mrs. Smith and her son in 1849, when Miss Brontë was paying them her second visit. The thrilling event proved for her a more trying ordeal than she anticipated. "In company," she wrote in *Villette*, "a wretched idiosyncrasy forbade me to see or feel anything. . . . I never yet saw the well-reared child, much less the educated adult, who could not put me to shame by the sustained intelligence of its demeanour" in social intercourse. When she first saw Thackeray face to face her shyness was invincible. "Excitement and exhaustion made savage work of me that evening," she wrote; "what he thought of me I cannot tell." Thackeray long remembered "the trembling little frame, the little hand, the great honest eyes." Other meetings followed between the two; but though Miss Brontë lost her first sense of speechless dread, the personal association never proved quite congenial on either side. Thackeray and Miss Brontë revered each other's genius with genuine sincerity. But Thackeray's easy half-cynical

conversation ruffled her austerity. To him she presented herself as "a little austere Joan of Arc, marching in upon us and rebuking our easy lives and our easy morals." His personality would seem to have both attracted and repelled her. On a morning call which Thackeray made her at Mr. Smith's house, she improved the occasion by reproaching him with his shortcomings. Mr. Smith has vivaciously described his own unheralded entry on "the queer scene." The little lady hardly reached Thackeray's elbow, but she plied the giant with a raking fire of invective before peace was restored. Miss Brontë declared that Thackeray behaved on the occasion "like a great Turk and heathen; his excuses were worse than his crimes."

The peculiarly severe standard by which she judged Thackeray has left a curious trace on *Villette*. In May, 1851, Mr. Smith and his mother took her to Willis's Rooms to hear the novelist deliver the second of his lectures on the Humourists. He recognised her in the audience, and after the lecture playfully introduced her to his mother as *Jane Eyre*, the title of her passionate heroine. Mr. Smith has recorded that she warmly resented the mode of address. But she was even more embarrassed by Thackeray's frank appeal to her to tell him how she enjoyed his performance. So natural a request disturbed her equanimity, and she had no word to offer. This slight fleeting encounter was enshrined a few months later in *Villette*. The Professor, Paul Emanuel, there gives, amid applause, a lecture in the Villette Athénée, at which the heroine, Lucy Snowe, is present. Of the Professor's subsequent demeanour Charlotte Brontë writes thus in her rôle of Lucy Snowe:—

As our party left the Hall, he stood at the entrance; he saw and knew me, and lifted his hat; he offered his hand in passing, and uttered the words "Qu'en dites-vous?"—question eminently characteristic, and reminding me, even in this his moment of triumph, of that inquisitive restlessness, that absence of what I considered desirable self-control which were among his faults. He should not have cared just then to ask what I thought, or what anybody thought; but he *did* care, and he was too natural to conceal, too impulsive to repress, his wish. Well! if I blamed his over eagerness, I liked his *naïveté*. I would have praised

him: I had plenty of praise in my heart; but, alas! no words came to my lips. Who *has* words at the right moment? I stammered some lame expressions, but was truly glad when other people, coming up with profuse congratulations, covered my deficiency with their redundancy.

The scene of May, 1851, in Willis's Rooms is here faithfully recorded.

Another scene, in which Charlotte Brontë and Thackeray were the protagonists, was enacted in Thackeray's house the following month. The author of *Villette* found no place for this second adventure in her fiction. But all the details still live freshly in the memory of Lady Ritchie, Thackeray's daughter, who herself played a part in the incident, and from her lips I learned a little more than I knew a week or two ago. Both she and Mr. Smith have already described the chief features of the episode with vivacity in print. But the points of interest, whether new or old, are varied enough to excuse mention of it here.

It was one evening in June, 1851, when both novelists were at the zenith of their high reputations, that the giant author of *Vanity Fair* gave at his house in Young Street, Kensington, a small evening party in honour of the little authoress of *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*. She was on her longest visit to Mr. Smith and his mother across the Park, and Mr. Smith accompanied her to Thackeray's house. Lady Ritchie has written of the excitement with which her father, her sister, and herself awaited in the hall the great little lady's arrival. Dressed in a little *barège* dress with a pattern of faint green moss, the tiny and delicate woman entered the drawing-room, hanging on her host's arm, "in mittens, in silence, and in seriousness." To meet the celebrated writer there were gathered, as Lady Ritchie lately reminded me, women of the most brilliant intellect and speech in London. There were Mrs. Carlyle, the witty and sardonic wife of Thomas Carlyle; Mrs. Brookfield, the clever wife of the fashionable preacher; Mrs. Procter, overflowing in good spirits and shrewdness, wife of Charles Lamb's friend and biographer, Barry Cornwall.

All were anxious to show respect for the distinguished guest, and were exhilarated by the expectation of greeting her. But Miss Brontë was under a nervous spell, and her mental lassitude spread through the room. A blight settled on the assembly. Charlotte repulsed the ladies' advances. Mrs. Brookfield opened conversation with the expression of a hope that Miss Brontë liked London. The skirmish ended with the novelist's curt reply, "I do and I don't." The gloom thickened; the lamp began to smoke; Thackeray's native gaiety drooped; all hearts grew chill. The host, unable to cope with the silence, as his daughter tells us, furtively on tiptoe made for the street door, and sought the consolation of his club. His daughter, mystified by his retreat, suggested to the party in the drawing-room that he would be back soon; but he did not return till his guests had departed. To Lady Ritchie's memory Charlotte still presents herself as a shy and prim little governess who regarded children like herself and her sister with a freezing severity. Mr. Smith, Charlotte's companion at Thackeray's memorable party, said that as she drove back with him to his mother's house, she spoke acidly of the two little girls.*

VIII.

One's sympathy goes out to this visitor to London drawing-rooms from the Yorkshire moors. Seasoned Londoners could at a first glance find little in her that was prepossessing, and many probably acquiesced in George Henry Lewes's ungallant designation of her as "a little

* I am informed by Miss Millais, daughter of the late Sir John Everett Millais, President of the Royal Academy, that her father was among Thackeray's guests at the party given in Charlotte Brontë's honour. Millais, then a young man of two and twenty, had already made considerable reputation as a painter. "I wish," Miss Millais writes to me on February 28, 1909, "I had written down my father's recollections of Miss Brontë. He saw her several times in 1851, and must have been introduced to her at the party, which Lady Ritchie describes wonderfully as being so painful. He told me very much the same thing, and said he was taken up by Thackeray, and Miss Brontë spoke to him. He said her eyes were quite remarkable, and afterwards Miss Brontë remained in appearance his idea of a woman genius. The little lady 'looked tired with her own brains.' He met her afterwards at Mrs. Procter's, where she was not so shy, and he was anxious to do a drawing of her, but found she was already engaged to sit to George Richmond."

plain, provincial, sickly-looking old maid." In her first draft of *Villette*, which embodied so much of her London experience, she gave herself (who is the heroine) the surname of "Frost," altering it to "Snowe" in the final version. But her coldness was superficial. No good and charitable judges could misconceive the warm enchantment of her genius, and her manner yielded most of its self-conscious crudity and asperity to the sympathetic influence of Mr. Smith's hospitality.

The publication of *Villette* in January, 1853, brings Charlotte Brontë's relations with London to a fitting close. The book was begun early in 1851, after she had twice—for some weeks in each of the preceding two years—enjoyed the hospitality of Mrs. Smith and her son. The manuscript occupied her at intervals until the autumn of 1852. When she forwarded at that season the greater portion to Mr. Smith, her correspondence gives many signs of anxiety lest her bold transcription of his character should cause him discontent. But the wise publisher kept his counsel, and she as prudently made no excuses. He pronounced in general terms a highly favourable verdict. Some of his criticism on details she neglected, and he did not press them. He hinted at some "discrepancy," "a want of perfect harmony" in the conception of Dr. John. There came, too, a suggestion from London that Dr. John should in the closing chapters marry Lucy Snowe. But no such intention found place in Charlotte Brontë's design. "Lucy," she wrote to Mr. Smith, "must not marry Dr. John: he is far too youthful, handsome, bright spirited, and sweet tempered; he is a curled darling of nature and fortune, and must draw a prize in life's lottery. His wife must be young, rich, pretty: he must be made very happy indeed." In the book Dr. John is mated elsewhere, and he passes out of Lucy Snowe's life without the exchange of any confidence of the heart. The heroine's passion is centred on the grim, great-hearted professor, Paul Emanuel, who dies shipwrecked in the Atlantic Ocean. The knell of death, not wedding bells, sounds the epilogue.

When in January, 1853, the printing of *Villette* was on the point of completion, Miss Brontë stayed a fourth and last time under the Smiths' roof in London. For a crowded fortnight, sight-seeing was continued under Mr. Smith's escort with all the old ardour. Miss Brontë was still Mr. Smith's guest on the day of *Villette's* publication, and she was at hand to hear the burst of unqualified applause with which London greeted this last of the works to be published in her lifetime. Early in February, 1853, she left for Haworth, and Mr. Smith did not meet her again. Later in the year their two lives underwent almost simultaneously a momentous change. Mr. Smith became engaged to the lady whom he married on February 11, 1854, and Miss Brontë accepted the long-urged suit of her father's curate, Mr. Nicholls. Mr. Smith and Charlotte Brontë exchanged notes of mutual congratulation, and with her warm expressions of good wishes for Mr. Smith's married happiness Miss Brontë's correspondence with her publisher seems to have closed. Her own quiet wedding took place a few months later (June 29, 1854), and she died on March 31, 1855.

Mr. Smith lived on till April 6, 1901. Many and vast were the new interests which absorbed him in the long interval between Charlotte Brontë's death and his own. Many were the new titles he acquired to fame and affection in middle life and in age. He has numerous claims to live in literary history. He lives there as the friend of authors so illustrious as Thackeray and Browning, whose works he published after he became Miss Brontë's publisher. He lives there as the founder of the *Cornhill Magazine* and of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and even more conspicuously as the public-spirited projector and proprietor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. But whatever recognition is due to these achievements, it should never be forgotten by the literary historian any more than by Charlotte Brontë's disciples that he was in youth the original of her sound-hearted, manly, and sensible Dr. John, who ranks with the most cheering portaits of masculine virtue that the hand of genius has drawn.

That tendency, which Charlotte Brontë so signally exemplifies in Dr. John and Mrs. Bretton, of interpreting in her novels men and women with whom she came into personal contract, is often reckoned a defect in her art. It is complained, too, that she indulged overmuch in self-portraiture, and that her heroines, Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, present with too little qualification her own outlook on life as she records it in her private correspondence. The links that bind her fictitious personages to herself and her living associates crowd, indeed, upon the student of her life, and this "audacious fidelity," as one critic terms it, has been cited as proof of limitation in her power of invention. But the point against her may easily be pressed too far. Every novelist presents in his work something of himself and his relations with kinsfolk, friends, and acquaintances. Fielding, Miss Austen, Scott, Thackeray, all faithfully transcribe much of themselves and of the life around them. Yet Miss Brontë's censors, even when they admit the question to be one only of degree, aver that she depends more directly and to a larger extent than any novelists in the first rank on the immediate suggestion of her own sensation and environment. Neither Sterne's *Uncle Toby* nor Thackeray's *Colonel Newcome*, we are reminded, has an identifiable model. Both, as far as are known, were compounded in the crucible of their creators' imagination. On the other hand, Paul Emanuel, Miss Brontë's most complex and most finished presentment of human nature, is commonly reckoned a portrait from the life; Dr. John, her most radiant picture of mankind, is an avowed delineation of Mr. Smith.

Broadly speaking, the argument would seem to merit less attention than has been paid it. After all, it matters little whence Charlotte Brontë gleaned her material compared with the uses to which she put it. No artist in fiction can reach a higher level of achievement than that of producing an irresistible illusion of life with its throbbing emotion, its elations, its depressions, its hopes and fears. A novelist's records of fact and observation come to little

unless they are clothed in the habiliments of genuine feeling. In the absence of adequate imagination, men and women, whence-soever they come, move on the printed page like lay figures. Miss Brontë's imaginative endowment has been excelled in breadth and intensity. But her imaginative grip was strong enough to transmute her studies from the life into breathing entities of flesh and blood. Penetrating insight lent "a colossal phlegm and force" to the measure of creative faculty within her scope and the fiery glow of her language leaves an abiding conviction that, whatever else she closely studied, she was deeply versed in the human heart. At any rate she was unflinching in her pursuit of the truth about her fellow-creatures, and it was her patient and honest scrutiny of Mr. Smith which discovered for her Dr. John's humane and cheery heroism.