



ARTHUR & CHARLOTTE

By Jane Sunderland

EXCERPT

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Arthur and Charlotte

Rev. Patrick Brontë (late 70s)

Charlotte, his daughter (late 30s)

Arthur Nicholls, a curate (mid-30s)

Jane Sunderland

Mid-19th century. Patrick Brontë and his daughter Charlotte are living together in Haworth Parsonage. Charlotte's brother Branwell and sisters Emily and Anne have recently died.

Scene 1: A Spring morning, 1853, Haworth church

Arthur is preaching, coming to the end of his sermon. Patrick and Charlotte are listening.

ARTHUR Parishioners. Parishioners. We are privileged by being placed on this earth. Privileged. We have been chosen. We are special. And so our lives should be devoted to God and to doing God's work. We are frail. Fragile. Easily distracted. We live in an age of distractions. God knows this and forgives. But he knows too that we are not powerless or puppets. We have the ability to improve ourselves and our lives, and to recognise and reject those distractions. We do. One of the greatest distractions of our age is a particular form of reading.

CHARLOTTE (*whispers to Patrick*) Did he say what I thought he said?

ARTHUR Yes, reading.

PATRICK (*whispers to Charlotte*) So it appears.

ARTHUR Yes, works of fiction. Fiction. After our daily work is done, reading the Bible, reading history, reading Milton, the *Pilgrim's Progress*, reading classical works, even reading Shakespeare - all these can help us improve in mind and spirit and bring us closer to God and his creations. But works of fiction - works concerned with invented shadows, evil shadows - cannot.

CHARLOTTE (*whispers to Patrick*) Does he know?

ARTHUR Fiction reading is a waste of our precious God-given time. Fiction is secular. Ungodly. An evil which must be contained. It corrupts. It is a sinful escape from the world which leads to crime in our menfolk through emulation and to foolish dreams in our womenfolk through weak-mindedness. It inculcates bad habits in our children, who learn from the examples set by their parents and go on to crime and foolish

thoughts. Some fiction is even impure, and leads to depravity in the minds of men and even women. And, unbelievably, some fiction is actually written by women.

PATRICK (*whispers to Charlotte*) I hope you're listening.

ARTHUR Women, those creatures who we expect to be teachers of our children, beacons of purity and morality and avenues to our spiritual salvation. So I exhort you - return those works to the library. Lock them away. Burn them.

Scene 2: Outside Haworth church, after the service

Charlotte is waiting.

CHARLOTTE (*to audience*)

You heard him

Ungodly

Crime

Foolish dreams

Evil shadows

Emily, Anne

You two beacons of purity and morality

Laugh or cry?

(Arthur and Patrick enter.)

ARTHUR Miss Brontë.

(They all walk back to the parsonage.)

PATRICK (*to Arthur*) Bit outdated, your little rant? A bit 18th-century?

(Charlotte coughs)

ARTHUR I hope you're looking after yourself properly. That / cough

PATRICK / Arthur? What you said about fiction. Overstated?

ARTHUR (*still looking at Charlotte*) Not at all.

PATRICK Well I don't recall the eleventh commandment being "Thou shalt not read fiction". And what about novels which provide a moral example? Which educate?

ARTHUR Very occasionally.

CHARLOTTE Illuminate, even?

ARTHUR Illuminate Perhaps. But best to keep our message simple, surely.

(Arthur, Charlotte and Patrick stop as they notice laundry drying on the flat gravestones - and, further away, various women.)

CHARLOTTE Is that Mrs Midgley folding that tiny sheet?

ARTHUR She's doing it again. Again. She and all her women-friends. After I told them. No. No! I can see you!

(He rushes into the graveyard.)

Come back. Mrs Midgley. Mrs Crosby. Mrs Clayton. Mrs Buckworth. This is a graveyard. Sacred ground. Not for - I've seen you. I know who you are. I shall talk to your husbands. Come back. Come back and -

(Arthur tries to pick up various items of laundry and gets himself tangled up. Patrick and Charlotte help him.)

PATRICK You know what these women are like.

ARTHUR *(getting untangled)* They think they're a law unto themselves

CHARLOTTE Good luck with that little project, Mr Nicholls.

ARTHUR I didn't mean to involve you in -

CHARLOTTE Nothing's more important than helping get you out of a tangle.
(coughs)

PATRICK Go inside, Charlotte. Keep warm. We'll sort this lot out.

ARTHUR I hope you -

(Charlotte exits. Patrick begins to replace the laundry where it was before.)

Will Miss Brontë be -

PATRICK Be what?

ARTHUR Nothing. Better soon. I mean she's been coughing for months now.

(pause)

PATRICK You do know that Charlotte's written a book, don't you? A work of fiction, as it happens. Doing very well, too.

ARTHUR What book?

PATRICK A new review only yesterday. Let me see if I can remember All right. I paraphrase: "All the serious novel writers of the day lose in comparison with Currer Bell." She's very pleased. "All the serious writers ..." And after her disappointment / with that *Professor* book

ARTHUR / Currer - Bell? Currer Bell? You mean -

PATRICK You didn't know?

ARTHUR So Miss Brontë - Miss Brontë is -

PATRICK Currer Bell. You did know, didn't you? Everybody else round here did. That postmaster / just couldn't

ARTHUR / I'd heard rumours.

PATRICK Oh, it's more than a rumour.

ARTHUR Miss Brontë - A single lady -

PATRICK Not just any single lady.

ARTHUR No, but I thought it was impossible that she -

PATRICK Well, she has.

ARTHUR / So *Jane Eyre* ...

PATRICK Yes of course *Jane Eyre*.

ARTHUR I've read the reviews. It's coarse. Animal. Godless. / Blasphemous.

PATRICK / Arthur. Just read it. Decide for yourself Open that mind of yours a bit. You might be pleasantly surprised.

ARTHUR If I'd / known

PATRICK / And now you do.

(pause)

I think it's her best.

ARTHUR There are others?

PATRICK Two. And one more in the pipeline, as they say. Don't you think we should be all thankful for her God-given talent?

ARTHUR I just never / thought that

PATRICK / Now if you'll excuse me.

(Patrick exits)

ARTHUR Lord God, please help me. To understand. To persevere in your service. What I should read and not read. What I should look at. *(Looks towards the parsonage)* Who I should look at. *(breathes deeply)* Charlotte. Currer Bell. Bell. Bell Nicholls. Arthur Bell Nicholls. Currer - Bell. Charlotte. What's happening? God, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-understanding, help me to understand myself. What must I do? In your service. In her service. Miss Brontë's service. Or I shall go mad.

Scene 3: Next day, Arthur's room in his lodgings

(Arthur is reading Jane Eyre, lying on his bed.)

ARTHUR "I felt so glad as the road shortened before me that I stopped to ask what that joy meant." Glad. Felt so glad Joy. Joy like -

(Charlotte - as a spectre - enters)

CHARLOTTE ' "Mrs Fairfax will smile you a calm welcome, to be sure", said I; "and little Adele will clap her hands and jump to see you: but you know very well you are thinking of another". '

ARTHUR Thinking of another. Always Who are *you* thinking of? Help me God. Give me guidance. Have mercy. For sins I may - *(He turns more pages.)*

CHARLOTTE “I grieve to leave Thornfield. I have lived here a full and delightful life. I have talked with what I delight in - an original, a vigorous, an expanded mind.”

ARTHUR An - expanded - mind?

CHARLOTTE “I have known you, Mr Rochester. It strikes me with terror and anguish to feel I absolutely must be torn from you forever.”

ARTHUR Mr Rochester? ... Whose voice is this? What well, what pool of consciousness? Her eyes - That brown dress - That little ribbon on the left shoulder Help me God. For my thoughts about this woman. Give me strength and courage and patience.

(He turns more pages.)

CHARLOTTE “Now it was dark. What could keep him? I had enjoyed so much bliss lately”

ARTHUR Bliss Bliss?

CHARLOTTE “I ran to meet him.”

ARTHUR “ ‘There!’ he exclaimed, as he stretched out his hand and bent from the saddle: ‘you can’t do without me, that is evident. Step on my boot-toe, give me both hands: mount.’ ”

(Arthur reaches out his hand. Charlotte takes it.)

CHARLOTTE “Joy made me agile: I sprang up before him. A hearty kissing I got for a welcome”

(They kiss, Charlotte disappears)

ARTHUR Heavenly Father, if only Keep me on the path of righteousness.
(pause) That little tiny waist Should I ask her? Can I? Next week?
Tonight?

Scene 4: The next day, Parsonage garden

Charlotte is gardening, without enthusiasm. Arthur rushes in, carrying a large file of papers.

CHARLOTTE Mr Nicholls. Are you - Are you quite well?

ARTHUR Apologies, Miss Brontë. I won't burden / you with

CHARLOTTE (*coughs*) / No, tell me.

ARTHUR The third funeral this week. The third! Joseph Crosby. Two years old.

CHARLOTTE The tiny boy with the ginger curls?

ARTHUR As was.

CHARLOTTE His mother / must be

ARTHUR / You know that nearly half the children in this village die before their sixth birthday. Nearly half.

CHARLOTTE I knew it was / a

ARTHUR / You've seen it. And smelt it. Poverty. The stench of poverty. Filth. Running down the hill. Just thrown down the street. Why? Because there are no pipes. No water closets. No sewers. You know all the corpses from the graveyard seep into it. Not to mention all that - that effluent from the farms. That's not the work of God. You're all right, families like you. And your own well. And your own privy.

CHARLOTTE Papa needs / those because

ARTHUR / And you know the irony? No shortage of rain, is there? Water comes down from the hills in torrents. Good water. But we lose it. Pipes - what pipes? Top of the hill to the bottom. All mixed up with everything else.

(pause, Patrick enters)

PATRICK Charlotte, you shouldn't be out here. It's damp. Go inside. Keep warm. I'll be in for tea soon. *(to Arthur)* Are you keeping her talking?

CHARLOTTE No Papa. He's not.

(Charlotte exits. Arthur hands Patrick a file; Patrick looks at it briefly.)

PATRICK Bradford being as unhelpful as ever then?

ARTHUR It's the mill owners. But they're talking about sending an inspector.

PATRICK Well that's good. Isn't it?

ARTHUR How many families have we buried now? Mrs Crompton's big son last week, Mrs Anderson's little girl the week before that? And her step-brother not six months ago?

PATRICK I know. I know!

(pause)

PATRICK / Two more good reviews of *Jane Eyre* today, you know. Cheered her up no end. Have you -?

ARTHUR No. No. Not yet.

PATRICK It's very good. All my children were - have been talented, / you know

ARTHUR / Does Miss Brontë have -

PATRICK What? Have what?

ARTHUR Someone waiting To look after her. So that she wouldn't need to - You know. Someone to provide When you -

PATRICK When I -?

ARTHUR A suitor.

PATRICK Charlotte? She wants to get on in the world by herself.

ARTHUR Yes, / but

PATRICK / Can you imagine any man putting up with Charlotte telling him what to do? *(laughs)* And wanting her own way all the time? And getting it? And scribbling away when he's wanting his dinner? If there's a man in England who meets that description, I've not met him.

ARTHUR So -

PATRICK Charlotte's here with me. Father and daughter. And don't worry - I've no plan to shuffle off this mortal coil any time soon All right. Keep me informed about the Health Committee.

(Arthur exits. Charlotte enters.)

CHARLOTTE Tea's ready, Papa. Come in. It's cold.

PATRICK Arthur Bell Nicholls.

CHARLOTTE I know.

PATRICK Always doing at least three jobs at the same time.

CHARLOTTE Including taking on the town plumbing.

PATRICK Ever persevering. He's indispensable. Really. I do hope he's not hatching any secret plans to leave.

CHARLOTTE I don't think he has the imagination for secret plans.

PATRICK Now that's uncharitable. And unchristian.

CHARLOTTE Just accurate. And that perpetual gloom of his. And he's so predictable.

PATRICK Reliable. Suits me fine

CHARLOTTE Yes, well ...

(pause)

PATRICK Actually, he was rather *unpredictable* just now. Asking about you.

CHARLOTTE Me?

PATRICK He seemed to think you had a secret suitor who was about to sweep you off your feet in a silver carriage and free you from the drudgery of literary creation.

CHARLOTTE Really?

PATRICK What a joke. *(laughs)* I told him you weren't going anywhere.

CHARLOTTE Right.

Scene 5: Next day, Parsonage garden

Arthur is pacing up and down, as if rehearsing a speech. Charlotte enters.

ARTHUR Miss Brontë.

CHARLOTTE Mr Nicholls.

ARTHUR I've - I've just finished *Jane Eyre*.

CHARLOTTE Oh?

ARTHUR Last night. Well, early this morning to be precise. My congratulations.

CHARLOTTE Thank you No adverse effects then?

ARTHUR Why should -? Ah. I see.

CHARLOTTE I don't mean to tease.

ARTHUR Your portrayal of the - the - the human spirit ...

CHARLOTTE You sound surprised.

ARTHUR Yes ... No, I -

CHARLOTTE And the story?

ARTHUR Well Earthly love.

CHARLOTTE Yes.

ARTHUR Desire.

CHARLOTTE Yes.

ARTHUR Adultery. Bigamy. Madness The things Jane and Mr Rochester talk about. He's hardly a man of character. And their immodest behaviour. I would never have thought it was written by a lady.

CHARLOTTE Or shouldn't have been written by a lady?

ARTHUR Some subjects - Some topics - Some areas of life -

CHARLOTTE Are the province of men?

ARTHUR Well, that's what some people think.

CHARLOTTE And what *you* think?

ARTHUR I *used to* think some topics were best left to the fairer sex and /
others to

CHARLOTTE / Please no.

ARTHUR No what?

CHARLOTTE That phrase.

ARTHUR The fairer -

CHARLOTTE Yes. Don't.

ARTHUR You don't find it complimentary?

CHARLOTTE I do not.

ARTHUR It's meant / to please

CHARLOTTE / For a start, it's often untrue. And - I can't abide it

(pause)

ARTHUR So when Jane hears Mr Rochester's voice.

CHARLOTTE Across the moors?

ARTHUR Across the moors. Why does she go back to him?

CHARLOTTE She loves him.

ARTHUR But she'd left him because she didn't want to be his - his -

CHARLOTTE Mistress?

(pause)

ARTHUR You mean - her change in circumstances. Her inheritance.

(pause)

She'd become independent.

(pause)

Like a man.

CHARLOTTE Like a man.

ARTHUR But her reputation -

CHARLOTTE If anything went wrong, she'd be able to look after herself. Live comfortably. Respectably. Emigrate even.

ARTHUR And Jane says - (*takes a copy of Jane Eyre out of his pocket*)

CHARLOTTE Remind me?

ARTHUR Let me just ... Page 109. Jane says: "Women feel just as men feel".

CHARLOTTE She does.

ARTHUR (*reads*) "They suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer".... Do you really believe that?

CHARLOTTE The author isn't the character, you know.

ARTHUR No But do you?

CHARLOTTE Don't you?

ARTHUR *Men* suffer from restraints. Surely women don't see them *as* restraints.

CHARLOTTE This is the 1850's, Mr Nicholls.

(*pause*)

ARTHUR But still ...

CHARLOTTE Still nothing. And now you'll excuse me.

ARTHUR Don't go.

CHARLOTTE What?

ARTHUR Please Just a few more minutes.

(*pause*)

Shirley's next on my reading list.

CHARLOTTE Ah ...

ARTHUR What?

CHARLOTTE You'll see

(*Charlotte exits*)

ARTHUR Yes!