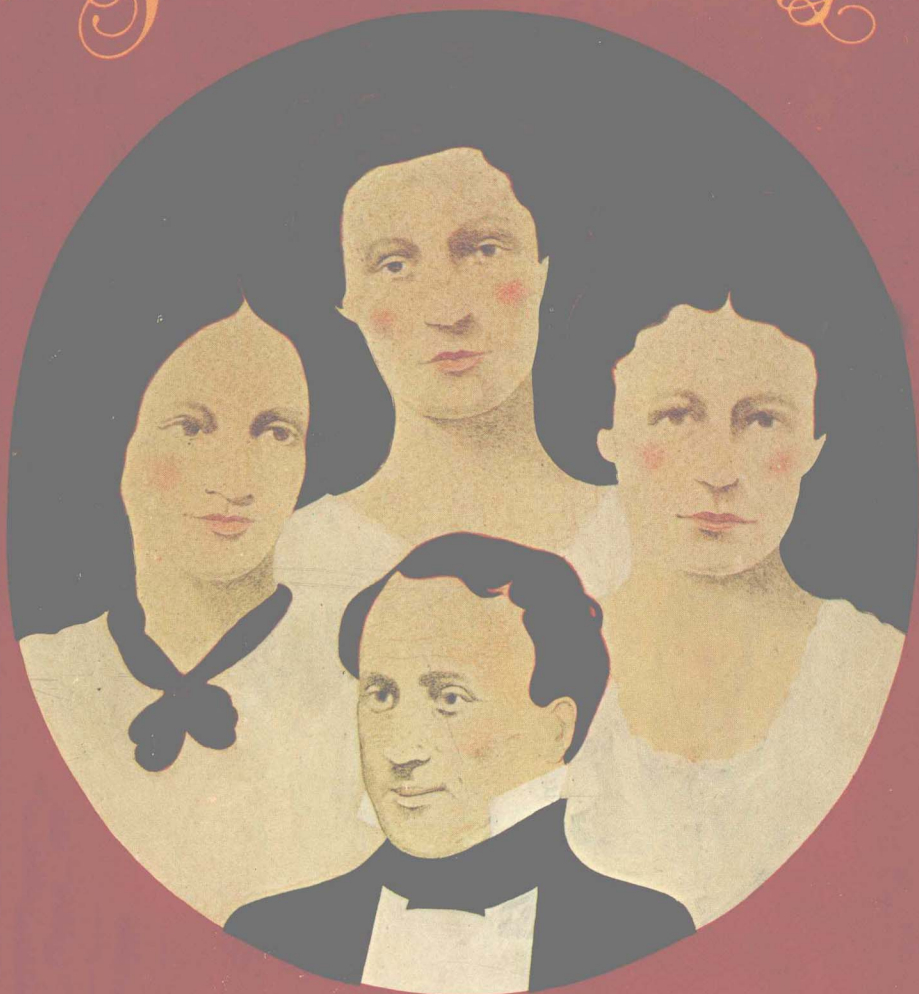


DARK QUARTET

The Story of the Brontës



LYNNE REID BANKS

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by
LYNNE REID BANKS



Originally published in Great Britain
by George Weidenfeld & Nicolson Limited

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Dark Quartet

Also by

LYNNE REID BANKS

THE L-SHAPED ROOM
HOUSE OF HOPE
CHILDREN AT THE GATE
THE BACKWARD SHADOW
TWO IS LONELY
ONE MORE RIVER
SARAH AND AFTER

TO MY MOTHER, PAT REID BANKS,
AND MY HUSBAND, CHAIM STEPHENSON.

FOREWORD

WHEN IT WAS FIRST SUGGESTED THAT I should write a biographical novel about the Brontës, I was daunted at the prospect, though not as much, in retrospect, as I should have been. Had I known what lay before me, I would undoubtedly have had to refuse the commission.

I knew very little about my subject to begin with, and by the time I had spent six months bent over book after book, I was convinced that not only was there no more to be said, but that if there were, it would need not a novelist, not even a scholar, but some kind of archaeologist to find it: someone who would creep into the parsonage garden by night and dig up the letters that might be buried there, or burrow like a mole into the moorsides nearby for new, "original" sources. For a time, I despaired.

But among all these heaps of known and documented facts, there are a great many unanswered questions—*unanswerable*, surely, at this stage, except in terms of speculation. Every scholar who has ever written about the Brontës has felt free to speculate a little. May I, as a self-confessed writer of fiction, not be bold enough to speculate without apologetical phrases such as, "We may easily imagine the scene . . ." or "We ask ourselves whether at this point . . ." or "Surely they must have thought, felt, said . . .?"

At the same time, much *is* known, and nothing that is authentic may be altered (though certain incidents must inevitably be left out). Since I didn't want to include too many letters, which are published elsewhere, I used the convention of making characters say what, in fact, they wrote. Thus some of the conversation—Charlotte's in particular—employs the characters' own words.

With regard to the novels, I have gone into very little detail, for the obvious reason that these are available for all to read. What I have tried to do, without drawing deliberate attention to it in the narrative, is to introduce backgrounds, settings, influences and incidents in their proper places, which the reader can relate to the novels. Unfortunately it has not been possible to include all such sources for lack of space, but the observant reader can spot a good many.

So the facts were my stepping-stones, and sometimes, when there were enough of them, my straight path through these four lives. Where there was no solid factual ground, I have felt free to guess, to use my novelist's insight—in a word, to invent. Who has studied this family and not longed to be a fly on the parsonage wall, to watch and listen and find out what really happened, what they said to each other, what they did, what motivated them? But I have not let my imagination run riot. I have kept it harnessed to the truth. For the rest, I offer *my* answers to some of the mysteries. Let anyone who is not satisfied with these brave the wrath of the curator of the Brontë Museum by digging up the parsonage garden!

I must add my humble thanks to a number of Brontë experts, living and dead, who laid the stepping-stones down for me: first and foremost, the redoubtable Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell, without whom nothing; second (only just), kind, wise and scholarly Winifred Gérin, whose definitive studies of my four protagonists provided me with my most fruitful field of study. Phyllis Bentley, Margaret Lane, Fanny Ratchford and Daphne du Maurier are others to whom I am deeply indebted for their scholarship, their insights and their researches. My thanks also to Norman Raistrick, the curator, and to all at the Brontë Museum who have helped me.

LYNNE REID BANKS
London, 1976

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PART I

The Unchildish Years

1821-25

THE PARSON'S FAMILY

IT WAS DECEMBER. HAWORTH PARSONAGE on the Yorkshire moors stood like a rock in the river of wind, foursquare on a hill, where it caught the wildest blasts of any storm. The unchecked currents of air eddied past its windows in noisy torrents, flattening the few poor shrubs in the garden and swirling over the wall among the green gravestones, to be brought up short by the massive bulk of Haworth Church. Beneath the aisle, in the vault reserved for the incumbent's family, lay a new coffin which bore the inscription:

MARIA BRANWELL BRONTË
WIFE OF THE REVEREND PATRICK BRONTË

—together with the dates, which enclosed, like quotation marks, the short years of her life: 1783 to 1821. It had been a good life, gay, virtuous and unselfish, terminated by an undeservedly protracted and agonizing death.

In the parsonage dining room, five of the six children she had borne in almost as many years were sitting around the table; the baby, Anne, was asleep in her cradle. There was Maria, the eldest at seven, Elizabeth, Charlotte, then Branwell (the only boy) and finally

Emily Jane. She was a pretty child, taller at three than Branwell at four, and as tall as five-year-old Charlotte. They ate heartily—what there was to eat, for poor parsons' families didn't get meat every day.

The father of the family was not present. He suffered from digestive difficulties and had years ago elected to eat alone in his study. The carving-chair was occupied by his sister-in-law, Elizabeth Branwell. She had come up from Cornwall out of a sense of duty, to bring up her deceased younger sister's children.

She sat straight and firm in the chair facing the window. It had no curtains, only shutters, which kept out some of the wind but augmented its moaning with creaks and rattles. A fire burned in the plain grate, putting out a mixture of sweet and acrid smells, but not as much heat as even that small room needed to prevent shivers. Aunt Branwell, accustomed to the balmy warmth of the West Country, drew her shawl more tightly around her with every rude gust outside.

Her face was narrow, austere; her eyes were fishlike, her forehead domed. Her rather thin lips were pinched, and the tight lines around them and down her fleshless cheeks bespoke a rigid inner discipline. She was a devoutly religious woman, a follower of Calvin. The children suffered from the rigors of her beliefs, but also, indirectly, they benefited, for nothing less compelling could have brought their aunt away from her beloved Cornish home to this inclement moorland wilderness.

Just now she was looking disapprovingly at Branwell. He had an odd little face—asymmetrical and narrow, with the beginnings of a strong nose and a weak chin—like two faces blended into one contradictory collection of features. Small brilliant eyes; soft flyaway red hair like his Irish father's.

“—I made them fight, and Bonaparte killed Wellington, and after supper we can have a state funeral—”

Aunt tutted loudly. Maria was supposed to have the floor. She was describing, between mouthfuls, a debate in the House of Commons, as reported in the newspapers and related to her by her father. She poured it all out in high excitement, as if the perennial quarrels between Whigs and Tories, far away in London, were of the most urgent importance to her. Aunt Branwell was fascinated; she still hadn't got used to a niece of seven who read and discussed the political columns—such a phenomenon went some way to cancel out the child's perpetual untidiness.

Now Charlotte also interrupted, answering Branwell. “But Bona-

parte can't kill Wellington! You must bring him back to life. Kill your beloved Bony, if you like, and tomorrow we'll bury him in the churchyard."

"I won't kill him!" shouted Branwell excitedly, half jumping up from his place. "Have your own soldiers and kill who you like! You can't tell me who I can kill—"

"Children!" The back of a fork descended ringingly on the table edge. Branwell sank back into his seat. Even Maria stopped, but went on again when her aunt turned to her: "I am listening, Maria. Who spoke next?"

Charlotte bent to her brother and they continued their argument in whispers. She was another queer-looking child. No beauty—jaw too pronounced, upper lip too short under a big nose, disproportionately bulging forehead and a poor complexion. Her eyes redeemed her—huge gray pools of expressiveness, and what they expressed now was defiance. Branwell was not going to kill her hero off if she could help it.

Emily Jane was bored, and covertly stretched her hand down to the region of her ankles, where a dog was serving as her footrest. Her eyes strayed longingly in the direction of the window with its quivering shutters. Elizabeth leaned to her and whispered:

"You can't go out tonight, Emily—Aunt will never allow you."

Emily said nothing to that, but asked in a clear, loud voice:

"May I leave the table, Aunt?"

"No, Emily, you may not. Be still till we have finished."

Emily didn't ask again, but waited until her aunt's attention was occupied with Maria. Then she slipped from her seat and moved silently to the door. The dog's claws, clicking on the carpetless flags, gave her away.

"Emily Jane! Did I not say you were to wait?"

"He has to go out, Aunt. *He* can't wait."

The door closed quietly and firmly behind child and dog, leaving Aunt defeated and purse-lipped. It was incomprehensible to her how the Reverend Patrick could allow dogs in the house at all.

Spring came late. The winter had seemed endless for the children, shut in the dark, cold parsonage, adjusting to Aunt and getting over the death that had brought her. But now the rough moor was flecked with racing cloud-shadows; the holly tree had stopped weeping; the green mold on the graves had dried to an unsuggestive gray.

The church could never look cheerful. It was too black, and its voice, the bell, always said "Fu-ner-al . . . fu-ner-al . . ." even when it was only calling them to hear one of their Papa's dramatic sermons. Some said that Haworth Moor was also bleak and depressing; but when you ran up over its first brow and stopped at the top to look down at the village, nestling (where in winter it cowered) on its slope, the prospect could be joyful indeed. Even the dark-gray parsonage looked quite jaunty, set in its broken, sunlit frame of graves, which had no morbidity from afar when the spring light was on them. Life was sublime, especially when there was liberty to bang out of the back door and run and run, holding hands in a long line with Elizabeth first and Maria at the end to see that Anne didn't get pulled clean off her feet.

Emily never stayed in the line long. Her dog rushed ahead and she had to follow: her thin legs began to carry her forward, in a rush of tingling wind; her hair tore from its ribbons, her hands from the hands on either side. On and up she went, disappearing over the first hilltop in a billow of skirts and cloak, her hastily tied bonnet coming adrift and flying back like a winged messenger to the others. Anne, who couldn't really run, sometimes cried to see her nearest and most beloved sister vanishing from sight, as it seemed to her, into the clouds that sat on the hill.

Often they stumbled home windblown, wet and filthy. Aunt Branwell remonstrated in vain. She scrubbed them with a hard brush, telling them that God desired them to be clean and gentle, not rough and wild, although she did not convince them. But she said less to Branwell than to the girls. Branwell was, after all, a boy.

There was not always freedom, for Aunt had to give them lessons. Then the four elder girls would sit in her bedroom and Miss Branwell would read the Bible to them while they poked their needles wearily into their squares of linen.

Maria hated the detailed work of samplers. It was not in her nature to be neat and orderly. But not one to accept defeat in a matter so important, Aunt Branwell drove her hard, forcing her to sit unpicking and reworking for an hour after the others had been released to roam the moors or help in the kitchen or, best of all to Charlotte, to sit in the little room and "make out" with Bany.

"Making out" was one of their chief joys. To interpret "making out" as simply pretending would be to degrade the kind and degree of their make-believe. It was no mere playacting to them; they had

began to believe in it utterly. The little room they called their "study" was a world far wider than the whole rest of the house, with garden, village, graveyard and more besides. The moors were not part of the world, but like outer space, a glorious, limitless infinity at whose edges they had so far merely nibbled.

Aunt Branwell didn't like it. She would come and rap sharply on the door. "Children! Cease this caterwauling! Cease at once, the whole village can hear you!"

Silence—the frozen silence of intense concentration rudely broken into. Then, from Bany, "But it's not Sunday, Aunt."

"Sunday! I should hope it is not! Were it Sunday, I would not expect to find you shut in there at all, engaged in battle-games and other godless goings-on! But Sunday or no, you are to stop now. Your poor father is working below you. Have some thought for him in his bereavement."

There would be a reduction of the noise within the study to whispers, but it couldn't last long. Soon they would be joined by Maria, when her sewing was done, and Elizabeth, who had been helping in the kitchen. Sometimes even Emily crept in. The room became overcrowded, and soon the whispers would rise through a swift progression to shouts and bellows. Footsteps on the stone stairs . . . Now it was Papa's voice, the ultimate accent of authority.

"Children!"

The Reverend Patrick opened the door and gazed at his brood, and they at him.

They were frozen into statues, a strange group of infant grotesques: an arm uplifting an invisible sword; a corpse on the floor with flounces awry; one pursued, backing against a chest; a fugitive crouched under the table.

He stood erect, his fine pale-blue Celtic eyes ablaze with a mixture of annoyance, pride and wry amusement well concealed, all shadowed in an engulfing sadness. His hair was like reddish fur, beginning to turn gray; his face was long and narrow, with a high-bridged nose and small but sensual mouth. His clerical collar cut high under an angular, domineering, obstinate jaw.

"What's all this noise? Is it possible you are quarreling in earnest?"

The statues melted and edged toward him, uncertain of his mood. In a rage he could be terrible—terrible! Did he not load a pistol each night against intruders, and every morning fire it through his bed-