

In April, 1839, Charlotte Bronte took her first position as governess. She was miserable, finding her employers tyrannical and her charges a trial. Her letter to Emily on June 8 reads in part:

I have striven to be pleased with my new situation. The country, the house and the grounds are, as I have said, divine; but alack-a-day, there is such a thing as seeing all beautiful around you—pleasant woods, white paths, green lawns, and blue sunshiny sky—and not having a free moment or a free thought left to enjoy them. The children are constantly with me, and more riotous, perverse, unmanageable cubs never grew. As for correcting them, I quickly found that was out of the question; they are to do as they like.

A complaint to [the mother] only brings black looks on myself, and unjust, partial excuses to screen the children. I have tried that plan once, and succeeded so notably, I shall try no more. I said in my last letter that Mrs. Sidgwick did not know me. I now begin to find she does not intend to know me; that she cares nothing about me, except to contrive how the greatest possible quantity of labour may be squeezed out of me; and to that end she overwhelms me with oceans of needlework; yards of cambric to hem, muslin nightcaps to make, and, above all things, dolls to dress. I do not think she likes me at all because I can't help being shy in such an entirely novel scene, surrounded as I have hitherto been strange and constantly changing faces....

I see now more clearly than I have ever done before, that a private governess has not existence, is not considered as a living rational being, except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfill....

Nevertheless, Mrs. Sidgwick is universally considered an amiable woman Perhaps I may like her better after a while. . . . Mr. Sidgwick is in my opinion a hundred times better It is very seldom he speaks to me, but when he does I always feel happier and more settled One of the pleasantest afternoons I have spent here--indeed, the only one at all pleasant--was when Mr. Sidgwick walked out with his children, and I had orders to follow a little behind. As he strolled on through his fields, with his magnificent Newfoundland dog at his side, he looked very like what a frank, wealthy, Conservative gentleman ought to be. He spoke freely and unaffectedly to the people he met, and, though he indulged his children and allowed them to tease himself far too much, he would not suffer them grossly to insult others.

Charlotte found some improvement in a new situation in 1841, as she indicated when she wrote to her friend Ellen Nussey. Nevertheless, she could not avoid the inherent oppressiveness of her position.

My dear Ellen,

I told you some time since, that I meant to get a situation, and when I said so my resolution was quite fixed. I felt that however often I was disappointed, I had no intention of relinquishing my efforts. After being severely baffled two or three times, —after a world of trouble in the way of correspondence and interviews, —I have at length succeeded, and am fairly established in my new place. . . .

The house is not very large, but exceedingly comfortable, and well regulated; the grounds are fine and extensive. In taking this place I have made a large sacrifice in the way of salary, in the hope of securing comfort, by which word I do not mean to express good eating and drinking, or warm fire, or a soft bed, but the society of cheerful faces, and minds and hearts not dug out of a lead-mine, or cut from a marble quarry. My salary is not really more than £16 per annum, though it is nominally £20, but the expense of washing will be deducted therefrom. My pupils are two in number, a girl of eight and a boy of six. As to my employers, you will not expect me to say much respecting their characters when I tell you that I only arrived here yesterday I have not the faculty

of telling an individual's disposition at first sight. Before I can venture to pronounce on a character, I must see it first under various lights, and from various points of view. All I can say therefore is, both Mr. and Mrs. White seem to me good sort of people. I have as yet had no cause to complain of want of considerate ness or civility. My pupils are wild and unbroken, but apparently well disposed. I wish I may be able to say as much next time I write to you. My earnest wish and endeavour will be to please them. If I can but feel that I am giving satisfaction, and if at the same time I can keep my health, I shall, I hope, be moderately happy. But no one but myself can tell how hard a governess' work is to me — for no one but myself is aware how utterly averse my whole mind and nature are to the employment. Do not think that I fail to blame myself for this, or that I leave any means unemployed to conquer this feeling. Some of my greatest difficulties lie in things that would appear to you comparatively trivial. I find it so hard to repel the rude familiarity of children. I find it so difficult to ask either servants or mistress for anything I want, however much I want it. It is less pain to me to endure the greatest inconvenience than to go into the kitchen to request its removal. I am a fool. Heaven knows I cannot help it!

Now can you tell me whether it is considered improper for governesses to ask their friends to come and see them. I do not mean, of course, to stay but just for a call of an hour or two? If it is not absolute treason, I do fervently request that you will contrive, in some way or other, to let me have a sight of your face. Yet I feel at the same time, that I am making a very foolish and almost impracticable demand; yet Rawdon is only four miles from Bradford! I dare say you have received a valentine this year from our bonny- faced friend the curate of Haworth [William Weightman, Rev. Brontë's curate]. I got a precious specimen a few days before I left home, but I knew better how to treat it than I did those we received a year ago. I am up to the dodges and artifices of his lordship's character, he knows I know him, and you cannot conceive how quiet and respectful he has long been. Mind I am not writing against him, I never will do that. I like him very much. I honour and admire his generous, open disposition, and sweet temper, — but for all the tricks, wiles, and insincerities of love, the gentleman has not his match for twenty miles around. He would fain persuade every woman under thirty whom he sees that he is desperately in love with her.