

*With apologies to Charlotte Bronte and the legions of her fans who are amassing with torches and pitchforks outside my house.*

The jarring ride of the coach over the deeply rutted puddle-crammed roadbed prevented me from reading as I am inclined to do as I travel. It forced me to look upon the landscape of \_\_\_shire and ponder the course of my life these last two decades. I had as intended spent the years as a missionary in India bringing to heathen peoples the Christian Word. My life's work achieved it was time to return to England. In the year since my return, I have traversed city and countryside acquainting myself with the changes in the places and lives of the people I once knew.

My stay in the nearby village informed me of the recent history of Thornfield Hall. It was rebuilt by the master and his new wife a few years after the devastating fire which sealed an unsavory chapter in their lives. As the chaise rounded the last turn I could see the edifice revealed to me. It appeared in the old style attesting to the stories that it was rebuilt almost unchanged. Despite its obvious freshness, its aspect from the distance was one of remarkable gloominess. Perhaps the charred foundations upon which they built the restoration contained the smolder of previous iniquities. I could not say for sure, but I found gazing upon it unnerving.

I took my single travel bag off the coach and approached the door. It was answered by a eager young gentleman servant who ushered me into a parlor. The foyer and hall were magnificent in size but unadorned in a manner commiserate with the wealth of the Rochesters. It was as if they purposely avoided ostentation and limited ornament to simple strong lines. Still the darkness of the timbers supporting ceiling and stair brooded over long rooms lit by lancet windows. It was only a few minutes before the mistress of the house entered and I rose to greet her. "St. John!" she exclaimed. "Mrs. Rochester," I acknowledge as I bowed before her.

Jane had changed little since I last saw her. Some said she was plain looking but perhaps they were too harsh. Time was kind to her and her countenance bore little trace of the lines and paleness that often comes to women of her age. Now amongst her peers, Jane would be radiant. Her garb was black and simply cut reminding me how suitable a missionary's wife she would have been.

She was so opposite the very changed Rosamond Oliver, who once drew my attentions. Rosamond had married shortly after my departure. Her once slim features were rounded with age but still possessing a living attractive glow, just not a young one. She was still buoyant about life and charitable without peer. It would be easy to assume that wealth and disposition made her immune to life's tribulations but I know that she too suffered. The loss of two young children and one never born must have scarred even her ebullient character. Yet, in the presence of her sole surviving daughter, and perhaps for her daughter's sake, Rosamond was indefatigable and generous about all the blessings that God has bequeath upon them.

Mrs. Rochester bid me sit and inquired immediately about details of my return and what I was doing since. She had corresponded with my sisters continuously and dare I say knew more about them than I could possibly relate. Still having overcome their last dispatch, I

could gleefully report that Diane and Mary were together and contented. Diane and Mary married happily, were respectively mother and aunt to each other's throng of children. Their courtships were quite unremarkable, as were their husbands. Their lives were equally full of unexceptional highs and lows. Theirs were the kind of lives lived well that do not attract a writer to chronicle them.

Social pleasantries being dismissed, I was moved to express my condolences on the loss of her husband some five years earlier. She nodded gratitude. I did not inquire to details, as the little news I picked up from the village was dreadful. Mr. Rochester, who was losing sight once again in his one good eye, had taken to sojourn by himself despite admonitions from his wife. But he felt confident that his familiarity with the grounds would overcome his blindness. One day he did not return from his walk. A few weeks later the lake surrendered a body corrupted by the elements without head and some limbs. It seemed to be the former master of Thornfield. No constabulary investigation was performed in deference the honor of the mistress of Thornfield. Still, the village was rampant with rumors of his demise occurring before the body entered the lake.

"And what of you and India, St. John? It does not seem so long ago that your letters said you were almost no longer of this world." Mrs. Rochester was right. I explained the nature and extent of my illness but that some how my recovery was complete and almost instantaneous. I explained to my heathen Hindu charges that my petitions to the Lord eradicated my malady demonstrating that the Lord God would intervene on behalf of the righteous. Equally, the Lord's wrath will act to punish the unjust. They remained resolute that it was something they called *karma*. That I was a good man and my goodness came back to me in the form of a cure. They were recalcitrant in their error because of their perception that the natural world is an everlasting cycle of returns independent of an omnipotent being. These cycles, or *samsara* (meaning a flowing together of life forces), return death to life and run continuously, so they believe. I tried to educate them that because of revelation we know this is not true. That there was creation, expulsion, redemption through our Lord Jesus Christ and ultimately there would be salvation and the linear progression of the earth would terminate." Mrs. Rochester and I talked more of my cultural observations and experiences.

The morning passed to dinner. The young man, who answered the door, entered and escorted us to a dining room. Like the others of the house it was furnished in traditional but restrained manner. I commented on the youth of her butler. "He seems a dashing young servant, Mrs. Rochester. Has he been in your employ long?"

"William? Since he was a child. Shortly after, Edmund and I rebuilt Thornfield, I brought over his parents, Robert and Bessie, from Gateshead. They served me well and brought up their young family in these halls. Robert has since passed on, but Bessie lives in a cottage on the edge of our land still near her children and grandchildren. William and his wife serve the house and his brother Randall maintains the grounds of the new Thornfield."

Afterwards we began to talk of her life in a fashion more inclusive than was possible in the stream of missives we bartered over the years. Rochester's ward Adele, whose heart was always trusting and eager for acceptance, married foolishly. Her husband could not

provide for his family and had no interest in doing so. The Rochesters endowed Adele with a comfortable pension, which they kept far from her husband's sieve-like fingers.

The Mistress of Thornfield spoke vividly of her sons. Here, dear Reader, her eyes opened wide with delight. Both were born in the first decade of her marriage and were vigorous and studying in the finest schools and traveling the world. "The eldest has his father's strength, his cousins scholarship." I nodded appreciation. "And, dare I say his mother's appreciation for propriety. The younger was more inclined to wayward conduct and moods of a miserable nature. It was necessary to send them away so they would not observe the putrefaction that began to overtake their father."

I was troubled by this revelation and proffered consolation. The first ten years of her marriage seemed storybook. Indeed she told me she recorded it as such for the prose muse enthused her to share it with the few who might someday think it worthy of consideration. She spoke cautiously, "Perhaps the seed of discord is planted in a marriage wherein the bride thinks she can change her groom to her perfect ideal and the groom expects that his bride will never change." She half stared out the window. It was a confession of sorts that Jane lay before me. Was it because I was clergy or an old friend or a potentially renewed consort? I could not tell. But my ministry told me that she needed corroboration of her posture and I should listen before advising.

"He was a good man deep inside, but the tumult of his life was cancerous. He began to resent the attentions our boys demanded, consideration that was once reserved for him. As our sons grew taller, they reminded him of his infirmities, age and misspent youth. Rochester embraced despondency. Then too diseases of an aberrant nature contracted during his wanton ways led to a corporal infestation that corroded him mind and body."

"In the beginning, I had thought, in the conceit typical of a young woman that I could save him from such a fate. And he was for a decade vivid and full of the wonder of life. But I could not save him forever. He began to return to his old ways, both in mind and habit. He resisted my attempts to restore his salvation. He did not think he needed my variety of deliverance. I held firm to my first impression, that my love alone would sanctify him."

"It was a reasonable view at the commencement of our love. But I was a woman barely twenty years of age who had seen so little of the world. Perhaps it was a romantic idea fostered by novels. He was like a Mr. Darcy, conveniently wealthy and attractively distant. But it is the nature of story to end at the dramatic high. Love stories end at love's blossoming. They rarely follow the flower as it dries and drops petals. I should have known better than to take advice from an authoress who was herself unmarried. Did you ever read **Pride and Prejudice**, Mr. Rivers? I took up the volume while at your homestead in Moor House. It was one of Mary's favorites."

"No," I stuttered, "I have never taken to reading *fiction*."

"Mr. Rivers, I apologize for I have bored you with tawdry particulars of my life. Be assured that I surpassed the usual female fault of ascribing heinous motivations to my husband for acts; acts which he committed with casual ignorance and indifference. I do

not fault him for being an imperfect man. But I could not tolerate how his mortifying perspicacity might influence his sons. It was my prayer that his failings not be passed on to our progeny. I toiled hard to preserve them and their memory of a wonderful father of their childhood. And if my husband's demise was too soon, in many ways it was a blessing for him and his family."

The day and evening spent. Mrs. Rochester had the servants place me for the night in a room on the expansive second floor of Thornfield. I was restless and could not sleep. I lay staring at the ceiling. There was no moon so I could not perceive it looming above me. My attraction for Jane grew and I began to burn with desire. Perhaps the encounters with the Indians had engendered such things in me that never before existed.

I realized that my first offer of marriage tendered some twenty years earlier was an icy tedious proposal. I, in my scholarly fashion, I had calculated Jane as a useful missionary companion. Never once had I offered her love or expressed a passion for her. As a young man with religious ideals I suppressed all those stimulations. I suppressed them for Rosamond who I knew could never join me in my vocation. I suppressed them for twenty years on the mission. Now as a man having finished his fifth decade, I am newly awakened, burgeoning with compulsions, surging with an interest hereto unrealized. But in that large bed, in the comfort of her warm house, Jane's goodness and plain beauty were ever more appealing. Sleep would not come and relieve me of these considerations.

So when I heard rousings above me, as if furniture was moving and doors were slamming shut, I was curious as to their cause. They stirred, stopped and stirred again. There was chattering and a low howl. Then there was silence. After a time in the dark I heard a crash and groan that indistinctly sounded like the words "Help me."

I lit the candle by the bed and threw on my robe. I followed by the flickering light of a single candlestick the stairs up to the third floor. There was no moon and so the windows did not give any hint of what lay ahead of me. On the third floor the barren wood planks were smooth and pointed to a single stool in front of a door that was ajar. From within came the moans. I approached the door cautiously and with my free hand pushed inward to open it further. I could see the boot of a limp foot was blocking the aperture. I pushed with my shoulder to lunge through the door. There on the floor was a man servant and hovering above his unconscious body was a man. He was chained to wall by means of his right hand, blind to the light of my candle but sensing my presence thrust the stub of his left arm towards me and cried, "Help me!" A wraithlike draft of Thornfield extinguished my lone candle.

The End