

CHARLOTTE BRONTE GOES TO CONFESSION

CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S father, the Rev. Patrick Bronte, was born in Ireland on Saint Patrick's Day, 1777, at Emdale, near Rathfriland, in the County Down. His father, Charlotte's grandfather, Hugh Prunty—his Scotch Presbyterian neighbours called him Brunty—came from somewhere in the south of Ireland, but where exactly his paternal home was he could never ascertain. When he was twenty-two he made a runaway match with Alice McClorey of Ballynaskeagh, a neighbouring townland. Alice McClorey was a Catholic, and her brother, with whom she lived, and her relatives were much opposed to the marriage, which took place secretly in the Protestant church of Magherally. After a brief honeymoon the young people returned to live in a two-roomed thatched cottage at Emdale, near Rathfriland, where ten children were subsequently born to them, and all of them were brought up Protestants.

The eldest son, Patrick, shortly after entering Cambridge in the year 1802, changed his name from Branty, the name signed in the Register of the University, to Bronte. Prior to that time there were no Brontes in Ireland. Being an Ulsterman, although born of a Catholic mother, the Rev. Patrick Bronte was of the ultra-Protestant type so peculiar to the North-East corner of Ireland. A speech against Catholic Emancipation was his one venture into the arena of the politics of his time. To the members of his family he passed on a legacy of intolerance, but, of the three sisters, to judge from their writings, Charlotte seems to have inherited more than her share of it.

When Charlotte and Emily Bronte entered the Pensionnat Heger in Brussels they were afflicted with a type of insularity which was then peculiarly English.

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They hated all foreigners, and especially did they hate the Belgian people because they were Catholic foreigners. This intolerance on the part of Charlotte is made evident by many references in her novels.

Charlotte's dislike of the Catholic religion deepened with the years; with Emily it was different. There was much in it that was attractive to her. Being a 'black Protestant,' as her father's north of Ireland friends would say, and educated on strictly Calvinistic lines, there was not a little that was anti-Catholic in her make-up, but, and it served to counter-balance the bigotry, there was also much in the practices of the Catholic Church that made a profound impression on her sensitive mind. While in Brussels she grew to love the great Cathedral of Saint Gudule, with its beautiful music and ceremonies. She would go there in the evenings with the unwilling Charlotte to Benediction, a service which seems to have a peculiar power of appealing to the outsider. On the other hand, Charlotte's anti-Catholic attitude was the cause of her spending many a lonely hour in Brussels. What she was pleased to term her 'upright heretic and English spirit' recoiled from 'the gentle Jesuitry of the Romish system,' hence she held herself aloof, and, resenting all advances in the way of friendliness, assumed the role of Ishmael—a Protestant in a strange land among Catholic, and therefore, foreign and hostile people. But, as we have seen, Charlotte's grandmother, Alice McClorey, was a Catholic, though not a very exemplary one, so, as the Irish saying has it, 'there was a Catholic drop in her, for all that.'

On one occasion, when the pupils of the school in the Rue d'Isabelle had gone home for the summer vacation, and Monsieur and Madame Heger had departed with their family for the seaside, Charlotte found herself alone in the great deserted building, a stranger in an unfriendly, foreign city. One other

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teacher remained. She was, in all probability, as homesick and lonely as her very prim and difficult companion, but she was Catholic and French, and, therefore, Charlotte disliked and distrusted her, and was at no pains to hide her feelings.

Heart-sick with loneliness and boredom, she roamed the hot streets of the city, or tramped for miles into the country, only to return wearied, and, if possible, more depressed than before. Once, returning from one of these walks, as she crossed the great square in front of the Cathedral, the bell of Saint Gudule clanged above her head. It was the hour for vespers. The great doors stood open. Outside, the evening sunshine lay white and wide over the gleaming pavements of the noisy square. Inside the lights of the altars shone, and the gloom and quiet of the vast aisles beckoned to her. Charlotte Bronte, the ultra-Protestant, entered, and in the following letter, written to her sister Emily some weeks later, she tells the story of her 'Confession.'

BRUXELLES,

September 2nd, 1843.

DEAR E.J.,

Another opportunity of writing to you coming to pass, I shall improve it by scribbling a few lines. More than half the holidays are now past, and rather better than I expected. The weather has been exceedingly fine during the last fortnight, and yet not so Asiatically hot as it was last year at this time. Consequently I have tramped about a great deal, and tried to get a clearer acquaintance with the streets of Bruxelles. This week, as no teacher is here except Mdlle. Blanche, who is returned from Paris, I am always alone, except at meal times, for Mdlle. Blanche's character is so false and so contemptible I can't force myself to associate with her. She perceives my utter dislike and never now speaks to me—a great relief.

However, I should inevitably fall into the gulf of low spirits if I stayed always by myself here without a human being to speak to, so I go out and traverse the Boulevards and streets of Bruxelles sometimes for hours together.

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Yesterday I went on a pilgrimage to the cemetery, and far beyond it on to a hill where there was nothing but fields as far as the horizon. When I came back it was evening, but I had such a repugnance to return to the house, which contained nothing that I cared for, I still kept threading the streets in the neighbourhood of the Rue d'Isabelle and avoiding it. I found myself opposite to Ste. Gudule, and the bell, whose voice you know, began to toll for evening *Salut*. I went in quite alone (which procedure, you will say, is not much like me), wandered about the aisles where a few old women were saying their prayers, till vespers began. I stayed till they were over, still I could not leave the church or force myself to go home—to school I mean. An odd whim came into my head. In a solitary part of the Cathedral six or seven people still remained kneeling by the confessionals. In two confessionals I saw a priest. I felt as if I did not care what I did, provided it was not absolutely wrong, and that it served to vary my life and yield a moment's interest. I took a fancy to change myself into a Catholic and go and make a real confession to see what it was like. Knowing me as you do, you will think this odd, but when people are by themselves they have singular fancies. A penitent was occupied in confessing. They do not go into the sort of pew or cloister which the priest occupies, but kneel down on the steps and confess through a grating. Both the confessor and the penitent whisper very low, you can hardly hear their voices. After I had watched two or three penitents go and return I approached at last and knelt down in a niche which was just vacated. I had to kneel there ten minutes waiting, for on the other side was another penitent invisible to me. At last that penitent went away and a little wooden door inside the grating opened, and I saw the priest leaning his ear towards me. I was obliged to begin, and yet I did not know a word of the formula with which they always commence their confessions. It was a funny position. I felt precisely as I did when alone on the Thames at midnight. I commenced with saying I was a foreigner and had been brought up a Protestant. The priest asked if I was a Protestant then. I somehow could not tell a lie and said 'yes.' He replied that in that case I could not 'Jourir du bonheur de la confesse,' but I was determined to confess, and at last he said he would allow me because it might be the first step towards returning to the true church. I actually did confess—a real confession. When I had done he told me his address, and said that every

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morning I was to go to the Rue du Parc—to his house—and he would reason with me and try to convince me of the error and enormity of being a Protestant!!! I promised faithfully to go. Of course, however, the adventure stops there, and I hope I shall never see the priest again. I think you had better not tell papa this. He will not understand that it was only a freak and will perhaps think I am going to turn Catholic.

Trusting that you and papa are well, and also Tabby and the Hoyles. I hope you will write to me immediately.

I am yours,

C.B.

If Charlotte Bronte wrote with levity of her experience in the Brussels Cathedral, and referred to her position, kneeling at the Confessional, as a 'funny one,' it was done solely to allay the fears of her family at the Haworth Parsonage, lest they should think she was in danger of falling a victim to the 'gentle Jesuitry' of Rome, and becoming a Catholic. The tone of levity was assumed. There was no gaiety in the heart of the writer in that hour. Instead, Charlotte Bronte at that time was a discontented, disillusioned and very unhappy woman, whose lonely and distraught soul cried out for solace and understanding. The Catholic Church, with its succour for sinners in the Sacrament of Penance called to her over-burdened heart, just as the cool, dusky, quiet aisles of the great Cathedral called to her troubled soul. Here in a shadowy corner of the vast church, where the old women said their Rosaries in the gloom, Charlotte Bronte set her feet for an instant on the Road that would have led her Home—home to the church of her fathers—but it was only for an instant. Her promise to see the priest again she never kept, and so—

'The choice went by for ever

'Twixt that darkness and that light.'

Charlotte Bronte remained a Protestant.

CATHAL O'BYRNE.