Mrs. Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë

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MRS. GASKELL AND CHARLOTTE BRONTË:

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The names of Mrs. Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë must needs be inseparable, because Mrs. Gaskell's Life of her friend has done so much to keep the memories of both before the public. Next year we are to celebrate the centenary of Charlotte Brontë's birth, if, indeed, the war is over; if, alas! this be not the case, the less we write about centenaries the better. In any case Charlotte Brontë's novels have had a constant stream of readers for more than half-a-century. With Mrs. Gaskell there was a lull of many years, when perhaps only "Cranford" held a place in the public esteem. Now there is a more definite recognition of her great powers as a story-teller. I am tempted to recall the two writers because I have just come across a bundle of unpublished letters by Mrs. Gaskell, in three or four of which I find references to her friend, Miss Brontë. The first, dated Nov. 29th, 1849, was written from Mrs. Gaskell's then home in Upper Rumford Street, Manchester. It is interesting because at the time Mrs. Gaskell did not even know who was the author of "Jane Eyre":—

Have you read Southey's Memoirs? But of course you have, happy creature, and do you know Dr. Epps?—I think you do. Ask him to tell you who wrote "Jane Eyre" and "Shirley." Do tell me who wrote "Jane Eyre."

The next letter records a well-known visit to the Lakes, in which Charlotte Brontë and her future biographer first met. This was in August, 1850:

William is at Birmingham; he was preaching there last Sunday, and is staying for some days. It is funny how we *never* go from home together. He is so anxious about the children; he says he is never easy if we are both away, it takes away all his pleasure, so first he went to Edinburgh Scientific

Association, and prowled about Scotland, then last week quite unexpectedly Lady Kay Shuttleworth wanted us to come and meet Miss Brontë, and William could not go—and then the people he is with at Birmingham wanted us to go; and he said he shd. not be happy if I went; so we are like Adam and Eve in the weather glass. I wish, my dear, you were here. It would be a charming beguiling of my sofa imprisonment. I am very happy nevertheless making flannel petticoats and reading *Modern Painters*. Miss Brontë is a nice person. Like you, Tottie, without your merriment; poor thing, she can hardly smile she has led such a hard, cruel (if one may dare to say so) life. She is quiet, sensible, unaffected, with high, noble aims. Lady K. S. was confined to one room, so she and I had much of our day to ourselves, with the exception of some lectures on art, and “bringing ourselves down to a lower level,” and “the beauty of expediency,” from that eminently practical man, Sir James, who has never indulged in the exercise of any talent which could not bring him a tangible and speedy return. However, he was very kind, and really took trouble in giving us, Miss Brontë especially, good advice, which she received with calm resignation. She is sterling and true; and if she is a little bitter she checks herself, and speaks kindly and hopefully of things and people directly; the wonder to me is how she can have kept heart and power alive in her life of desolation. I made her give me an account of the “Editorial party.”

The next extract is from a very long letter to the same friend, and we are enabled by the reference to “Ruth” to date it—1852:—

“Ruth” is done—utterly off my mind and gone up to the printers—that’s all I know about it. (“You’ll get a “Ruth” one of these days from the author.”) Rosa Mitchell had suddenly a better offer in the money line—a situation she cd. not refuse, and we had to change our plans; and we wondered if it would be fair to a girl of Ma’s age to ask her to teach the little ones, and to tie her; and we were doubting about it, when she wrote and offered, *in the nicest way*; humbly distrustfully, yet full of grave, steady resolution. Meanwhile Katie was here, and heard thro’ Alice of a vacancy at Miss Martineau’s which we grasped at for Meta, and in a week all these changes in our plans were made.

Miss Brontë has been ill—*very* ill I’m afraid, but I only heard of it yesterday morning thro’ the Shaens, who had asked her there, and she gave that as her excuse, or rather reason,

for not coming to them. I wrote to her directly—though I don't know that *that* did much good—only one felt how lonely and out of the world she must be, poor creature. I've a great mind to go and see her uninvited some day. I cd. (that's to say if I'd the money) stay at the Inn so as not to be in Mr. Brontë's road. However, I don't mean to stir from home this long time when I get back, but write, write, write; I really do mean to do something good and virtuous. Florence did not do well in the temper line during the holidays, she always wants to be one of older girls, but when I left she was angelic.

The next letter, dated April 23rd, 1854, is to John Forster. I publish only that fragment of it that has reference to Charlotte Brontë:—

Ah! did you not cheat me with your ("now don't tell") at the bottom of the page! I turned over, thinking you really had pressed, and for that and previous misconduct on the same affair I have half a mind not to tell you. Yes! she is going to be married! to Mr. Nicholls, who has returned to Haworth. He made some kind of renewed application to her father to be allowed to see them from time to time as an acquaintance in January; in February he again spoke to her; and she says she cannot tell me all the details in a letter, but "events have so flowed out of each other that now she finds herself what people call engaged." Mr. Nicholls returns to Haworth to be curate to her father, himself only a perpetual curate under the vicar of Bradford with £250 a year *pour tout potage*, out of which he pays Mr. Nicholls's salary. They are all three, father, daughter, and husband, to live together; she says her father seems now anxious to make up for former injustice, and is so kind that at times she "could cry that she has not been able more to gratify his natural pride." The "old, the poor, the very young" among the Haworth people are delighted, which speaks well for Mr. Nicholls, I'm sure. I am terribly afraid he won't let her go on being intimate with us heretics. I see she is, too, a little. However, she is coming to us in May, and I must make the most of her then, and hope for the future. I fancy him very good, but *very* stern and bigoted; but I dare say that is partly fancy. Still, it arises from what she told me. He sounds vehemently in love with her. And I like his having known her dead sisters and dead brother and all she has gone through of home trials, and being no person who has just fancied himself in love with her because he was dazzled by her genius. Mr. N. never knew till long after "*Shirley*" was published that she wrote books, and came in cold and disapproving one day to ask her if the report he had heard at

Keighley was true, etc. Fancy him, an Irish curate, loving her even then, reading that beginning of "Shirley!" However, with all his bigotry and sternness, it must be charming to be loved with all the strength of his heart as she sounds to be. Mr. Shaen accuses me always of being "too much of a woman" in always wanting to obey somebody—but I am sure that Miss Brontë could never have borne not to be well ruled and ordered. Well, I think I have got into a fiasco, and I have hardly any right to go on discussing what she could or she could not do—but I mean that she would never have been happy but with an exacting, rigid, law-giving, passionate man—only, you see, I am afraid one of his laws will be to shut us out, so I am making a sort of selfish moan over it, and have got out of temper, I suppose, with the very thing I have been wanting for her this six months past.

A further letter to Mr. Forster, dated May, 1854. has another reference to the same subject :—

I troubled you with my groans, my dear Mr. Forster, so now you see I am going to send you my reliefs—selfish the first is. I don't believe Miss Brontë will *soon* become bigoted, or *ever* lose her true love for me, but I do fear a *little* for her happiness just because he is narrow and she is not. Good, true, pure and affectionate he is, but he is also narrow, and she can never be so.

Finally, there is a letter from Plymouth Grove, Manchester, dated July, 1855, to Miss Ellen Nussey. which shows the first stage of Mrs. Gaskell's biography of Charlotte Brontë which has given so much delight to three generations of readers :—

I don't know if you have heard of Mr. Brontë's request to me that I would write the life of his daughter, Mrs. Nicholls, who was, I am well aware, your dear and long-tried friend. But if you have been informed of this wish of Mr. Brontë's you will not be surprised to hear that I went over to Haworth yesterday to see him and make the acquaintance of Mr. Nicholls. I told Mr. Brontë how much I felt the difficulty of the task I had undertaken, yet how much I wished to do it well, and make his daughter's most unusual character (as taken separately from her genius) known to those who from their deep interest and admiration of her writings would naturally, if her life was to be written, expect to be informed as to the circumstances which made her what she was. Both he and Mr. Nicholls agreed to this, Mr. Brontë not perceiving the full extent of

the great interest in her personal history felt by strangers, but desirous above all things that her life should be written, and written by me. (His last words were, "No quailing, Mrs. Gaskell. No drawing back.")

Mr. Nicholls was far more aware of the kind of particulars which people would look for, and saw how they had snatched at every gossiping account of her, and how desirable it was to have a full and authorized history of her life, if it were done at all. His feeling was against its being written, but he yielded to Mr. Brontë's impetuous wish; and brought me down all the materials he could furnish me with, in the shape of about a dozen letters, addressed principally to her sister Emily, one or two to her father and her brother, and one to her aunt. The dates extend from 1839 to 1843. But Mr. Nicholls said that he thought that you were the person of all others to apply to; that you had been a friend of his wife's ever since she was 15; and that he would write to you to-day, and ask if you would allow us to see as much of her correspondence with you as you might feel inclined to trust me with. But recalling since how often she had spoken of you to me, I should like very much to make your personal acquaintance, if you will allow me; and if agreeable to you I would come over from Manchester on either Friday, July 27th, or Saturday, July 28th next, whichever was most convenient to you, by the train that arrives at Birstall at $\frac{1}{4}$ past 10 in the morning. I do not know if your old schoolmistress, Miss Wooler, is yet alive and living in Birstall, but if so I shall endeavour to see her, and Mr. and Mrs. Taylor.

Then there is this letter from Mrs. Gaskell to Miss Brontë's Brussels friend, Miss Wheelwright, dated Plymouth Grove, February 7th, 1857. Miss Wheelwright was the daughter of a Dr. Wheelwright, and she and her sisters were at school at Brussels with the two Brontë girls:—

I have to-day finished my life of Miss Brontë; and next week we set out for Rome. Before I go, however, I must return you your precious letters, with my best thanks, not merely for the loan of them, although their value has been great, but for the kind readiness with which you all (especially you and your mother) met my wishes about giving me information. I hope some time or other to be able to call upon you, and express all this personally, if you will allow me. Meanwhile I trust you will accept a copy of the "Memoir," which will be forwarded to you on publication, and with kind compliments.

And then we have one other letter, which I reproduce in facsimile.† Altogether the correspondence forms, I think, an interesting memorial of two great novelists. These letters were sent to me by the late Miss Meta Gaskell, who through many years sent me material for a biography of her mother which has not yet been written. It was my good fortune, on the other hand, to give Miss Gaskell some of her mother's letters, which were of too private a nature to be of use to a biographer.

† See Frontispiece.