

CHARLOTTE

Emily, what if we had a school here at home? I could teach, Anne too. You could keep house. In the evenings we could write, just as we do now.

EMILY

Could we manage it?

CHARLOTTE

We must learn proper French. No pupils will come unless we teach French. There is a girl's school, not too expensive. In Brussels.

EMILY

Brussels? I hope you will write to me in English.

CHARLOTTE

I cannot go alone, dear. Papa will not allow it.

(Beat. EMILY stares at her.)

I cannot ask our sister to give up her income. Only six months, or a year, no longer.

(EMILY, speechless, shakes her head no.)

Emily, if there is no Brussels I must go back to work. Will you at least consider it?

(Lights change as a SERVANT brings winter cloaks and bonnets. CHARLOTTE and EMILY put them on, and then cross into their next scene.)

MRS. GASKELL (cont.)

A rather large building, with a wall built all around it. And a garden, I believe. Gardens are prevalent in her novels. Which is odd, as few thrive in Yorkshire. I do not think they understood what they were getting themselves into. Least of all, Charlotte.

(Lights on the sitting room of a girls' school in Brussels. Morning in Winter 1842. CHARLOTTE and EMILY are sitting with carpetbags.)

CHARLOTTE

Good Lord. How long will they keep us caged here?

EMILY

(Sees something)

What is that?

CHARLOTTE

(Looks)

The Sacred Heart of Christ. They revere it.

EMILY

There is a hole in his chest.

CHARLOTTE

Catholic symbolism. They wish to see his heart.

EMILY

Why is it purple? It looks like a turnip.

CHARLOTTE

A rutabaga perhaps.

EMILY

A bleeding rutabaga.

CHARLOTTE

Hush, someone is coming.

(Sound of rapid footsteps followed by lighter footsteps: HEGER and his pupil. They stop. CHARLOTTE and EMILY listen.)

HEGER (O.S.)

*Non, je n'ai pas le temps maintenant!*

PUPIL (O.S.)

*Mais Monsieur, vous avez promis de lire mon devoir.*

CHARLOTTE

She is asking for help, with her composition.

HEGER (O.S.)

*Donnez-le moi. Vite!*

(Brief silence; then, disgustedly:)

*Comment horrible. Ne savez-vous pas le français de base?*

(PUPIL cries.)

HEGER (O.S.)

*Venez, mademoiselle. Un chocolat.*

CHARLOTTE

He is giving her chocolate. I hope she throws it at him.

PUPIL (O.S.)

*Merci Monsieur.*

HEGER (O.S.)

*Je dois aller dans le salon.*

CHARLOTTE

Oh no, he is coming in here!

(We hear MADAME's voice:)

MADAME (O.S.)

*J'ai une minute pour les saluer.*

HEGER (O.S.)

Thank God. *Au revoir.*

(Brisk retreating footsteps. MADAME enters. She is 38, well dressed, attractive as per the standards of the time. The sisters stand.)

MADAME

Ah, our new English ladies.

CHARLOTTE

Madame Heger? I am Charlotte Brontë. This is my sister Emily.

MADAME

How quaintly dressed you are.

CHARLOTTE

We make our own clothes, Madame.

MADAME

Of course. You wish to become teachers. I am sorry I cannot stop. The maid will bring you to your room. We will talk more later, yes?

CHARLOTTE

Madame, we heard a man's voice. Is he a teacher?

MADAME

*Mais oui*, the best in our school. He is my husband, as well.

CHARLOTTE

I see. Will he be teaching us?

MADAME

He teaches boys mainly, at *le premier* school in all of *Bruxelles*. You will see it beyond *le jardin*—our garden, as you say. Here he teaches advanced pupils.

CHARLOTTE

What does he teach?

MADAME

French literature. And writing.

CHARLOTTE

Which class are we in, Madame?

MADAME

Second division, for less experienced pupils.

(HEGER enters suddenly and stops when he sees them. He is 32 but seems older. He wears a dark suit and has dark hair, a trim beard, and spectacles.)

MADAME

Mademoiselles, my husband, Monsieur Heger.

(To him)

*Les soeurs Brontë, qui viennent d'Angleterre.*

HEGER

England. A peculiar country. It is no wonder you have crossed the Channel.

(To MADAME)

*Mon chapeau?* (My hat?)

MADAME

*Je ne l'ai pas vu.* (I haven't seen it)

(To the sisters)

Mademoiselles, I must go.

(To him)

*Peut-être. . . ?*

(He sighs audibly.)

MADAME

*Bonjour, mademoiselles. Bienvenue.*

(MADAME exits.)

HEGER

My wife feels it will not do to leave you alone. There is silver in this room. You are not thieves, are you?

CHARLOTTE

No, Monsieur.

HEGER

What do you make of *Bruxelles*?

EMILY

We have not seen much of it.

CHARLOTTE

It looks lovely. One hears many languages.

HEGER

The only true language is *français*, mademoiselle.

CHARLOTTE

Yes, I . . .

HEGER

All of the English ladies wish to learn *français*. Why is it, mademoiselle, do you think?

CHARLOTTE

Well. . .

HEGER

I shall say why it is. It is decoration. As if *français* were a ribbon or pearly buttons. Do you refute this?

CHARLOTTE

No, Monsieur. Many Englishwomen like the sound of French, though I do not think it true of all Englishwomen.

EMILY

Not the intelligent ones.

CHARLOTTE

(Quickly)

Yes, it is the international language is it not? A way to communicate with others in the world.

HEGER

Hmm. A fair response. If my eyes do not trick me, you appear to be modest young women. Of at least moderate intelligence. Time will tell, *mademoiselles*, is that not what the English say?

EMILY

We are certainly—

*end*