

1

Though it is night, the sun casts an eerie light over these regions, forlorn indeed. The snow is so yielding that at every step I plunge up to my knees and can barely make any headway.

A cry from behind freezes my blood.

I turn to discover that Lieutenant Ross has sunk into the deadly white mass and cannot extricate himself. With immense difficulty I flail back to him.

“Parry,” he says, with tears in his eyes, “I am done for. You must go on without me.”

“Nonsense, my friend,” I say. “Give me your hand. We will make it to the Pole yet.”

“Emily!” Aunt’s voice, sharp as a needle. “You are daydreaming again. Attend to your work.”

Emily stabs the white calico in exasperation. She wasn’t daydreaming — in her imagination she was her hero, Parry, the great explorer, and just at the critical moment Aunt came crashing in and broke the spell.

She sighs. Lucky Parry to be able to go off journeying in the wild wastes of the Arctic, unencumbered by annoying relatives making him do things he didn’t want to do. *He* never had to sew nightshirts, for sure. Her back aches from sitting on the low stool, her fingers are cramped, and she’s desperate to stand up

and move about, to walk, to run. To escape this stuffy room. To be out of doors.

She wiggles her toes inside her boots.

There's a sudden movement at the window. Dropping her sewing, she dashes over and peers out just in time to see a flock of chaffinches disappearing over the mossy garden wall into the graveyard beyond.

Disappointed to have missed them, Emily lifts her eyes, gazing past the dark bulk of the church below her and the cluster of grey houses surrounding it that form the top of the village, across the smoke-filled valley to the distant hills. Their heather-clad slopes, glowing purple in the soft autumn light, look so inviting. Emily sighs again.

Resting her forehead against the glass, she squinnies down the lane past the Sunday school toward the bottom corner, where anyone approaching would appear between Mr. Brown the sexton's house and the church. But there's no sign of Branwell.

It's not fair. Their brother will be off somewhere, up to high jinks, probably, in all that lovely sunshine, while Aunt keeps her and her sisters shut up like prisoners. Every day apart from Sunday it's the same routine — an hour or more of sewing in Aunt's bedroom, a tedious ordeal that seems to last forever.

"Emily!" Aunt's voice cuts into her thoughts. "What are you doing now?"

"Looking at some birds."

"Birds! Much good will they do you. Have you finished that hem?"

"Almost."

“Show me.”

Reluctantly Emily takes the crumpled nightshirt over for inspection. Up close, the rose water Aunt dabs on herself fails to mask the sickly-sweet whiff of perspiration and the sharp reek of snuff.

“How has this got so grubby, Emily? You must take more care.” Aunt peers at the hem.

Awaiting her verdict, Emily stares at the familiar framed text on the wall. *The Lord is my Shepherd*, illustrated by a picture of a rather languid-looking Jesus leading a few sheep through a desert landscape with palm trees. She wonders, not for the first time, how, without a blade of grass or sprig of heather to eat, the sheep can be so unbelievably plump.

Aunt tuts. “No, no. This won’t do at all. Your stitches are much too big and irregular.” She holds the nightshirt out to Emily between her finger and thumb as if she can hardly bear to touch it. “You’ll have to unpick them and start again.” She looks closely at Emily and her expression of disapproval deepens. “Have you brushed your hair today?”

“Erm . . . I can’t remember.”

Aunt tuts again. “You really should take more pride in your appearance, Emily.”

“Why?” Emily stares pointedly at the long hairs on Aunt’s chin.

“Because it’s natural for a girl to want to make the best of herself. It’s . . . it’s womanly.”

Emily puts on an innocent look. “But I thought it says in the Bible that women shouldn’t adorn themselves with ‘broided hair’ but with good works.”

“Yes, of course it does.” Aunt looks flustered. “But that’s different. That’s about not being vain — it doesn’t mean you shouldn’t brush your hair.”

“But you said I should take more pride in my appearance. Isn’t pride the same as vanity?”

Aunt thrusts the nightshirt at her. “That’s enough, Emily. Take this and get on, do.”

As Emily takes the offending article and slouches back to her stool, she mutters, “Branwell won’t care if the stitches are big.”

“But you should.”

My stars, the old lady’s ears are sharp.

Aunt goes on, “It is the mark of a lady to take care with her work. How often do I have to tell you? Regularity and neatness —”

“— are the sign of an orderly mind.”

“Quite so.” Aunt peers at her niece, suspecting “sauce.”

Emily keeps her face straight. Out of the corner of her eye she sees Charlotte’s lip curl with amusement.

As soon as Aunt’s attention is off them, Emily winks at Anne, who is sitting on the stool next to hers. Her younger sister gives a brief, answering smile, but then she glances at Aunt and dutifully bends to her work again.

Poor Anne, she’s having the worst of it today. Darning stockings is the most hateful thing.

Slowly Emily starts unpicking stitches. If Aunt had any idea what went on in their minds, she’d be shocked. *An orderly mind*. How dull that would be.

“Charlotte, keep still. This won’t come out right if you fidget.”

Poor Charlotte. She’s been standing by the bed for ages while Aunt presses various pieces of material against her and marks

the alterations. At sixteen — two years older than Emily — Charlotte's not getting any taller, but she's filling out, so she has to make herself a new dress. Only it isn't new, really — it's being concocted from an old one of Aunt's taken apart and cut down to fit.

The pieces of fabric lie spread out on Aunt's yellow quilt. For a wonder Aunt hasn't reminded them today, as she so often does, that when she first came to live with them she had to send all the way to Wales for this quilt, since only wool wadding was adequate to combat the rigors of Haworth winters.

Finally, after much prodding, Aunt puts down her chalk. "That will do well, I think."

It won't.

Charlotte's face is impassive, but she's fingering the dress pieces doubtfully and Emily knows what she's thinking. The dress is going to be a horror. Even turned inside out, you can tell the silk's been worn. And the material's such a dreary color, a peculiar rusty green. The heroines in Charlotte's stories wear elegant, beautiful gowns and they're always white.

Aunt has sat down on her stiff-backed chair, which is placed as close to the banked-up fire as she can get it. Spurred on by a sudden flare of antagonism, Emily lifts her chin. "Aunt, you know how you're always telling us about the lovely clothes you and Mama wore when you were young?"

Aunt pauses in her knitting and laughs, a trilling, almost girlish laugh. "Oh yes, all those pretty muslins and —"

Emily pounces, looking Aunt straight in the eye. "So why do we have to wear these plain, dull dresses?"

For herself she doesn't care at all, but she knows that Charlotte minds dreadfully. It's so unjust.

Aunt purses her lips.

Emily is aware of her sisters tensing as they wait for Aunt to erupt. But with a small nod of her head, the old lady says mildly, "That is a fair question, Emily."

She hesitates a moment and then says, "As you know, our papa, your grandfather, was a wealthy merchant. Penzance was a prosperous town and we moved in social circles where it was important that we dressed appropriately. Your mother and I were therefore fortunate that Papa could afford fine clothes for us. God, in His wisdom, has seen fit to place you in a different station in life. Different things are required of the daughters of a humble parson."

She sighs and looks out of the window.

Pulling a length of thread from the reel, Emily glances at Charlotte, who looks troubled. Perhaps it wasn't such a good idea to ask about the dresses.

After a moment Aunt turns back and her tone becomes brisk once again. "Now, Charlotte, what are you waiting for? Pin those bodice pieces together and then baste them. Emily, how many times must I tell you? Cut the thread with scissors, not your teeth."

They all resume their work.

With Aunt it always comes down to God in the end. As if there's no more argument to be had.



Later, released at last and out on the moors, Emily breathes in great lungfuls of air, as if she can't get enough of it. She wants to shout aloud with the relief of being free to move, of being away from Aunt's watchful eye. Striding along beside Tabby

and Anne, she's enjoying the warmth of the sun on her face, the way the wind brings everything to life, making the grasses sway and sending the high white clouds scudding across the sky.

But Charlotte is lagging behind, looking miserable.

"Charlotte's out of sorts today," Emily observes to Tabby.

Tabby glances back. "Aye, she does seem a bit dowly."

Emily and Anne exchange looks. Tabby's expressions amuse them no end.

"But she's often 'dowly' these days and I don't know why." Emily kicks a stone.

"Nay, don't scuff thi boots like that, Miss Emily — they've got to last thee a good while yet. As for Miss Charlotte, it's just her age, I reckon. Nowt to fret about."

Emily looks back again. Maybe it *is* Charlotte's age. A few months ago she had an alarming experience — Aunt called it "the start of womanhood," making her sister blush. Perhaps that's what is disturbing Charlotte. Or maybe it's what Aunt said earlier about their station in life. And that was Emily's fault. She should never have raised the subject of fine dresses.

Suddenly contrite, Emily runs back and hops onto a rock in front of Charlotte, startling a scraggy sheep, who stares at her with its mad yellow eyes. Emily ignores the sheep and, flinging out her arms, she intones, "O Charles, God in His wisdom has seen fit to call thee to a glorious destiny. Thou wilt be great, esteemed amongst women." Then, dropping her arms and speaking in her normal voice, she adds, "And possibly even amongst men too."

Charlotte smiles, in spite of herself.

Emily, pleased at her sister's response, jumps down and links arms with her, and they walk on until they catch up with

Anne. Emily links arms with her as well and the three of them continue together, following Tabby, who by now is some way ahead.

“You know, you oughtn’t to joke about God, Emily,” Charlotte says after a few moments. She is serious now, looking up at Emily with a little frown wrinkling her brow.

“No, you shouldn’t,” chimes in Anne earnestly. “I think it might be considered blasphemy.”

Emily gives an impatient shake of her head. These two can be so pious sometimes, especially Anne. It isn’t as if she was saying anything dreadful about God.

Charlotte adds, “And you really shouldn’t try to provoke Aunt. Fancy quoting the Bible at her. Poor Aunt.”

“You thought it was funny,” Emily points out. “And anyway, *she* is the provoking one, making us sew for hours. And it isn’t fair. She would have hated wearing a dress like the one she’s making you wear when she was young, but she doesn’t care about our feelings.”

Anne says, “I sometimes think she does feel sorry for us.”

Emily turns to her, astonished. “Do you? She never shows any sign of it.”

“When she says good night, she has a way of looking . . . so . . .” Anne makes a sad face.

“She might feel sorry for *you*,” says Charlotte. “She likes you better than us.” She suddenly sounds accusing.

Anne turns pink and her lip starts to tremble.

Charlotte really is out of sorts today. Pulling Anne closer, Emily leaps in before her sister says anything else. “You’re probably right, Charlotte. But it isn’t Anne’s fault. Be glad it’s not you

that Aunt has chosen for a bedfellow. Does she not snore, Anne, and pass wind with a sound like a trumpet?"

Anne giggles, but then she looks serious. "Do you suppose if Mama were alive, we'd have to wear hand-me-downs?"

Emily exchanges a glance with Charlotte. They have a tacit understanding between them that they don't talk about Mama. But it's not surprising that Anne doesn't feel the same — she can't remember their mother at all.

Charlotte says quietly, "Even if Mama were here, we wouldn't have any more money. And Papa wouldn't approve of us wearing finery. Aunt was quite right about our situation. Living as we do here in Haworth, we've no need of fine dresses."

A silence falls. Emily chews her lip. This isn't good. If she doesn't say something, Charlotte will sink into gloom again.

"Listen." Emily comes to a sudden halt, causing the other two to stop as well. "Think how lucky we are not to be dressed up like dolls and have to mind we don't get marks on our gowns. Or tread daintily in our little satin slippers, the way Aunt would like us to." Emily puts her nose in the air and takes a few mincing steps. She's delighted when the other two laugh. "And just think — if we were the daughters of a wealthy merchant, we wouldn't have all this."

She gestures at the broad sweep of moorland, at the clear blue bowl of the sky. Overhead, unseen, a lark is singing his heart out. Emily, suddenly transfixed, listens with all her attention, her own heart swelling in sympathy with the joyous sound.

After a long moment, she comes back to herself and becomes aware of her sisters looking at her with bemused expressions.

She gives herself a shake. "Come on, it's much too nice a day for moping." She grabs their hands. "Let's run and catch up with Tabby."

And, with Charlotte half-protesting and Anne doing her best to keep up, she pulls them along.



Back home, breathless and windswept and on their way upstairs to wash their hands for tea, they meet Branwell in the hall. His hair is tousled, his shirt collar awry, and he has a smudge of dirt on his face.

"Where have you been?" Emily can't keep the envy out of her voice.

"Up at Marsh Farm. Some of the boys were ridding with terriers." Branwell's eyes glow at the thought of it. "Fred Harper's dog was the best. As quick as lightning. She grabbed a rat, like this, killed it with a shake of her head, and caught another before the first hit the ground." Branwell acts out the terrier's feat, overdoing it as usual and snarling and squealing so fiercely his face turns red. Then he bares his teeth at Anne, lunges, and pretends to bite her.

Shrinking away from him, giggling, she knocks against the hall stand, and the pewter plate with Papa's letters on it waiting to go to the post skitters off and hits the hard stone floor with a crash, scattering envelopes in every direction.

"Oh!" Anne's hand flies to her mouth and she freezes, looking petrified.

Emily stoops quickly to retrieve the plate. She examines it. "Don't worry, it's only a little bit dented. They probably won't even notice."

“Anyway, it’s not your fault,” says Charlotte. “It’s Branwell’s.” She frowns at him. “You are a giddy goose sometimes.”

Branwell looks the picture of injured innocence. “I was only —” “What on earth is going on?” Aunt is standing on the first landing, glowering down at them. In her black dress and framed by the tall arched window behind her she reminds Emily of one of the four avenging angels of the apocalypse. Though the impression is somewhat spoiled by the outsized mobcap perched precariously on the top of her head.

Emily bites her lip to stop herself from giggling.

Aunt is in full spate. “How often have I told you? The hall is no place for your games. You’re too old for such silliness, but if you must behave like barbarians, then at least do it outside. All this noise is disturbing your poor father.”

“We didn’t know he’d come home,” says Charlotte. “Otherwise we’d have been quiet.”

“Well, he has. And he’s gone straight to bed.”

Emily feels a prickle of alarm. Papa in bed so early? It’s unheard of.

“I must go and see if he wants anything,” says Aunt. “When you’ve put this shambles to rights and had your tea, I suggest you occupy yourselves quietly until it’s time for prayers. Something useful, mind — not that foolish scribbling.” Wagging her finger as a final warning, she disappears upstairs again.

There’s a silence as they look at one another.

“Do you think Papa is ill?” Anne’s voice is tremulous, her eyes wide.

Her question hangs in the air until finally Charlotte says, “I don’t know.”

“I’ll go and ask Tabby. She’ll tell us.” Emily slips across the hall to the kitchen.

But Tabby, buttering bread for their tea, will only say, “There’s nowt to worry thiselves about. Thi father’s worn hisself out traipsing over to Trawden and back in the heat. He’ll be right as ninepence in the morning, tha’ll see.”