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Villette

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VILLETTE.

By CURRER BELL,
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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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VOLUME I

CHAPTER I
BRETTON

My godmother lived in a handsome house in the clean and ancient town of Bretton. Her husband's family had been residents there for generations, and bore, indeed, the name of their birth-place – Bretton of Bretton: whether by coincidence, or because some remote ancestor had been a personage of sufficient importance to leave his name to his neighbourhood, I know not.

When I was a girl I went to Bretton about twice a year, and well I liked the visit. The house and its inmates specially suited me. The large peaceful rooms, the well-arranged furniture, the clear wide windows, the balcony outside, looking down on a fine antique street, where Sundays and holidays seemed always to abide – so quiet was its atmosphere, so clean its pavement – these things pleased me well.

One child in a household of grown people is usually made very much of, and in a quiet way I was a good deal taken notice of by Mrs Bretton, who had been left a widow, with one son,[1] before I knew her; her husband, a physician, having died while she was yet a young and handsome woman.

She was not young, as I remember her, but she was still handsome, tall, well-made, and though dark for an Englishwoman, yet wearing always the clearness of health in her brunette cheek, and its vivacity in a pair of fine, cheerful black eyes. People esteemed it a grievous pity that she had not conferred her complexion on her son, whose eyes were blue – though, even in boyhood, very piercing – and the colour of his long hair such as friends did not venture to specify, except as the sun shone on it, when they called it golden. He inherited the lines of his mother's features, however; also her good teeth, her stature

(or the promise of her stature, for he was not yet full-grown), and, what was better, her health without flaw, and her spirits of that tone and equality which are better than a fortune to the possessor.

In the autumn of the year — I was staying at Bretton; my godmother having come in person to claim me of the kinsfolk with whom was at that time fixed my permanent residence. I believe she then plainly saw events coming, whose very shadow I scarce guessed; yet of which the faint suspicion sufficed to impart unsettled sadness, and made me glad to change scene and society.

Time always flowed smoothly for me at my godmother's side; not with tumultuous swiftness, but blandly, like the gliding of a full river through a plain. My visits to her resembled the sojourn of Christian and Hopeful[2] beside a certain pleasant stream, with 'green trees on each bank, and meadows beautified with lilies all the year round.'[3] The charm of variety there was not, nor the excitement of incident; but I liked peace so well, and sought stimulus so little, that when the latter came I almost felt it a disturbance, and wished rather it had still held aloof.

One day a letter was received of which the contents evidently caused Mrs Bretton surprise and some concern. I thought at first it was from home, and trembled, expecting I know not what disastrous communication; to me, however, no reference was made, and the cloud seemed to pass.

The next day, on my return from a long walk, I found, as I entered my bed-room, an unexpected change. In addition to my own French bed[4] in its shady recess, appeared in a corner a small crib, draped with white; and in addition to my mahogany chest of drawers, I saw a tiny rosewood chest. I stood still, gazed, and considered.

'Of what are these things the signs and tokens?' I asked. The answer was obvious. 'A second guest is coming: Mrs Bretton expects other visitors.'

On descending to dinner, explanations ensued. A little girl, I was told, would shortly be my companion: the daughter of a friend and distant relation of the late Dr Bretton's. This little girl, it was added, had recently lost her mother; though indeed,

Mrs Bretton ere long subjoined, the loss was not so great as might at first appear. Mrs Home (Home it seems was the name) had been a very pretty, but a giddy, careless woman, who had neglected her child, and disappointed and disheartened her husband. So far from congenial had the union proved, that separation at last ensued – separation by mutual consent, not after any legal process. Soon after this event, the lady having over-exerted herself at a ball, caught cold, took a fever, and died after a very brief illness. Her husband, naturally a man of very sensitive feelings, and shocked inexpressibly by too sudden communication of the news, could hardly, it seems, now be persuaded but that some over-severity on his part – some deficiency in patience and indulgence – had contributed to hasten her end. He had brooded over this idea till his spirits were seriously affected; the medical men insisted on travelling being tried as a remedy, and meanwhile Mrs Bretton had offered to take charge of his little girl. 'And I hope,' added my godmother in conclusion, 'the child will not be like her mama; as silly and frivolous a little flirt as ever sensible man was weak enough to marry. For,' said she, 'Mr Home *is* a sensible man in his way, though not very practical: he is fond of science, and lives half his life in a laboratory trying experiments[5] – a thing his butterfly wife could neither comprehend nor endure; and indeed,' confessed my godmother, 'I should not have liked it myself.'

In answer to a question of mine, she further informed me that her late husband used to say, Mr Home had derived this scientific turn from a maternal uncle, a French savant; for he came, it seems, of mixed French and Scottish origin, and had connections now living in France, of whom more than one wrote *de* before his name, and called himself noble.[6]

That same evening at nine o'clock, a servant was despatched to meet the coach by which our little visitor was expected. Mrs Bretton and I sat alone in the drawing-room waiting her coming; John Graham Bretton being absent on a visit to one of his school-fellows who lived in the country. My godmother read the evening paper while she waited; I sewed. It was a wet night; the rain lashed the panes, and the wind sounded angry and restless.

'Poor child!' said Mrs Bretton from time to time. 'What weather for her journey! I wish she were safe here.'

A little before ten the door-bell announced Warren's return. No sooner was the door opened than I ran down into the hall; there lay a trunk and some band-boxes, beside them stood a person like a nurse-girl, and at the foot of the stair-case was Warren with a shawled bundle in his arms.

'Is that the child?' I asked.

'Yes, miss.'

I would have opened the shawl, and tried to get a peep at the face, but it was hastily turned from me to Warren's shoulder.

'Put me down, please,' said a small voice when Warren opened the drawing-room door, 'and take off this shawl,' continued the speaker, extracting with its minute hand the pin, and with a sort of fastidious haste doffing the clumsy wrapping. The creature which now appeared made a deft attempt to fold the shawl; but the drapery was much too heavy and large to be sustained or wielded by those hands and arms. 'Give it to Harriet, please,' was then the direction, 'and she can put it away.' This said, it turned and fixed its eyes on Mrs Bretton.

'Come here, little dear,' said that lady. 'Come and let me see if you are cold and damp: come and let me warm you at the fire.'

The child advanced promptly. Relieved of her wrapping, she appeared exceedingly tiny; but was a neat, completely-fashioned little figure, light, slight, and straight. Seated on my godmother's ample lap, she looked a mere doll; her neck, delicate as wax, her head of silky curls, increased, I thought, the resemblance.

Mrs Bretton talked in little fond phrases as she chafed the child's hands, arms, and feet; first she was considered with a wistful gaze, but soon a smile answered her. Mrs Bretton was not generally a caressing woman: even with her deeply-cherished son, her manner was rarely sentimental, often the reverse; but when this small stranger smiled at her, she kissed it, asking –

'What is my little one's name?'

'Missy.'

'But besides Missy?'

'Polly, papa calls her.'[7]

'Will Polly be content to live with me?'

'Not *always*; but till papa comes home. Papa is gone away.' She shook her head expressively.

'He will return to Polly, or send for her.'

'Will he, ma'am? Do you know he will?'

'I think so.'

'But Harriet thinks not: at least not for a long while. He is ill.'

Her eyes filled. She drew her hand from Mrs Bretton's, and made a movement to leave her lap; it was at first resisted, but she said –

'Please, I wish to go: I can sit on a stool.'

She was allowed to slip down from the knee, and taking a foot-stool, she carried it to a corner where the shade was deep, and there seated herself. Mrs Bretton, though a commanding, and in grave matters even a peremptory woman, was often passive in trifles: she allowed the child her way. She said to me, 'Take no notice at present.' But I did take notice: I watched Polly rest her small elbow on her small knee, her head on her hand; I observed her draw a square-inch or two of pocket handkerchief from the doll-pocket of her doll-skirt, and then I heard her weep. Other children in grief or pain cry aloud, without shame or restraint; but this being wept: the tiniest occasional sniff testified to her emotion. Mrs Bretton did not hear it: which was quite as well. Ere long, a voice, issuing from the corner, demanded –

'May the bell be rung for Harriet?'

I rang; the nurse was summoned and came.

'Harriet, I must be put to bed,' said her little mistress. 'You must ask where my bed is.'

Harriet signified that she had already made that inquiry.

'Ask if you sleep with me, Harriet.'

'No, missy,' said the nurse: 'You are to share this young lady's room,' designating me.

Missy did not leave her seat, but I saw her eyes seek me. After some minutes' silent scrutiny, she emerged from her corner.

'I wish you, ma'am, good night,' said she to Mrs Bretton; but she passed me mute.

'Good night, Polly,' I said.

'No need to say good night, since we sleep in the same chamber;' was the reply with which she vanished from the drawing-room. We heard Harriet propose to carry her up stairs. 'No need,' was again her answer – 'No need, no need:' and her small step toiled wearily up the staircase.

On going to bed an hour afterwards, I found her still wide awake. She had arranged her pillows so as to support her little person in a sitting posture; her hands, placed one within the other, rested quietly on the sheet, with an old-fashioned calm most unchildlike. I abstained from speaking to her for some time, but just before extinguishing the light, I recommended her to lie down.

'By and by,' was the answer.

'But you will take cold, missy.'

She took some tiny article of raiment from the chair at her crib side, and with it covered her shoulders. I suffered her to do as she pleased. Listening awhile in the darkness, I was aware that she still wept – wept under restraint, quietly and cautiously.

On awaking with daylight, a trickling of water caught my ear. Behold! there she was risen and mounted on a stool near the wash-stand, with pains and difficulty inclining the ewer (which she could not lift) so as to pour its contents into the basin. It was curious to watch her as she washed and dressed, so small, busy, and noiseless. Evidently she was little accustomed to perform her own toilet; and the buttons, strings, hooks and eyes, offered difficulties which she encountered with a perseverance good to witness. She folded her night-dress, she smoothed the drapery of her couch quite neatly; withdrawing into a corner, where the sweep of the white curtain concealed her, she became still. I half rose, and advanced my head to see how she was occupied. On her knees, with her forehead bent on her hands, I perceived that she was praying.

Her nurse tapped at the door. She started up.

'I am dressed, Harriet,' said she: 'I have dressed myself, but I do not feel neat. Make me neat!'

'Why did you dress yourself, missy?'

'Hush! speak low, Harriet, for fear of waking *the girl*' (meaning me, who now lay with my eyes shut). 'I dressed myself to learn, against the time you leave me.'

'Do you want me to go?'

'When you are cross, I have many a time wanted you to go, but not now. Tie my sash straight; make my hair smooth, please.'

'Your sash is straight enough. What a particular little body you are!'

'It must be tied again. Please to tie it.'

'There, then. When I am gone you must get that young lady to dress you.'

'On no account.'

'Why? She is a very nice young lady. I hope you mean to behave prettily to her, missy, and not show your airs.'

'She shall dress me on no account.'

'Comical little thing!'

'You are not passing the comb straight through my hair, Harriet: the line will be crooked.'

'Ay, you are ill to please. Does that suit?'

'Pretty well. Where should I go now that I am dressed?'

'I will take you into the breakfast-room.'

'Come, then.'

They proceeded to the door. She stopped.

'Oh! Harriet, I wish this was papa's house! I don't know these people.'

'Be a good child, missy.'

'I am good, but I ache here;' putting her hand to her heart, and moaning while she reiterated 'Papa! papa!'

I roused myself and started up, to check this scene while it was yet within bounds.

'Say good morning to the young lady,' dictated Harriet.

She said 'good morning,' and then followed her nurse from the room. Harriet temporarily left that same day, to go to her own friends, who lived in the neighbourhood.

On descending, I found Paulina (the child called herself Polly, but her full name was Paulina Mary) seated at the breakfast table, by Mrs Bretton's side; a mug of milk stood before her,

a morsel of bread filled her hand, which lay passive on the table-cloth: she was not eating.

'How we shall conciliate this little creature,' said Mrs Bretton to me, 'I don't know: she tastes nothing, and, by her looks, she has not slept.'

I expressed my confidence in the effects of time and kindness.

'If she were to take a fancy to anybody in the house, she would soon settle; but not till then,' replied Mrs Bretton.