VILLETTE.

BY

CHARLOTTE BRONTE.

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 birthplace - 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, 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 beside a certain pleasant stream, with "green trees on

each bank, and meadows beautified with lilies all the year round." 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

bedroom, an unexpected change. In, addition to my own French bed 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

mamma; 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 - 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.

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 schoolfellows 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 staircase 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 the small stranger

smiled at her, she kissed it, asking, "What is my little one's name?"

"Missy."

"But besides Missy?"

"Polly, papa calls her."

"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 footstool,

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 washstand, 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.

CHAPTER II.

PAULINA.

Some days elapsed, and it appeared she was not likely to take much of

a fancy to anybody in the house. She was not exactly naughty or

wilful: she was far from disobedient; but an object less conducive to

comfort - to tranquillity even - than she presented, it was scarcely

possible to have before one's eyes. She moped: no grown person could

have performed that uncheering business better; no furrowed face of

adult exile, longing for Europe at Europe's antipodes, ever bore more

legibly the signs of home sickness than did her infant visage. She

seemed growing old and unearthly. I, Lucy Snowe, plead guiltless of

that curse, an overheated and discursive imagination; but whenever,

opening a room-door, I found her seated in a corner alone, her head in

her pigmy hand, that room seemed to me not inhabited, but haunted.

And again, when of moonlight nights, on waking, I beheld her figure,

white and conspicuous in its night-dress, kneeling upright in bed, and

praying like some Catholic or Methodist enthusiast - some precocious

fanatic or untimely saint - I scarcely know what thoughts I had; but

they ran risk of being hardly more rational and healthy than that

child's mind must have been.

I seldom caught a word of her prayers, for they were whispered low:

sometimes, indeed, they were not whispered at all, but put up

unuttered; such rare sentences as reached my ear still bore the

burden, "Papa; my dear papa!" This, I perceived, was a one-idea'd

nature; betraying that monomaniac tendency I have ever thought the

most unfortunate with which man or woman can be cursed.

What might have been the end of this fretting, had it continued

unchecked, can only be conjectured: it received, however, a sudden

turn.

One afternoon, Mrs. Bretton, coaxing her from her usual station

in a corner, had lifted her into the window-seat, and, by way of

occupying her attention, told her to watch the passengers and count

how many ladies should go down the street in a given time. She

had sat listlessly, hardly looking, and not counting, when - my eye

being fixed on hers - I witnessed in its iris and pupil a startling

transfiguration. These sudden, dangerous natures - sensitive as

they are called - offer many a curious spectacle to those whom a cooler

temperament has secured from participation in their angular vagaries.

The fixed and heavy gaze swum, trembled, then glittered in fire; the

small, overcast brow cleared; the trivial and dejected features lit

up; the sad countenance vanished, and in its place appeared a sudden

eagerness, an intense expectancy. "It is !" were her words.

Like a bird or a shaft, or any other swift thing, she was gone from

the room, How she got the house-door open I cannot tell; probably it

might be ajar; perhaps Warren was in the way and obeyed her behest,

which would be impetuous enough. I - watching calmly from the window -

saw her, in her black frock and tiny braided apron to pinafores she

had an antipathy , dart half the length of the street; and, as I was

on the point of turning, and quietly announcing to Mrs. Bretton that

the child was run out mad, and ought instantly to be pursued, I saw

her caught up, and rapt at once from my cool observation, and from the

wondering stare of the passengers. A gentleman had done this good

turn, and now, covering her with his cloak, advanced to restore her to

the house whence he had seen her issue.

I concluded he would leave her in a servant's charge and withdraw; but

he entered: having tarried a little while below, he came up-stairs.

His reception immediately explained that he was known to Mrs. Bretton.

She recognised him; she greeted him, and yet she was fluttered,

surprised, taken unawares. Her look and manner were even

expostulatory; and in reply to these, rather than her words, he said,

- "I could not help it, madam: I found it impossible to leave the

country without seeing with my own eyes how she settled."

"But you will unsettle her."

"I hope not. And how is papa's little Polly?"

This question he addressed to Paulina, as he sat down and placed her

gently on the ground before him.

"How is Polly's papa?" was the reply, as she leaned on his knee, and

gazed up into his face.

It was not a noisy, not a wordy scene: for that I was thankful; but it

was a scene of feeling too brimful, and which, because the cup did not

foam up high or furiously overflow, only oppressed one the more. On

all occasions of vehement, unrestrained expansion, a sense of disdain

or ridicule comes to the weary spectator's relief; whereas I have ever

felt most burdensome that sort of sensibility which bends of its own

will, a giant slave under the sway of good sense.