

Jane Eyre

Charlotte Brontë



TIMELESS CLASSICS



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Leaving Gateshead Hall

It was too rainy for a walk that day. The Reed children were all in the drawing room, sitting by the fire. I was alone in another room, looking at a picture book.

I sat in the window seat, hoping that no one would disturb me, when John Reed rudely barged in. He looked about the room and said, “Where in the dickens is Jane? Eliza! Georgiana! Tell Mama that Jane must have run out into the rain—bad animal!”

“She’s in the window seat,” Eliza said.

I came out immediately, for I trembled at the idea of being dragged out by John.

John Reed was 14—four years older than I. He was large for his age and a bully. I shrank every time he came near me.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“You must say, ‘What do you want, *Master Reed*,’” he sneered. “You have no business to take our books. You are a *dependent*! Your father left you no money. You ought to beg, and not live here with us. Now, I’ll teach you to rummage my book shelves, for they are mine. *All* the house belongs to me—or will in a few years. Go stand by the door!”

I did so. Then I saw him lift the book. I turned aside, but not quickly enough. When the heavy book struck me, my head cracked against the door. The cut bled and the pain was sharp—but now my fear of John was replaced by anger.

“Wicked and cruel boy!” I cried.

He rushed for me, grasping my hair and shoulder. I was frantic. When I pushed him away, he yelled out loud.

Mrs. Reed and Bessie, the maid, came in.

“Dear! What a fury to fly at Master John!” Mrs. Reed said. “Take her away to the red room, Bessie, and lock her in.”

As Bessie took me upstairs to the red room, she whispered, “Try to be pleasant, Jane, or she will send you to the poorhouse.” Then she locked the door. The room was dim, with a deep red

carpet and curtains. It was here that Mr. Reed had died nine years ago.

I could not remember Mr. Reed, but I knew he was my own uncle—my mother's brother. When my parents had died, he had brought me here to Gateshead Hall. In his last moments before death, he had made Mrs. Reed promise she would raise me as one of her own children. Mrs. Reed probably felt she had kept that promise.

In my terror, a strange idea came to me. I wondered if Mr. Reed's ghost was troubled by the way I was being treated.

Then I thought I saw a ghostly gleam of light on the wall. I screamed and ran to the door. I shook the lock desperately.

Mrs. Reed looked in. "You cannot get out of there with such tricks, Jane! Now you will stay an hour longer!"

"Oh aunt, have pity!" I cried. "Forgive me! I cannot bear it!"

"Silence!" commanded Mrs. Reed. In her eyes, my fear was nothing more than an act.

She pushed me back into the room even though I was sobbing wildly. I suppose I then

had some sort of fit. I fell unconscious.

The next thing I remember is waking in my own bed. A gentleman was bending over me and asking, "Well, who am I?"

I answered that he was Mr. Lloyd, the apothecary. I knew that Mrs. Reed sometimes called him when the servants were ill.

"What made you ill?" Mr. Lloyd asked.

"I was shut up alone in a room where there was a ghost," I said. Then I went on to tell Mr. Lloyd how unhappy I was at Gateshead.

"This child should have a change of scene," Mr. Lloyd said to himself.

Some months later, Mrs. Reed sent for me. A tall man in black was with her in the drawing room. He was straight as a pillar, with a face as stiff as a carved mask.

"This is the little girl I wrote to you about," Mrs. Reed said to him.

"Well, Jane Eyre, are you a good child?" the man asked sternly.

I could not answer yes. Everyone told me I was bad. So I said nothing.

Mrs. Reed said, "Perhaps the less said on that subject the better, Mr. Brocklehurst."

“There is no sight so sad as that of a naughty child,” Mr. Brocklehurst sighed. “Do you know where the wicked go after death?”

“They go to hell,” I answered.

“And what must you do to keep from going to hell?” Mr. Brocklehurst asked.

“I must keep in good health and not die,” I answered.

Mr. Brocklehurst frowned. “That proves you have a wicked heart. You must pray to God to give you a new and clean one.”

“If you accept her at Lowood School, Mr. Brocklehurst, the teachers must keep a close eye on her,” Mrs. Reed said. “Above all, you must guard her from her worst fault: The girl is a liar.”

“Lying is a sad fault,” Mr. Brocklehurst said. “She shall be watched, Mrs. Reed. I will speak to Miss Temple about her.”

I wiped the tears from my eyes. Now I would forever be a wicked child in Mr. Brocklehurst’s eyes. I would have no chance to prove myself otherwise. Mrs. Reed had crushed any hopes I had for the future.

Mr. Brocklehurst soon left.

“I shall never call you aunt again as long as I live!” I cried out to Mrs. Reed. “You have treated me with miserable cruelty!”

“How dare you say that!” she cried.

I went on in a voice I could not control: “Because it is the *truth*! You think I have no feelings, that I can do without one bit of love or kindness. But I cannot live so. You have no pity. Until my dying day, I shall remember how you locked me in the red room—when I cried out for mercy. You have fooled people into thinking you are a good woman. But you are bad! *You* are a liar!”

Speechless, Mrs. Reed got up and quickly left the room. I was left there alone—winner of the field. For the first time, I tasted something like vengeance. At first the taste was like wine. But its after-flavor was like metal. Somehow I felt as if I had been poisoned.

A few days afterward, on the 19th of January, I left Gateshead Hall.

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Early Days at Lowood

After a long journey, I arrived at Lowood School. It was late in the evening when I was brought to the dormitory. It was lined with small beds. Surrounded by silence, I fell asleep.

The next morning I woke to a loud bell. I got up reluctantly, for it was bitter cold.

After prayers, we were led into a room for breakfast. Although I was very hungry, the smell of the food was far from inviting. I heard one of the girls say, “*Disgusting!* The porridge is burnt again!” I ate as much as I could, which was very little.

I looked at the girls seated around me. There were about 80 of them, aged from 9 to 20. They were dressed in plain brown dresses and country-made shoes. Their hair was combed straight back from their faces.

Everyone stood up when a tall woman entered. She had a stately air and was fashionably dressed. I later learned she was Miss Temple, the superintendent of Lowood.

“This morning you had a breakfast which you could not eat. I have ordered that a lunch of bread and cheese shall be served to all.”

The teachers looked at her with surprise.

“This is to be done on *my* responsibility,” she added in a firm voice.

Soon the bread and cheese were passed out, to the delight of everyone. Then an order was given: “To the garden.”

We all went outside. The stronger girls ran about playing games, but the smaller, thinner girls huddled together for warmth. I heard some of them coughing.

I stood by myself, puzzling over some words carved on a nearby stone: *Lowood Institution*. Near me, someone coughed. On a bench close by, an older girl sat reading.

“Can you tell me why they call Lowood an *institution*?” I asked her.

“It is a charity school,” she said. “The girls here have lost one or both parents.”

“Are you happy here?” I asked.

“You ask too many questions,” she said.

Later I learned the girl’s name was Helen Burns. She seemed a bright pupil. But she was constantly punished for being sloppy.

My first quarter at Lowood seemed to last an age. It was not a golden age, either. I struggled with new rules and new subjects to learn. And life at Lowood was harsh. It was an hour’s walk to church every day. We had no boots, so the snow melted in our shoes. My feet became inflamed. It became a torture to put my raw, swollen toes into my shoes in the morning.

One day, after my third week at Lowood, Mr. Brocklehurst came to visit.

When he arrived, we were all in the schoolroom. He quickly walked up to Miss Temple and said, “In settling the accounts, I find that an extra lunch of bread and cheese was served to the girls. How is this?”

Miss Temple said, “I must be responsible for that, sir. The breakfast was so badly cooked the girls could not eat it.”

“Madame,” said Mr. Brocklehurst sourly, “these girls are not to become used to luxury. Let

them remember the sufferings of the Christian martyrs. If you feed their bodies, you are starving their souls!”

Miss Temple’s face remained as cold and unmoving as a statue.

As I watched them stare at each other, my slate slipped from my hand and crashed to the floor.

“A careless girl,” said Mr. Brocklehurst. “Ah, it is the new girl, I see. Come forward!”

He made me stand up on a stool. “Miss Temple, teachers and children,” he said, “do you all see this girl? It is my duty to warn you against her. Keep away from her! Shut her out of your games and conversation. Teachers, keep watch! Punish her body to save her soul. For this girl is—a *liar!*”

“Let her stand half an hour longer on that stool,” he went on. “Let no one speak to her for the remainder of the day.”

At 5:00 P.M., class was over. When I was left alone, I wept.

After a while, Helen came and comforted me. Then Miss Temple joined us. She took Helen and me to her apartment and gave us



comfortable seats near the warm fire.

“Well, Jane,” she said, “an accused criminal is always allowed to speak in his defense. You have been accused of lying—defend yourself as well as you can.”

I told her the story of my sad childhood, including the terrors I felt when I was locked in the red room. When I had finished, she said, “I know something of Mr. Lloyd. I shall write to him. If his answer agrees with what you have said, you are clear of all accusations. To me, Jane,” she said with a

friendly smile, “you are clear now.”

She then turned to Helen Burns. “How are you tonight, Helen?” she asked kindly. “Have you coughed much today?”

“Not quite so much, ma’am,” Helen said.

Miss Temple served tea and generous slices of seed-cake—a feast for us. All too soon the bell rang, and our evening ended.

Miss Temple wrote to Mr. Lloyd. His answer cleared me of guilt. Miss Temple then gathered everyone at the school and announced that I was clear of all charges that had been made against me. The teachers shook hands with me and kissed me.

From that hour I determined to do the best I could. I worked hard, and in a few weeks I was moved to a higher class. In less than two months I was allowed to begin French and drawing lessons.

I became almost happy. Now I would not have traded Lowood, with all its hardships, for Gateshead and its luxuries.