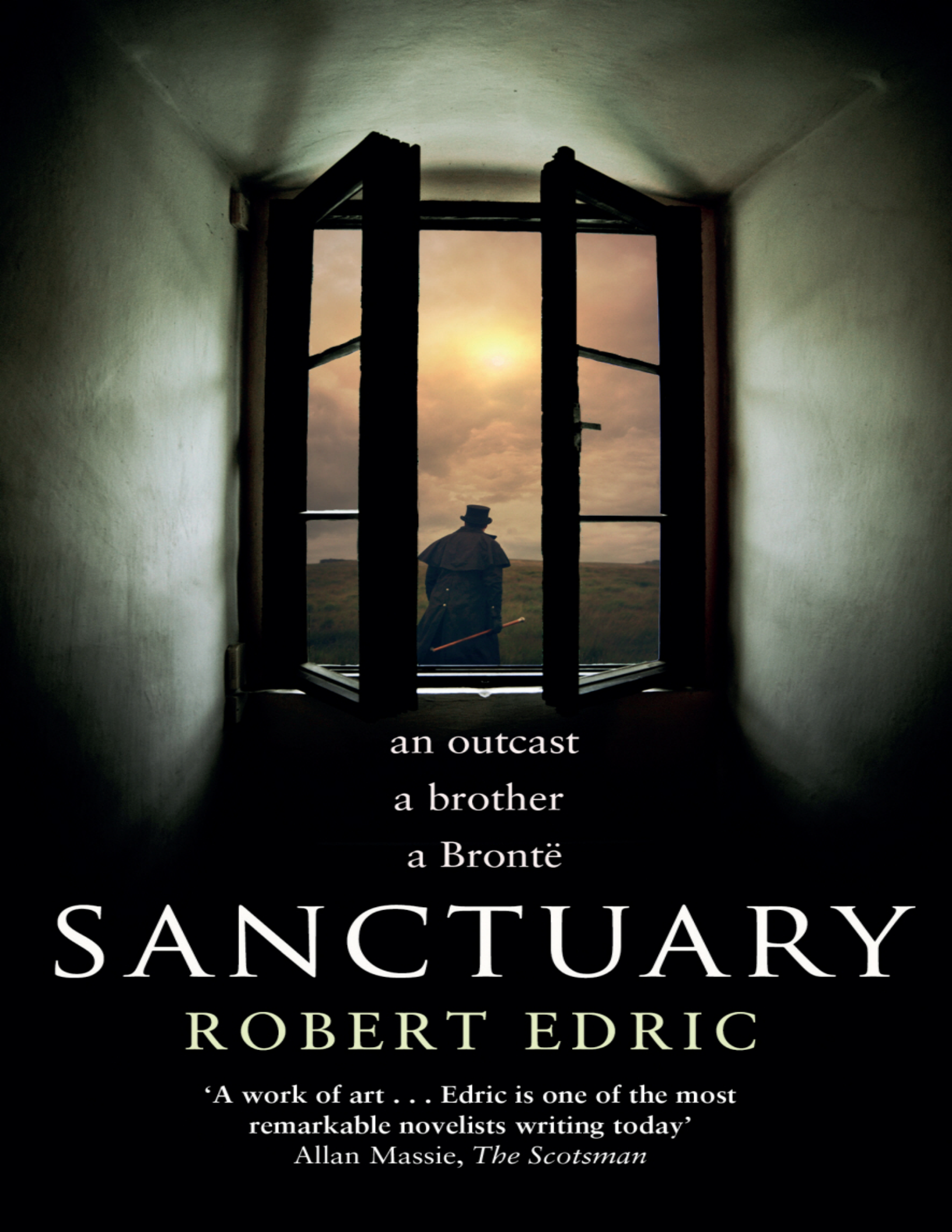

an outcast

a brother

a Brontë

SANCTUARY

ROBERT EDRIC

'A work of art . . . Edric is one of the most remarkable novelists writing today'
Allan Massie, *The Scotsman*

About the Book

Hayworth, West Yorkshire, 1848.

Following a succession of defeats and failures in his professional and personal life, Branwell Brontë – unexhibited artist, unacknowledged writer, sacked railwayman, disgraced tutor and spurned lover – finds himself unhappily back in Hayworth Parsonage. There he must face the disappointment of his father and his three sisters, whose own pseudonymous successes – allegedly kept secret from him – are only just becoming apparent.

With his health failing rapidly, his literary aspirations abandoned and his once loyal circle of friends shrinking fast, Branwell lives in a world of secrets, conspiracies and seemingly endless betrayals. To restore himself to a creative and fulfilling existence in the face of an increasingly claustrophobic environment, he returns to the drugs, alcohol and the morbid self-delusion that have already played such a large part in his unhappy life.

Sanctuary is a lacerating and moving portrait of self-destruction. In it, Robert Edric has reimagined the final months of one of the great bystanders of literary history, and, in so doing, has shone a penetrating light on one of the most celebrated and perennially fascinating families in our creative history.

Contents

SANCTUARY

Robert Edric

For

Beverley Forrest
Steeton, Keighley

and

Lynn Knowles
Hipperholme, Halifax

Guard your good name. My own given names imprison me with their history, and are serpent and lamb to me. Some would say my very nature is born of them – I am betrayed by my instincts and damned by my desires. It was ever thus.

Patrick Branwell Brontë
Letter to Joseph Leyland, February, 1848

Haworth, West Yorkshire, 1848

1

I MET A pack man on Sober Hill, leading a string of Galloways and carrying half a load himself. I watched him come towards me over the brow of the high slope, following the line of blocks at his feet. I could hear his panting at a distance, the wet rasping sound mixed with the clatter of his ponies' hooves. Seeing me ahead of him, the man raised his hand to his eyes and studied me before coming on.

He stopped a few yards short of me and let his pack fall to the ground. He took out a cloth and wiped his face. He was a short man, sturdy and with broad shoulders and a curved back. It seemed an effort for him to stand straight and face ahead. I had seen him often enough before, but had never spoken to him or learned his name.

I commented on the day to him, but he only shrugged, as though the day and its weather, its distances and hardships were of no concern to him. He clucked to his animals and they too stopped walking, lowering their heads to pull at the rough sedge all around us. The man watched them for a moment and then spat heavily at his feet.

'Where are you coming from?' I asked him.

He nodded over his shoulder. 'Colne way. And before that, Burnley and Nelson.'

'And headed for Leeds?' I said.

'"Headed"?' he said, amused by the word. 'It's one of the places I'm going to.'

'Cloth?' I said, indicating the ponies, and already regretting all this effort of conversation.

'Unmade kersey,' he said. 'For finishing in the mills. Leeds. Some to Bradford.'

The dozen or so animals moved slowly around us as they foraged, and again the man watched them.

'I had near to sixty at one time,' he said absently. 'No call now.' And as though on this cue, we both turned at the whistle of a train passing in the far distance.

I looked beyond him and saw the faint ribbon of smoke rising above the horizon. I alone followed the course of the invisible engine.

It was a common enough complaint of the local pack men that the railways had killed their trade.

'My father before me had a hundred animals,' he said. '*His* father a hundred more.'

'Why do you persist?' I asked him. I did nothing now to conceal my lack of interest in what he was saying.

He shrugged and said, 'Because I know nothing else,' and then, 'And because I have three sons.' He looked back in the direction he had come, as though expecting to see these three following him along the same hard path.

I guessed him to be forty, but it was difficult to tell because of the way he had been moulded by his loads. I had seen the same in the local miners – old men who had washed themselves back to pale, clean boys of thirteen.

He dug with his foot at the block upon which he stood. 'Buried,' he said. 'They get half the use they once did.'

'Less, I should imagine.'

'If you say so.'

Disused, the stones either became overgrown or sank into the ground and disappeared for ever. Around us, pale paths crossed the hillside and moor in all directions.

'They should pull them back up and keep them in order,' he said. 'They have an obligation.'

'"They"?' I said to him.

'The Authorities. Bye-laws. The men responsible.' It was a vapour of reasoning. First the canal through the bottom, and now the railways spreading faster than the planners could plot their lines and the navvies swing their picks.

One of the ponies came close to us and pushed its head into the man's side. He rapped it with his knuckles, causing it to snort and shy away from him.

'There's no need for—' I began to say.

'No need for what?' he said angrily. 'In six months it'll get more than a slap on its head. And not just this one.'

'I see,' I said.

'I very much doubt that. Your sort never do. Or if you do, then you're careful to see only what you want to see.'

I was alarmed by this sudden hostility and took a step away from him.

'My sort?' I said.

He grinned at me. 'Your sort. You're the parson's son. Over in Haworth. That suffering man.'

'Then you know me?' I said.

He smiled again at the clumsy remark. 'Oh, everybody knows *you*,' he said. He wiped a hand across his mouth.

Neither of us spoke for a moment. The perishing east wind rose around us.

'Do you ever wonder at it?' he said eventually.

'At what?'

'All this newness and change, all this . . .' He tailed off, suddenly uncertain of himself – though whether at what he wanted to say or his reason for saying it to me in particular, I could not be sure.

'Sometimes,' I said.

'Everyone talks forever of "progress",' he said.

'Meaning they speak of it most when they profit from it most?'

He nodded. 'And people like you and me, we are the men pushed aside and left only to watch and then made to applaud all these other men's successes.'

I wanted to tell him to speak for himself, to leave me out of his tightening bundle of despair. But nothing I might have said – none of my denials – would have convinced him, and so I stayed silent.

‘What do you do?’ he said. ‘Your work. You were never educated, so you cannot sit on your father’s easy cushion.’

My father’s easy cushion?

‘No,’ I said. ‘Besides, it was never my calling.’

‘So?’

‘I used to work on the railway,’ I said. ‘I have been a tutor to private households.’ *I was once an artist*.

‘I meant what do you do *now*?’ he said. The words were their own answer, a buffer to my slowing engine of a life.

‘Now I merely persist and endure,’ I said grandly.

‘And what’s that, then – “endure”?’

‘At present, my prospects appear—’

‘To be exactly what they are,’ he said, grinning again. ‘Pointed downwards and running fast.’

‘If you say so,’ I said. It seemed to me now that he believed I had come up on to that cold hillside with the sole purpose of confronting him there, and of providing him with an outlet for his own scorn and disappointment in the world.

‘If *I* were your father . . .’ he began to say.

‘Believe me, the man has no comfortable life.’

‘I heard he was blinded by work and worry.’

‘A cataract,’ I said. ‘Long since remedied.’

‘All that close Bible reading and such.’

‘He works tirelessly for the good of his parishioners,’ I said, feeling suddenly weary.

‘No one doubts that. Not like Colshaw over at Bacup, who should be hanged for the men he’s killed.’

‘Killed? I’m certain he’s done no such thing.’ I had seen Caleb Colshaw three months previously, delayed in Haworth by bad weather, sitting in our parlour, blocking the fire and licking his lips at the sight of my sisters.

‘I meant all the men, women and children he’s turned away from his door, all those he’s denied the Church’s charity,’ he said.

‘These are hard times for everyone.’

‘Not for the likes of Caleb Colshaw they’re not.’

Nor, presumably, for my father or for me.

A second whistle sounded and he again raised his head. ‘The word in Colne is that you stole their money,’ he said. ‘The railway.’

‘An accounting discrepancy for which I was held responsible, and for which I bore full responsibility,’ I said.

‘They say that, too.’

‘And believe what they choose?’

‘You know Colne.’

‘And you?’ I asked him. ‘What do you believe?’

‘I daresay it hardly matters one way or the other,’ he said. ‘You take to or against a man for no good reason whatsoever. Besides, it seems to me that you’ve taken against yourself hard enough these past few years not to care overmuch for the opinions of other men, and especially not the likes of me.’

‘My name is on the Railway List awaiting a suitable availability,’ I said. ‘Surely that must tell you something.’

‘And until that appointment’s made, I daresay it tells *me* exactly what it tells you,’ he said. Then he made the clucking sound again and his ponies formed their walking line. He watched them settle into their stride ahead of him. ‘They could come and go on these paths without me to lead them,’ he said.

And with that he finally left me and followed his animals. He walked along my own path home, but it was beyond me to accompany him, and so I waited where I stood and watched him go. In the distance, the fading trails of smoke and steam hung in the cold air like the smudged lines of a chalk drawing.

2

A WEEK LATER, when the snow had finally gone from the lower roads, I went to find Leyland in his new studio. Swan Coppice was a much smaller place than his old works, and cramped – filled with old furniture from a previous tenant – its floor crowded with Leyland's own unfinished and unsold work. I had spent the previous night in Halifax, chiefly at the Talbot and later at the Cock, where I had fallen asleep and been left undisturbed until two hours previously. Nicholson had woken me and told me how much I owed him – how much I *still* owed him. It was a debt, he insisted, that had risen by a considerable amount the previous evening. I searched my pockets for what little I still possessed and handed this over to him. He spread the coins in his palm and said they didn't amount to the smallest part of what I owed. When I contested this, he said flatly that he would send his bill direct to my father, silencing me in an instant and forcing me to make yet another of my empty promises.

In truth, I had gone to find Joseph so that when my absence from home was later raised, I might tell my father – or, more likely, Charlotte, my true gaoler – that I had spent the night with him and his family.

It was a month since our last encounter, and upon my arrival Leyland was surprised to see me, and wary too. I made a joke of the early hour, knowing that whatever I told him was belied by my dishevelled appearance. I began to explain myself, but he held up his hand to me.

'Where?' he said.

'The usual haunts.'

‘And in the company of?’

I listed those few I could remember.

‘They take advantage of you,’ he said. ‘Of your good nature and generosity.’ It was a kindness on his part; these days, the opposite was more likely true.

‘What little remains of either,’ I said. ‘Besides, I was a wealthy man at the start of the evening. Beresford still employs the maid from Oxenhope.’

He laughed and cupped his hands to his chest. ‘Dancing around you all night, diverting your senses and short-changing you.’

‘All part of what we are,’ I said.

He came to me then and put his arms around me like the steadfast friend he was.

‘I should have contacted you sooner,’ I said.

‘I heard you were overtaken by events,’ he said, and held me firmer for a moment.

‘I should still have come. Or at least have sent word, something of an apology.’

‘No need,’ he said.

There was every need – even though in my own mind the cause and course of our parting disagreement was forgotten – but we were both happy in this understanding, in this slate wiped clean.

He released me and went back to the work on which he had been engaged upon my arrival.

‘You’re busy,’ I said. I tried to sound more hopeful than I felt, looking at the room around me.

‘A returned commission.’ He picked a piece of shattered stone from the straw of a case. ‘A mantel for Bradley Hall. William Morley, lately appointed far above his capabilities to the Circuit. He wanted marble, but I persuaded him to consider something cheaper. I had no money for what he wanted. A mantel and door mouldings. It would have been more than I’d earned in the past quarter.’ He held the stone

up to the light, felt its shattered edge and then let it drop back into the straw.

'Is nothing retrievable?'

'Morley cancelled the commission and then cursed himself for having listened to me in the first place.'

'This wouldn't happen if—'

'If what? If I were still in London?'

I nodded, wondering how many times I had said the same thing to him, and to what diminishing effect. A decade ago, he had been young and successful, the 'coming man'. And now he looked and behaved as though he had been stripped of everything he had once possessed. I knew well enough to say no more on the subject.

'You were seventeen,' he said unexpectedly.

'As were we all. Once,' I said, waiting for him to explain.

'When you first saw my bust of Satan. You told me at our first encounter. In the Leeds Exhibition.'

'And you yourself were only twenty-three.'

'As were we all. Once.'

'It is still the most remarkable piece of sculpture I have ever seen,' I said.

'So you forever tell me. I remember asking you how you measured the likeness when so many of my other admirers denied the existence of the man himself.'

'Perhaps I saw its inner truths and realities,' I said.

'You wondered aloud how I had achieved so much by such an age.'

'I envied you,' I said. 'It was only natural. I *still* envy you.'

He reached out and briefly held my dirty sleeve.

'You instantly became – and remain – my dearest friend,' I told him. I put my hand on his to convince him of the sincerity of this.

'And you mine. We've come through the thick and thin, the two of us, we wanderers of the borderlands.'

And again, I didn't completely understand him.

‘You and I,’ he said. He tapped his forehead. ‘Our reason, our sanity, assaulted by ambition and promise.’

‘Our bonds are our bonds,’ I told him. ‘However they were forged.’ I went to the far side of the room and picked up a plaster hand.

‘Keep it,’ he said. ‘I’d forgotten all about it until I came across it a few days ago.’ Painted like flesh and put at a short distance, the hand would have looked severed and real. I told him I couldn’t take it.

‘Then Illingworth might,’ he said.

I smiled at the name – another of our shared landlord creditors.

‘You, too?’ he said. ‘How much?’

I shrugged. ‘Would he take it?’ I had offered the man books and other bits and pieces, all of which he had refused to tally against my own rising debt.

‘I doubt it. We live in an age of money. Everything is cash. Cash, bonds, bank notes, deeds of promise.’

‘You sound like Emily,’ I said, causing him to laugh. He held all my sisters and especially my father in great esteem.

‘Besides,’ he said, suddenly brightening, ‘we have triumphed over these same men before.’

Meaning that others, unable to bear our shame, had settled our debts on our behalf.

‘But only because others—’

‘It was still a triumph,’ he insisted. ‘Of sorts.’

‘Of sorts,’ I conceded. I scratched my nose with the finger of the plaster hand and put it back down on the bench. I watched him closely for a moment. The smile fell from his face. ‘Do you honestly fear for your own sanity?’ I asked him.

He sat on another case, brushing sawdust from his sleeves. ‘Sometimes. It’s my – our – nature. We are the men we are.’

‘And you believe we would lead happier, more settled lives—’

‘If we possessed more ordinary or common longings, yes. But then, of course, we would be different men entirely. It’s a circle of an argument, no beginning or end.’

‘And if we were different men, then it wouldn’t even enter our heads to consider it?’

‘You see why we remain such friends,’ he said. ‘Is Nicholson pressing you hard for his money?’

‘He thinks he is,’ I said. ‘The usual threats pointed in the direction of my father.’

‘He does the same with me and my brother.’ He searched a mound of papers, pulled out a sheet and gave it to me.

It was a print of his *Hounds*, the source of his fleeting fame.

‘Geller gave it to me. He saw it in a shop in Bradford and thought it might bring me pleasure to see the piece again.’

I looked fondly at the print. ‘And does it?’

‘My first instinct was to tear it into small pieces and throw them in his face.’

‘He will have acted with every good intention,’ I said.

‘I know. And it is all those small kindnesses and considerations that pierce me the deepest. Everything these days is a reminder, a loss made visible.’

‘I sometimes feel the same,’ I said. ‘My sisters, especially.’

‘They, too, mean well,’ he said.

‘I know. Paving the way to Hell.’ I expected him to laugh, at least to smile.

‘They imagine they’re protecting you,’ he said.

‘From what, from whom?’

‘You know that perfectly,’ he said. He drew a bottle from the case in which the broken mouldings lay. ‘I bought it yesterday. To console myself.’ He blew a fine dust from the glass and I felt my throat constrict at the sight of this. ‘What shall we toast?’ he asked me.

‘Our proud names,’ I told him.

‘To us, then,’ he said – it was our commonest toast – and he raised the bottle to his lips, drinking several mouthfuls before passing it to me.

As I took it from him, he held my arm again and said, ‘I never forget your praise for my work.’

‘And I shall never forget seeing it, knowing that a man from this same place had achieved something so – so lasting.’ It seemed a weak compliment and I regretted it.

‘Most of it shall certainly last longer than I shall,’ he said. He took back the bottle.

‘Men will look at your work in the centuries to come and know you for the artist you are,’ I insisted.

‘I wish I shared your confidence,’ he said.

And in that moment I wanted nothing more than for *him* to say the same of *me* – to say that one day, however distant and unknowable, men would look back at some lasting achievement of my own and know *me* for the man I, too, had once been.

‘When will you pay Nicholson?’ he said, wiping his lips on his cuff.

‘When I meet him in Hell,’ I said.

‘At the tail end of a long queue, then,’ he said. He laughed and passed the bottle back to me.

3

I CAME UPON Charlotte in the churchyard, reading a newspaper, her face close to the print. She was startled by my arrival and looked around us before speaking to me.

‘Patrick Reid has been hanged in York,’ she said. She held up the drawing of the hanged Mirfield murderer. It was clear to me that she was remembering her happy time at Roe Head with the Wooler sisters. ‘He looks very like you,’ she said.

I looked more closely at the dead man’s face.

‘Nothing like,’ I said, though there was some resemblance. ‘Besides, good riddance to him.’

‘I once dreamed that *you* were hanged,’ she said.

‘On what grounds? Something truly heinous and memorable, I hope.’

‘Don’t joke about it. You were hanged and only I saw you there. That’s all I can remember.’

‘You sound as though you believe it’s a prophecy I might one day fulfil,’ I said.

Taking back the paper, she folded it small and pushed it into her apron pocket.

‘He drew large crowds,’ she said. ‘Reid. Even his friends and associates said he was ever a fast man, always chased for his debts and surviving day to day on tit-bits.’

I told her she was making herself plain enough to me and she bowed her head in a kind of apology.

‘Look,’ she said, pointing to the bank across the lane.

I looked and saw the first snowdrops there, early this year.

‘Mary’s tapers,’ she said. It was what our father called them when his parishioners brought them into the church for him. Aunt B said she had seen the flowers in bloom before Christmas in Cornwall’s warm zephyrs.

A man and woman passed us by and greeted us. The woman seemed unwilling to acknowledge me, and the man, having spoken to me, was reluctant to say any more while in her company. The woman’s skirts trailed on the wet ground and were stained to her knees.

When they had passed, Charlotte said, ‘The crowd in York declared the day a holiday. Forty arrests were made for disorderly behaviour.’

‘And did the condemned man declare his repentance?’ I asked her.

‘At the very end.’

‘Then he is saved and now he wanders freely and happily in a well-provisioned Heaven where he will never again consider murdering his fellow man.’

She shook her head at the remark.

I watched the man and woman descend the hill and turn into Lodge Street. Only a day earlier, John Brown had prompted me to return to the Fellowship there, but I had resisted his every persuasion.

‘He was half an hour on the gallows,’ Charlotte said. ‘The crowd was filled with tray- and barrel-men.’

‘They have a nose for money, that crew.’

‘I suppose so. The Sheriff is calling for an end to the public audiences.’

‘They say it every time,’ I said.

She sat without speaking for a moment, and then said, ‘I woke with a fright and soaked with sweat.’

‘Earlier?’

‘No – when I dreamed you hanged. It was all too real to me, and beyond bearing.’

I saw then that what she was telling me was that I was not hanged by the law in her dream, but by my own hand. I

again wanted to make light of this, but could think of nothing to say. I wanted to reach out to her and to hold her, but so completely were we now sundered after the events of the past months that this, too, was beyond me. I pointed to the snowdrops, vividly white against the mud of the bank. ‘You should pick some for the house,’ I suggested. In spring, the bank would be all nettle and dock.

‘I will,’ she said, and left me to cross the lane.

Mary’s tapers. Just as marigolds were Mary’s gold, foxgloves Mary’s thimbles, and buttercups Mary’s sweat. I had learned the names as a boy, walking beside my father in those years when I was his obedient and worshipful shadow. There were others, but try as I might, I could no longer bring them to mind, and I was saddened by this – another small happiness forever denied to me.

4

THE FOLLOWING MORNING I was sleeping in the kitchen when I was woken by a sudden knocking at the door, and by the urgent shouting of a man calling in for my father. Before I could rise and respond to this, Emily appeared beside me and unlatched the door.

A man came directly into the room and grabbed her roughly by the arm.

'Your father, your father, we must have the parson as fast as he can come,' he shouted at her. He looked all around him as he spoke, clearly hoping to see my father already there.

Emily tried to calm him. She closed the door behind him, shutting out the sleet that blew into the kitchen. She told the man to sit down and then asked him what was so urgent. But he refused to sit. He remained agitated and insistent, and I saw then that he was barefoot, and that he wore only his trousers and a sleeveless vest, both of which were soaked and clinging to his body.

'I'm Arundel Booth,' he said. 'Arundel Booth.' As though this might explain all.

'I know who you are,' Emily told him. 'Now stand for a moment and compose yourself. I shall send for my father when I know what it is you want of him.' They all three of them protected him like this.

It always surprised me to see this side of Emily's nature, this sudden authority and rigour – like a vein of quartz running through soft rock.

The distraught man let her lead him to the chair beside me.

‘Father is sleeping,’ she told him. ‘He was out much of the evening on Church business.’

‘My daughter is close to passing beyond,’ Booth said. ‘Maria. Parson Brontë came two days ago. We thought she might go then. We thought she might pass beyond while in his presence and thus ease her journey into His waiting Kingdom.’ He clasped his hands at the words and raised his face to the ceiling.

‘I remember,’ Emily said. ‘I remember.’

Then the man looked at me. ‘You were asleep?’ he said. ‘At this hour?’

I could think of nothing to say to him.

‘Will he come?’ he said to Emily. ‘He said he would. Tell him Maria.’

‘I’ll fetch him,’ Emily said, glancing at me, the name of our own dear lost sister hanging between us. ‘Water,’ she said to me, indicating the man.

There was no kettle sitting on the stove and so as she left us I poured the man a cup of water from a jug.

He took it and sat with it in his hands without raising it to his lips. I finally recognized him from the Bull and the Lion and other places.

‘Haven’t seen you in a while,’ he said to me when we were alone, his voice now calm and low.

‘I’ve been busy,’ I told him. ‘Away. Business.’

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Business.’ He turned to the door, listening to Emily’s footsteps through the house. Another door opened and closed, and afterwards there was only silence, adding to our shared discomfort.

Finally, he seemed to sag where he sat. ‘We know she will die,’ he said. ‘It would have been best all round if it had happened while the parson was last there.’

Another of my father’s solitary burdens.

I was framing my response to this when Emily came back in to us, followed by my father, buttoning up his coat.

‘Maria,’ Booth said immediately.

Avoiding my eyes, my father said, ‘I know.’ He then looked directly at me and told me to accompany him.

Booth started to protest at this, and my father held up his hand to silence him. ‘I’m not well,’ he said. ‘My son will be of some practical assistance.’ It seemed his greatest concession to me. ‘Stir yourself,’ he said to me, indicating my unlaced boots and my own coat on the floor beside me. It was clear to me that he would brook no protest whatsoever in front of the man.

Booth, prompted back to urgency, put down his cup and went to the door, pulling it open and letting the sleet back into the room.

Emily suggested to my father that perhaps I alone should accompany the man and then report back to him, but this too he dismissed. She gave him his gloves and fastened his scarf for him, taking off his hat and tying the scarf over his head. She told him that his hat would only blow off in the strong wind and then busied herself fastening his buttons while my father complained of how ridiculous he would look.

‘Then look ridiculous,’ she told him. There was both humour and affection in the words.

Booth was by then already outside and rushing home.

‘Stubbing Lane,’ my father said to me, waiting as I pulled on my own coat. And then he left without me. It was a journey of a few hundred yards.

I waited for Emily to help me as she had helped him, but she kept her distance from me. She told me to hurry.

‘I’ll only get in the way,’ I told her. ‘Besides, how am *I* ever going to speed anyone’s ascent into *His* waiting Kingdom?’

‘Perhaps by swallowing your own disbelief and cultivated cruelty,’ she said.

I was taken aback at the words.

‘Go,’ she said. ‘Not for the man or his daughter, but for Father.’

I needed no further urging and ran out after him.

I caught up with him at the boundary wall. I put my hand on his arm and supported him, slowing his pace. The wind and sleet took my breath away.

'I didn't realize you were home,' he said to me, barely audible above the wind.

'I was told not to disturb you,' I said.

'My guardians. We are both fortunate.'

'I know,' I said.

After that, neither of us spoke until we reached the cottage on Stubbing Lane. A lamp was lit at the door, Booth beside it, beckoning us forward. All he wanted was the absolving consolation of my father's presence.

Entering the room, my father whispered to me, 'Low fever.'

'Typhus?'

'He's lost three other children over the past' – he stopped to make a calculation – 'eighteen months.' He was saddened by the realization and shook his head.

The dying girl lay on a pallet in front of a poor fire. She can have been no more than four or five. Smoke hung in a pall across the small room; I could feel it in my eyes and taste it on my lips. The girl's mother sat beside her, with four other children gathered around her, all of them moving closer to her at our appearance.

My father went to the dying girl and lowered himself beside her. He took out his small Bible – his 'visiting' Bible – opened it and began murmuring to himself.

The mother wiped the girl's wet face with her fingers.

Still at the doorway, Booth said, 'Are we in time?' and waited for the woman to nod. 'I ran all the way there and back,' he said, letting everyone know that he had played his part in the day's drama.

The low fire added scarcely any heat to the room. Its ashes lay scattered in the hearth and on the bare boards.