

Blakefields Mansion



Jen Smith & Clive West

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by

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Dedicated to Elwood "Woody" Wagner - I miss you.

Authors' notes

While the villages and towns in this book are very real, Blakefields Mansion, Stonecrest and Fulwood Manor are all products of our imagination. Likewise, Shibden Hall is not even loosely based on the delightful, 600-years old Shibden Hall Manor that lies between Halifax and Hipperholme.

To write entirely 'in dialect' makes it hard work for the reader while to write exclusively in 'Oxford English' reduces the authenticity of the characters. With this in mind, the more minor and less well educated characters have been attributed regional accents while the more major players have been left plain.

Publisher's notes

This book is intended as a period piece and, correspondingly, contains occasional language and opinions which our twenty-first century perspectives would deem politically incorrect. Naturally, these elements are intended solely for authenticity and do not in any way reflect the personal viewpoints of either the authors or the publisher.

To aid the reader and to avoid distractions, translations of the occasionally-occurring French phrases and 'more colourful' Victorian slang have been given as footnotes.

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Prologue

Isabelle fled across the damp meadow in the gloom of a late August evening, not certain of whether she was being pursued but sure of the simple fact she could not endure a single second more. Her fashionable eggshell-blue dress with its three layers of delicate flounces had become an almost intolerable burden in the swift and impromptu exit she'd made from Blakefields Mansion. It could only have happened a few minutes earlier but it already felt like an eternity ago. Oh, she briefly wished, for the freedom of a man and simple trousers designed for movement unlike the cumbersome garments which were *de rigueur*¹ for female members of society.

With that almost blasphemous thought playing through her mind, she slowed her pace and in a most unladylike manner hitched up her dress and with it the now saturated horsehair-stuffed braid which edged the bottom of her skirt. The braid had the dual purpose of decoration and anchorage, being designed to hold the skirt down at all times and prevent inappropriate glimpses of her ankles. Now that it was damp, it was behaving more like the string of lead weights her father used to thread on his fishing line in order to make his hooks sink. But “*A lady must maintain her modesty at all times,*” her governess had said – no, scolded, that was the word. Well, her governess hadn't seen what she'd witnessed, hadn't suffered the indignities and endured the screams that had come from the lips of her best friend – noises she could never have imagined being exposed to a mere few weeks back.

Although she was frustrated with her dress, she was lucky in that it was by comparison the most appropriate of her garments for such an escapade. Better this than her ballroom gown with its tight selvage panel and the impossibly constrictive whalebone corset she was obliged to wear underneath. She'd often privately joked about it with her best friend, Abigail, and they'd agreed, giggling, how even just a second cucumber sandwich might find itself being propelled back up, partially digested, by their squeezed stomachs.

Wanting to avoid the gravel drive that led to the tiny Lancashire village of Bell Busk in case she was being pursued, she'd opted instead to run across the relatively flat countryside that lay between Blakefields and the few scattered houses that made up the tiny hamlet. It had been a spur of the moment decision, but now that a stone wall loomed up ahead, she was beginning to question the wisdom of such a direct route.

¹As might be required by fashion or etiquette - in other words, 'the norm'.

A little while before she'd made her escape, she'd heard the clock in the hall strike eight so she was aware that it must now be getting on for eight-thirty. She had no money, as always, because "*A lady does not need to carry, money, dear. Her demeanour is her vouchsafe and that should be sufficient for any true gentleman to do the necessary.*" Darkness was drawing in around her and she knew from having heard the whistles of trains coming and going every day, and noticing when they ceased, that the little village station would very soon be closing up. She didn't want to spend a night in the local inn – it was far too close to Blakefields Mansion and Robert as well as being accessible to the wagging tongues and grubby pointing fingers of the resident hoi-polloi.

Halting briefly in front of the stone wall to draw in a lungful of cool evening air, she gritted her teeth in preparation for her exertion. She decided it was a case of: "*I am driven on by the flesh; and he must needs go that the devil drives,*" as the clown says in Shakespeare's 'All's Well That Ends Well'. The irony of the play's title, compared with her current predicament, struck her – it certainly wasn't 'All Well' now, nor was it promising a happy ending. She gave a fearful glance behind her, dreading that she might see the loathsome Robert in hot pursuit.

The tight braid in which she wore her long auburn hair had begun to unravel and loose strands of hair were sticking to her sweaty face "Yes, sweaty – I'm not 'glowing' like ladies are supposed to do, I'm sweating," she muttered to herself in between hoarse breaths. Pushing her hair irritably away from her face, she eyed the waist-high wall, tucked her skirts up as high as they would go, put one knee on the wall, then the other, swung herself round, and half fell down the other side hearing an ominous rip of her dress as she landed. Her knees were scraped and she'd only escaped a cow-pat by inches.

"That *cussed* wall," she muttered as she leant back against it wishing for a fan to cool her face. If the truth be told, she wasn't exactly sure what precisely 'cussed' meant but she'd heard the men saying it when the door to the smoking room had accidentally opened as she was passing. Judging by the awkward silence which followed, it was clearly an unladylike word and therefore one that perfectly mirrored the mood she was in right now.

Scrambling across the next field, endeavouring to see where she was going but pressing on as fast as she could to where she wanted to go while at the same time putting distance between her and the horrors that lay behind her, she spotted the distant light of the tiny railway station that stood at the crest of a small hill.

She crossed the lane that ran from Leeds in the south to Kendal in the north then paused again briefly to catch her breath and adjust her now

disarrayed attire. *“What on earth must you look like? Have you no sense of decency or shame?”*

Before she could make an appropriate riposte to the nagging of her governess, her thoughts were interrupted by the rhythmic cloppety-clop of a coach drawing close. Please don't let it be from Blakefields she silently prayed, stepping well out of the way to avoid any chance of being mowed down by it.

The closed carriage, drawn by a single black mare, raced past her. Its driver was perched high on a seat in front which, although perfectly natural, gave him a position from which to look down on her and she felt sure he had been doing just that while he was still behind, although his gaze veered up and into the distance once they'd drawn alongside. In her present condition she was understandably over-sensitive to the attitude of servants, she tried to tell herself. Fortuitously, the carriage was not one she recognised as being from Blakefields. That didn't mean she'd not been introduced to the vehicle's occupant sometime during the last month. It would have been under very different circumstances, of course.

As if to further emphasise the disassociation she was now feeling from her normal station in life, there was a smart 'floomp' noise as the coach's window which had hitherto been at half-mast was very smartly and deliberately closed.

Before she had time to feel offended at the apparent contempt for her appearance, as indicated by the prompt distancing of whoever was in the carriage, it crossed her mind that the coach was making good speed for a reason – the evening train must be due.

Picking up her skirt once more without any regard for decorum, she raced up the short incline to the station overcome by fear that the train, which she had designated to be her saviour, might depart without her.

The station itself was a simple affair. It was set on the southbound of the two platforms with three buildings adjoining each other like they were terraced and then a separate building where the signalman worked. The stationmaster's house was the biggest element of the terrace; a two-storey, half-timbered affair with matching adjacent side-buildings making up the office and the waiting room. A sign proudly declared that the name of the station was Bell Busk and that it was a part of the North Western Railway network.

The coach that had passed her had by now discharged its occupants although was standing by in the small gravel waiting area just outside the station – presumably in case the train didn't come, broke down or there was some other obstacle preventing its former passengers from continuing on their journey.

“Good evening, Miss,” came a gruff voice off to the side. Turning her head,

Isabelle spotted the stationmaster in his uniform of a flat cap bearing the initials 'NWR', and an open-necked jacket that was buttoned up to the Vee allowing a glimpse of a white shirt and olive green tie. He was a tall, stout, middle-aged man with a kindly crinkled face despite his harsh-sounding accent. "Is't th'all right, Miss?" he asked, looking her up and down a bit and taking in her torn dress and untidy hair. "Tha' don't look it ter me," he continued, answering his own question.

Not sure what to say, Isabelle smiled awkwardly. It briefly crossed her mind that she must have the air of one of those women collectively described as 'fallen'. *"You mustn't look at those women, dear - it is not seemly for a lady to be aware of such base creatures. To look at them is to acknowledge their existence and that lends them a status in our society which is not befitting of their poor moral character."* Of course, being told not to look at something made it all the more attractive and imperative to do so.

"Wha's 'appened to tha'? Someone do something bad to 'ee, did 'em? 'Old on a minute, I'll get us wife to take a look at 'ee." The concern in his voice was very clear but Isabelle simply couldn't afford to miss the train.

"I ... um ... I *must* get the train." She looked up at the station clock which read a quarter to nine. "When is it due in?"

"In fahve minutes, Miss, but don't 'ee worry. Old Arthur what drives it is a fiend for the missus' sponge cake and she's just done a grand bake-up. He won't leave without a nice big slice - an' a mug of 'er tea," he grinned making Isabelle feel warmer than she had done in weeks, "... an' mah green flag," he added with a wink and a flash of the pennant he was clutching in his right hand. "Come and see ma Mary. She'll check 'ee over a bit quick and train'll wait until she do say it can go. Nothin' else on this line after so 't isn't of issue."

Isabelle allowed herself to be ushered towards the stationmaster's house. If whoever had been in the carriage was observing her in the clutches of someone of such considerably lower social status, then good luck to them. "Mary, get 'ee out 'ere sharpish." A few seconds later, a grey-haired woman with a cosy figure resembling three balls of dough perched one on top of the other, came out onto the platform.

"What's the emergency, Bill, ah was on't wit' supper. 'Twill all be Mercy! Come in 'ere now, child," she suddenly exclaimed when she saw Isabelle. The woman's motherly instinct told her that here was a young lady in trouble, and she defied social protocol to embrace her against an immense bosom which knew no constraint of corset, Isabelle noticed.

“Let’s get you cleaned up an’ lookin’ like the lady you are,” Mary pronounced, ushering Isabelle into a small parlour that lay beyond the entrance hall. “You put kettle on hob and get that cake out of meat safe,” she ordered her husband. “That’ll keep Arthur’s stomach busy while I attend to this lady here. What’s your name, my love?” she asked.

“Isabelle. I was up at Blakefields and ...” Isabelle paused, not sure of how to continue. After all, who would believe what she’d witnessed with her own eyes?

“Say no more, love. Me ears has had taste of more’n one sorry tale I’d not choose to hear again, that had come from that place.”

“What do you mean?” Isabelle asked, curious to know what was common knowledge after all.

Mary just frowned and shook her head, “It ain’t seemly even to think about it, much less discuss it with a lady like yourself.” This rather missed the point that Isabelle had witnessed such things first hand and desperately needed to tell a friendly person about her experiences. However, before she could say any more, Mary was pressing a warm damp cloth against her face. “You wash that pretty face of yours an’ see what you can do to tha’ hair while I get a needle and thread.” She disappeared off to fetch said items.

Mary's words on her return were lost behind the clamour of the whistle and general huffing of the steam train that had just pulled up alongside the platform immediately outside the door.

As Mary finished roughly sewing up the rent in Isabelle's dress, Arthur reappeared. He poured boiling water into the teapot, cut two generous slabs from the sponge cake, heaped sugar into two large white mugs, added milk and tea, cast a friendly glance over his wife and her new protégée, then stomped back out to deliver the refreshment to the train driver and, presumably, the guard.

“Let me give your pretty frock a wipe down. Did you make it tha’self?” Mary asked.

“Um, no, I think my friend’s mother ordered it from London,” Isabelle replied, her mind elsewhere.

“Never ‘ad nothing I ain’t made wi’t me own hands. Fancy that! Never mind, still material’s got to be cleaned no matter how ‘twas stitched,” she continued, dabbing the damp cloth over the marks that Isabelle’s interaction with the landscape had occasioned during the course of her flight.

“Mary - do you mind if I call you Mary?” Isabelle asked.

“Course not, it’s me given name and it does me OK.”

"Mary, I don't have the fare for the ticket but I've got to get on this train. I ..." she paused, "I can't stay in the village another night."

"Oh don't 'ee worry so much. My Bill'll sort it out for 'ee. Wouldn't be ta first time summit such 'ad 'appened 'round 'ere." She shook her head disapprovingly. "More importantly, love, where do 'ee want to go? This train stops at Leeds – gets in about ten after ten."

"Does it go to Bradford first? Thank you so much for your help," Isabelle said graciously.

"Aye, it does, pet. Do you have friends in Bradford?"

"Yes, I've family and friends who live not too far from there. They're not expecting me but I'm sure they'll make suitable arrangements."

"What we'll do is get Bill to telegraph ahead with a message for them to have a coach waiting for you at Bradford station. He'll also explain to the Bradford ticket-master what's happened so you don't get bothered. How's 'at?"

"That's wonderful. You've been so kind."

"'Tis nothing, love. Would you like a cup of that nice tea?"

"No, thank you, I don't want to keep the train waiting any longer than it has already." She really would have liked to stay but it would have been wrong and she also wanted to get away from Bell Busk.

Mary smiled again, but next moment her expression became earnest and she put a hand on Isabelle's arm – a gesture which would normally have been unconscionable between persons of their different social standings but which Isabelle strangely appreciated for its ingenuous nature. "Do summit for me, love. Don't ever come back to tha' Blakefields place, will 'ee?"

Isabelle shuddered, briefly recalling to mind some of the incidents that had recently occurred, "No, I won't be coming back," she promised with heartfelt conviction, "but I do hope my friend gets away. I'm worried about her. Thank you again. I feel so much better."

Mary guided Isabelle gently out to the platform where a portly red-faced man was noisily supping tea from a mug between bites at the wedge of cake the stationmaster had handed him. He grinned at Isabelle and toasted her with his mug, slopping some of the tea on the spotless pavement of the platform. "Sorry, Bill," he spluttered, as soggy cake crumbs went the same way as the splash of tea.

"No worry, Arthur. Look after this young lady, will you?"

"'Twill be my pleasure. Don't 'ee have no concerns, miss. We'll get 'ee to

Bradford safe as 'ouses."

"And Arthur will arrange for a coach to collect you," chipped in Mary, injecting herself into the all-male conversation with a forthrightness and ease that Isabelle found almost shocking. If Arthur was surprised by Mary's magnanimous gesture, he didn't show it. Instead, he walked along the platform to the First Class carriage, opened the door, placed a small wooden footstool in front of it and offered his hand to Isabelle to help her onto the train.

The other occupants of the carriage – an elderly and severe-looking husband and wife, presumably the same people who'd passed her about ten minutes earlier – glared at her as if she were responsible for all the ills of the world.

A few minutes later, the train suddenly shuddered into life. Its brakes screeched in protest and the huge iron wheels shrieked as they span on their rails before eventually biting. The whole dark beast slowly pulled away as if being towed by some distant owner annoyed at the monster's tardiness and reluctance to budge when summoned.

"Thank you both for your help. You've been so nice to me," Isabelle shouted, waving to Bill and Mary without any regard for the opinion of her fellow travellers who would in all probability be outraged at the inappropriateness of her behaviour. In reality, Isabelle was a million miles beyond caring and chose, instead, to peer out the window at the few livestock freight trailers that were parked in the station's small siding. These forlorn wagons reflected the station's primary usage – the transport of cattle to their final destination, the slaughterhouse in Leeds.

No doubt if they'd been guests at Blakefields Mansion, they might well have been relieved to board the trailer.

Chapter 1

Two months earlier – the first week of June, 1856

It promised to be a most agreeable early Summer's afternoon. I was spending it with my childhood friend, Abigail Thornton, and her elder brother Will who had only recently acquired his commission to join the infantry in preparation for despatch to help keep the peace in Ireland. The three of us had spontaneously decided to take our wicker picnic hamper, full to bursting with all the delicacies we'd been able to muster, down to the banks of the gurgling Red Beck that lay at the far southern boundary of our property.

Not wishing to tire ourselves out unnecessarily or, more to the point, overtax the good-natured William who insisted on taking sole charge of the hamper despite its having two perfectly serviceable handles for us girls to take our share of the portage, we didn't wander as far as we otherwise might have. Instead, we chose to take the well-trodden path – a distinct but meandering thoroughfare which to my mind conjured up romantic images of poachers evading gamekeepers as they raced home with their ill-gotten trout and carp, prizes which my father told me were to be found there. It traversed a bluebell wood (a veritable feast for the eyes a month or so earlier in the season) and led to a clearing adjacent to one of the translucent faster-flowing tributaries where we could find both sunshine, and shade lest the first be deemed too overpowering.

After spreading our blue woollen blankets over the wonderfully fresh, green grass – May had brought plenty of rain to foster young growth – we spread our goodies out and looked forward to tucking in to the feast.

I don't recall all the interchanges of that afternoon but I do remember William trying somewhat vainly to explain to the supposedly lesser intellects of Abigail and myself, exactly what he was to be doing in Ireland. Having grown up in a time when our young Queen was literally monarch of all she surveyed, the whole affair seemed rather a storm in a teacup and I was just grateful that he had not got caught up in that dreadful war in the Crimea where, as the newly-laid cable had busily reported, so many of our brave young men had died from infection and disease.

Because I knew the Thornton family so well, William had become like a brother to me and thus any romantic interest I might otherwise have felt towards him – he was a handsome young man after all – had been scrubbed away by years of good-natured banter and general tomfoolery between us much to the disapproval of our parents. It was because our relationship was so very obviously

platonic, I would hazard, that we were allowed to engage in such amusements as this picnic without the need for the normally obligatory chaperone. So solid were our sibling affections, in fact, that the notion of William as a potential suitor would have required me to retire to my bedchamber to give vent to a very unbecoming attack of the giggles.

But I have failed in my duty to tell you about who we really were.

My branch of the family was known as the Shibden Hall Sedgefords, after the nearby village of that same name. I shall not lay claim that our family was ever what one might deem 'aristocratic' but other branches, better connected and more financially successful than ours, certainly moved in the upper tiers of society. Sadly for Papa, his father had had grave misfortune in some business venture – I shall not pretend to understand it all – and was compelled to sell a large tract of our family's estate (including our former Manor House) in order to meet the pressing demands of his creditors.

As a very young child, I moved from the Manor to our current residence, three cottages which used to belong to our staff (who had been despatched with great regret and glowing references) and which had been knocked together to form one larger, but still modest, cottage. Accordingly, I do not really recall living in the Manor although, it having been bought by the Thorntons and Abigail being my best friend, it has since become very much my second home. Over the years, I have spent a great deal of time exploring every last corner and I know its layout almost as well as I know that of my own home.

Abigail and I were born within a few months of each other and so it was natural enough that we become friends although, in stricter circles, our disparate social classes might have kept us apart or, at the very least, placed myself in a much inferior role. With her fair hair, delicate complexion and dreamy blue eyes, Abigail was a natural born beauty. The benefit of her family's income meant she was also in the fortunate position of being afforded the latest gowns, morning dresses and millinery to complement her looks.

I, on the other hand, with my auburn hair and dark green eyes, did not have the same means of showing my features to their best advantage. I was always aware of the contrast between my plain attire and the simple braid in which I wore my hair, and her fashionable dresses and careful *coiffure*². My countenance was not ill-favoured; it would be doing myself injustice to claim such a thing, but I did not strike the eye in such a pleasing manner as Abigail for the same reason as a rough jewel is overlooked when set alongside a cut gem in an elegant and well-crafted setting. If challenged to decide where my principal

²Hair-do

charm might lie, I would have to answer that it lay in my forthright attitude. We were both fortunate in being in possession of good health and sound mind and, I own, we were both prey to the affliction of finding humour in the most ridiculous of things – much to the chagrin of our governess, Miss Hillingford.

I was an only child, and given the financial predicament that occurred early on in my parents' marriage, I dare say my father did not regret the lack of a male heir quite as much as he might normally have done. This is, of course, surmise; such matters were never spoken of in my earshot. If I had not had Abigail as a friend, I do not know what might have become of me because it was through her that I received the benefits of a private education, funded entirely by her father despite, I suspect, well-meaning but ultimately empty offers of contribution from my own.