The House of Brontë.

A veritable House of Usher that lonely parsonage at Haworth must have been, at least it so stands forth in one's mental picture of it—blank, bare, bleak, and ominous, at the very end of the steep and narrow street that climbs between its double row of gray stone houses to the apex of the hill. The ancient gray stone church with its square and solid tower stands opposite, and from the gray front of the little house its five upper windows stare down upon the mouldering tombstones of the parish graveyard—an accompaniment as symbolic as that of the dark and stagnant tarn. This picture of the house is insistently suggested when one recalls the history of the Brontës. It has evidently impressed Miss Sinclair, the author of this latest study of the three remarkable sisters whose literary achievement has brought such fame to this strange family. Miss Sinclair says:

"It is the genius of the Brontës that made their place immortal; but it is the soul of the place that made their genius what it is. You cannot exaggerate its importance. They drank and were saturated with Haworth. . . . Haworth is saturated with them. Their souls are henceforth no more to be disentangled from its soul than their bodies from its earth."

The pathetic drama of Patrick Brontë's household loses none of its significance in Miss Sinclair's narrative. The shadow of death hovers over the family from the beginning to the end. Eighteen months after their advent at Haworth the mother was buried in the vault of the gray stone church, and on the flat stone above her grave was carved the text "Be ye also ready." The five little Brontë girls were sent away to a school,—the Clergy Daughter's School, which happened to be situated "in an unwholesome valley." Then Marie, aged twelve, was brought home to die; Elizabeth, aged eleven, followed her sister. Charlotte, Emily, and Anne were now at Haworth again, and there they lived undisturbed by further tragedy for seven years. Their activities were in part domestic, but by no means limited by the gray walls of the parsonage, the old stone church, or the sombre cemetery. The freedom of the moors was theirs,—the dun and purple moors surrounded, as Mrs. Gaskell describes them, by the sinuous, wave-like hills—grand from the ideas of solitude and loneliness that they suggest. And now they entered another world, the one created by their own imagination, which gave the childhood of these three sisters and their brother, Branwell, a coloring as unique as it was intense. It is not uncommon for children to live in a playland of strange fancies, but here was something different from the experience of normal childhood. "For a considerable number of years they were the 'Islanders.'" "It was in 1827 [Charlotte, at thirteen, records the date] that our plays were established: Young Men, June, 1826; Our Fellows, July, 1827; The Islanders, December, 1827. These are our three great plays that are not kept secret." And then there were the secret plays, Emily's and Charlotte's,—"shy and solitary flights of Emily's and Charlotte's genius," Miss Sinclair terms them. They had begun to write. "They seem to have required absolutely no impulsion from without," she says. "The difficult thing for these small children was to stop writing." And from this singular school of authorship came in due time that astonishing group of novels which has served for wonderment and comment ever since.

As was to have been expected, Miss Sinclair's study of the Brontës is vivacious, dramatic, frank, and unconventional. She apologizes for her book on the ground that too much has been said already about Charlotte and her family,—so much, indeed, that the truth itself is buried under a confused tangle of distorted facts. She does not spare the biographers. Mrs. Gaskell is censured for injustice to Patrick Brontë, the eccentric head of the house, whom Miss Sinclair describes as "a poor, unhappy and innocent old man." George Henry Lewes is "gross and flippant"; and as for Mrs. Oliphant, "there is nothing from her fame downward" that she did not grudge Charlotte.

In 1846 appeared the volume of "Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell"; in 1847 the novel, "Agnes Grey," by Anne, "Jane Eyre," by Charlotte, and "Wuthering Heights," by Emily. In the next year came Branwell's tragic end, in September; in December Emily died, aged twenty-nine; and five months later Anne too, at twenty-seven, succumbed to the same disease (tuberculosis) which had claimed her sister. In September of that year, 1849, Charlotte completed "Shirley." She did not lack appreciation; Mrs. Gaskell, Harriet Martineau, and Thackeray were her admiring friends, but her celebrity did not destroy her shyness or wean her from her attachment to Haworth. "Villette" was published in 1853, and in that year Charlotte was married to Arthur Nicholls, her father's

*The Three Brontës. By May Sinclair. Illustrated. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

curate. "The Professor" was not published until 1857. In March, 1855, Charlotte Brontë died — then in her thirty-ninth year. Her mother's death had occurred at the same age, and Branwell, too, had died at thirty-nine.

Miss Sinclair's book will interest all who are interested in the Brontës; it is a study that has unusual value. The passion, the spirit of revolt, the elemental in the work of Charlotte and Emily, are here given sympathetic emphasis. To Emily the biographer gives a leading place; "Wuthering Heights" is in her estimation superior to "Jane Eyre," and Emily's poems receive highest praise. It is the figure of Emily Brontë, tall, strong, and unconquerable, solitary and unique, that dominates Miss Sinclair's imagination at the conclusion of the story she has so vividly retold. But once again, in her concluding chapter, she harks back to that gray stone house on the hill — as she found it, when a child, in the vivid pages of Mrs. Gaskell's wonderful life:

"I knew every corner of that house. I have an impression (it is probably a wrong one) of a flagged path going right down from the Parsonage door through another door and plunging among the tombs. I saw six little white and wistful faces looking out of an upper window; I saw six little children going up and up a lane, and I wondered how the tiny feet of babies ever got so far. I saw six little Brontë babies lost in the spaces of the illimitable moors. They went over rough stones and walls and mountain torrents; their absurd petticoats were blown upwards by the wind, and their feet were tangled in the heather. They struggled and struggled, and yet were in an ecstacy that I could well understand. . . . And, all through, an invisible, intangible presence, something mysterious, but omnipotently alive; something that excited these three sisters; something that atoned, that not only consoled for suffering and solitude and bereavement, but that drew its strength from these things; something that moved in this book like the soul of it; something that they called 'genius.'"

There is no question of the genius of Charlotte and Emily Brontë. But genius commonly arrives by the broad highway of worldly knowledge; so still the wonder grows — how the tiny feet of babies ever got so far.

W. E. Simonds.