

THE PRUNTYYS

By Griffith Wylie

The following narrative is based on some papers in the archives of "The Banbridge Chronicle." These papers are records of the recollections of Rev. John McAllister of conversations he had with Hugh Prunty from about 1770 onwards. They also include similar records of the recollections of Samuel McAllister and another John McAllister.

(The name 'Bronte' as used by the famous novelists is only one of several variations of the same name. It is variously spelt 'Bronty,' 'Brunty,' 'Prunty,' 'O'Prunty,' and 'O'Prontiagh.' For the purpose of this article I will use the 'Prunty' version).

ACCORDING to Rev. John McAllister, Hugh Prunty told him that his grandfather — also Hugh Prunty — farmed on the banks of the River Boyne at about the beginning of the 18th century.

He was not an ordinary farmer. He specialised in fattening cattle and shipping them from Drogheda to Liverpool. His house was a long, low, thatched farmhouse on the banks of the Boyne and the land was excellent grazing. He would buy cattle in the spring of the year and graze them till they were fat, all summer, and then take them by ship to Liverpool. He was usually accompanied by his wife and when they sold their cattle they would then spend a day or two in Liverpool, buying presents for the family and they had quite a few! He would buy whiskey and tobacco and clothes. Now each autumn they would look forward to this trip, it was practically in the form of a holiday.

On one such occasion when they were coming home from Liverpool, a child was discovered, abandoned on the ship. It was a swarthy looking little boy with prominent teeth and a squint and wasn't just everyone's idea of an attractive child. Some of the sailors actually thought it was bad luck and were going to throw him overboard but Mrs. Prunty wouldn't hear tell of that. She said she would look after the child until they reached Drogheda. On reaching Drogheda the Captain of the ship would accept no responsibility and said; 'You looked after it, you take charge of it.' So, when they came ashore they went to a lawyer to see what they could do about this child. Some thought it was a gypsy because it was so dark and foreign looking. He was referred to by Hugh as a 'brat.' But the lawyer in Drogheda could offer no solution. The only thing he could say was to take it to Dublin where, if they paid a vestry tax, they could probably get the child taken into a foundling's home or workhouse. Mrs. Prunty was not keen on this. From all reports she seemed to be a very kind person and the idea of putting a child into what practically amounted to a prison just didn't appeal to her. So they brought they boy home in the meantime. Now the family were very resentful, they didn't like the look

of this child. Incidentally they called him 'Welsh,' because they reckoned he was of Welsh extraction because of his appearance.

Anyway the child was reared in the Prunty homestead. The rest of the family did not accept him with the exception of one little girl called Mary. But the child, Welsh, and the father, Hugh, had almost a dog-master attachment. Hugh seemed to take to the child for the simple reason that he protected him against the rest of the family. They would give Welsh the odd thump. Consequently the child seemed to adore Hugh and Hugh was certainly very good to him, to the extent that he became spoiled. Now, the more the children were antagonistic towards 'the brat,' the more Hugh Bronte protected him. He took Welsh with him everywhere he went.

Over the years, lots of things happened, several incidents — now they were making hay one time, building haystacks and when the boys who were on the stack got Welsh near it, or underneath it, they pushed it over on him to try and smother him but they were unsuccessful. Hugh appeared on the scene and extricated the little boy. This kind of thing happened several times. They simply did not like him and any time they got a chance they gave him a good thump or pushed him down. Because of this Welsh and the father became even more attached. Now Hugh started taking him to the cattle fairs when he was buying the store cattle and he found the young lad became quite clever, making deals and judging good cattle. He had an eye for cattle that would thrive. So the rest of the family were told to stay at home and do the work and look after the cattle while Hugh and Welsh went to the fairs and did all the business. Now Mary liked Welsh and the rest of the family couldn't understand why. They simply put it down to the attraction of opposites.

The incident of the two colts, has been told by different members of the family. It appears that Hugh, the father, having returned from a successful cattle sale had given one of the boys and Welsh, enough money with which to buy horses for themselves. It was considered good training for them to purchase their own mounts even if it meant making mistakes. The son went to a local fair and Welsh to one further afield. On returning it was discovered that Welsh had made a mistake, his horse proved to be lame. As the two of them were dismounting at the stables, the surly Welsh, mad that some one had done better than him, and that he would look a fool, couldn't contain himself and went up behind young Prunty as he was about to hang up the saddle and knocked him off his feet. However he had taken on more than he had bargained for, for in the fight, Welsh was badly bruised and knocked about. At last, he shouted 'If you don't give me your horse, I'll tell Pa you beat me up.' Now young Prunty, knowing that his father would always favour

Welsh, and that he would probably lose his horse anyhow, decided that discretion was the only way and he very grudgingly handed the horse over to Welsh. He said vindictively, 'I hope he breaks your neck!' And that nearly happened — a day or two later as he was forcing the animal to gallop up a hill, it threw him off and broke his collar bone. So while Welsh got the best horse at least he paid for it!

Education of the Prunty children was pretty good by the standards of those days. The Pruntys were well off financially, and in those days, if you had money, you could buy your education and so Hugh Prunty educated the sons in particular.

Mrs. Prunty at this time became concerned about the health of her husband. He had pains in his chest, he had breathlessness and was easily tired. When Autumn came again he had the largest group of cattle that he had ever had and once more he took them to Liverpool. However he took Welsh with him this time instead of his wife. On the ship, he wasn't feeling well and he took to his cabin but arriving in Liverpool he seemed to be pretty well rested and was able to accompany the cattle to the sales. The prices were the highest on record and he sold all his cattle. He then did his usual buying of presents for the family, perfume, whiskey, tea and tobacco, that much we know.

On the return trip from Liverpool and on arrival at Drogheda, he was found dead in his bunk. So instead of the father coming home, a messenger arrived at the Prunty house, from Drogheda, bringing the bad news. No one had seen Welsh, he had simply disappeared. Mrs. Prunty was almost overcome by grief but the family had to go to the ship and remove the body. There they found the gifts, but no record of sales and no money and no sign of Welsh. A large wake was held for Hugh Bronte, who was very well liked.

Eventually, following the funeral the boys had to try to carry on in the father's footsteps. But the farm was absolutely stripped of stock, there was very little money, and certainly not enough to buy stores again. There was no sign of Welsh or the money, and the rent was due. Well, they scraped the rent together and tried to buy stock with what money they had, but they had never been taught the art of buying cattle, and their efforts turned into a disaster.

They were wondering what they would do for the rent was due again, when out of the blue, Welsh sent a man, requesting a meeting, about something important. They agreed, and next day Welsh arrived at the door in a horse drawn chaise, dressed like a gentlemen. The family immediately asked him where the money had gone, but he replied that he didn't know, that the ship was full of rogues. Anyway he stated that he was prepared to take charge of the farm and run it, on the condition that Mary would marry him. He didn't get a very favourable reply and was told to go and never darken the door again. Before leaving he threatened that "Mary, shall be mine, and the rest of you will be scattered!" Anyway, it didn't work out quite like that for the Pruntys didn't scatter. However, they realised they weren't making much of a success of farming and some of the boys went off into service and some of



The remains of the house in which Hugh and Alice lived and in which Patrick was born 17th March, 1777.

the girls also and in this way they were able to raise the rent from their wages and sent the money home.

Welsh returned to the area and got a job as a sub-agent for the absentee landlord. Agents and sub agents were a law unto themselves, raising the rents and terrorising the tenants. They hung around and watched to see if there were any improvements to the homesteads and farm buildings, or how much stock there was, and then could raise the rent, because the more rent they raised, the more commission they got from the landlord. Being employed as a sub-agent he therefore increased the Prunty family's rent. The sons sent more money home and they were able to pay it time after time but one demand brought another demand.

Eventually Welsh decided it was time to move in on Mary. He got the help of an old woman called Meg. She was the local match-maker, cup reader and fortune teller. She was a very unsavoury character. He confided in her that he wanted to marry Mary and asked for her assistance. So she talked to Mary and in the meantime, advised Welsh to begin a 'softening-up' process, buying Mary little trinkets, little ornaments, perfumes, something a farm girl wouldn't have seen too often, for from the time her father died there had been precious few luxuries for Mary. Mary seemed to be pleased with the attention and was quite agreeable to talk to this woman Meg. Welsh in the meantime, gave the impression of wealth. He obviously had a fair bit of money from the cattle and he was always well dressed and drove about in his horse and carriage. Meg sold him love potions to give to Mary and whether it had any effect or not, Mary seemed to be charmed with Welsh's attention.

Unknown to her family, Mary and Welsh met regularly — possibly it was the thrill of slipping away to meet Welsh that was part of the attraction. Anyway he decided it was time to put the question. He arranged to meet her in the woods and Meg was to watch to bear witness. Mary agreed to marry him and left him

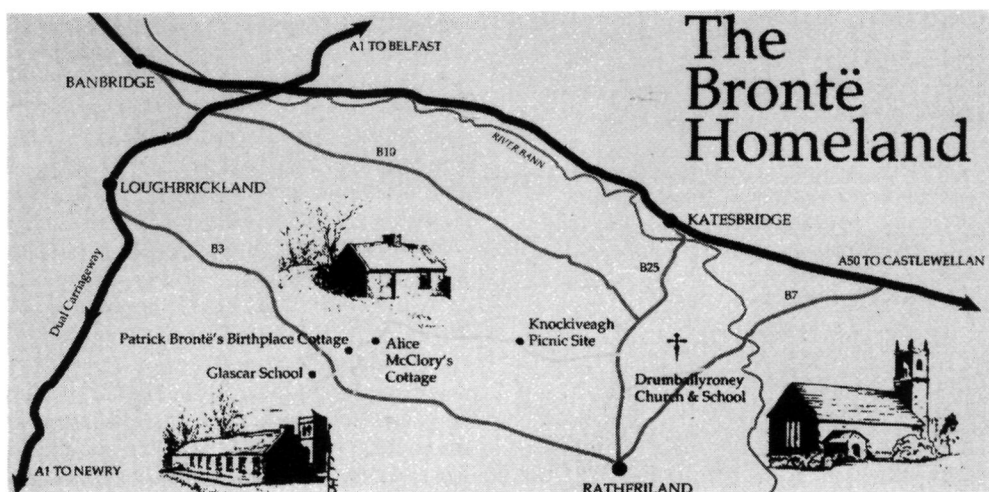


House at Ballynaskeagh to which Hugh and Alice moved.

to make arrangements. After some time, he arranged the services of a travelling clergyman or 'a buckle rigger.' This travelling clergyman married Welsh and Mary. The family were angry and when they came up to the farmhouse one brother actually struck Welsh and knocked him down. Welsh informed them that he was going to take over the farm. However, he was chased and he and Mary had to leave. There was no record that Mary was put out but Welsh was, and I suppose Mary had to follow him. Anyway he came back with the agent who informed Mrs. Prunty that the farm was no longer her's and she was forced to sign a paper to that effect, giving the farm to Welsh. Now the Prunty's went to law, all to no avail because the magistrate in this case was the land agent. Having had no success in the courts they tried take revenge on Welsh and tried to burn the house, not very successfully because some local Militia were alerted to the fact that they were going to do it and the Prunty men were arrested and when they turned up in court, were sentenced to hard labour, the magistrate again being the agent, he told them they only had themselves to blame.

After their release, they got jobs, the girls married or went into service and Mrs. Prunty lived with one her sons, also called Hugh. Now this son with whom Mrs. Prunty lived, moved. There's some doubt about where he moved to but it was about 120 miles from Drogheda and it is thought it was somewhere near Enniskillen. It was certainly 'mid-Ulster' and there was a lake near but the precise area is just not known. They did quite well, they had a farm there and he lived with his wife and they had several children.

But one day a horse and cart arrived at the door bringing Mary and Welsh. Mary was warmly greeted but Welsh was ignored. However, for the sake of Mary, they were brought into the house and given something to eat. Obviously they were going to stay because they had travelled some distance. During the time they were there, Welsh made a great fuss of young Hugh, this was one of the sons, a grandson of Hugh (who died on the ship). At this stage he was six years old. Mary fussed over the child too and before they left, she asked her brother and his wife for one of the children. Now this was relatively common practice on



The Brontë Homeland.



Childhood home of Alice McClory.

Irish farms where families tended to be big. The mother was probably expecting again, and particularly where there was a childless couple, who had property, and wanted a child, it was quite common for a mother to give them one of her children knowing that he would be well looked after and when his time came, he would probably inherit a farm. This was promised and Welsh himself promised that the farm would be his. Welsh was not a good man, no better than ever he was, and he wondered why Mary didn't speak out, possibly it was the desire for a child. Welsh asked for £50 for Hugh's education. The father agreed to do that but there's some doubt about this because Welsh always maintained that he was only given £5.

While they were away, some of the local people around the Drogheda-Boyne area burned Welsh's house. He was hated by all the local farmers as he was still the sub-agent and when they eventually got back with the child (it was four days travelling) they came back to an almost-burnt out house.

Anyway they had a fourday trip by cart, sleeping in the cart and in hay and in some of the pubs they were stopping overnight, Hugh was distressed, and Mary tried her best to comfort him and Welsh threatened to beat him if he didn't shut up. However, eventually they got to Drogheda and out to their home which was a ruin, Most of the roof was certainly off it, a thatched roof, and they had to live like animals for quite a while.'

They were greeted by a man called Patsy Gallagher, who was a right hand man of Welsh. He was known as 'a sub-agent's hack' — not a complimentary term. His main object in life seemed to be to spy on the tenants so that if they weren't coming up with the rent, their evictions would be organised. Anyway Hugh was put to work. He was only 6 years old when he was sent to tend the cattle and sheep and pigs. His

work was to herd the animals away to some of the fields away from the house and keep them there and see they didn't stray. For a child of 6 years old, it wasn't hard work but it certainly was work and Gallagher was a nasty character. He was supposed to go out with young Hugh but he often went to sleep and if the cattle strayed he blamed it on Hugh, so Hugh got many a hiding from Welsh. Gallagher seemed to take a delight in telling Welsh about how Hugh was so bad. But in a very short time Hugh became ill. It was thought that he had typhoid fever and there was no doctor or nurse available. There was no medicine and the only treatment he got was old-fashioned remedies administered by Mary, his aunt. He eventually recovered and although very weak he was ordered from his bed by Welsh and came under the control of this character Gallagher again. Hugh grew to hate both Gallagher and Welsh and he stated that the only consolation that he had about Welsh was that Welsh was 'not Irish and no Pruntv'. Gallagher enjoyed the beatings and over the next 10 years, he and Welsh systematically beat Hugh. However, Hugh was growing up, the Pruntys were very tall people and strongly made. Over the 10 years Hugh had made friends with a neighbour on the adjoining farm along the river and the neighbour gave him food. He realised that the child was a man nearly now, and undernourished and so he would bring him bread and sometimes hard boiled eggs and milk, and they formed a friendship.

Now they were making hay and Hugh was about 16 or thereabouts, it was hay-making time all along the banks of the Boyne. It was an area of boggy land that belonged to no one or rather to no particular farm so it was first come, first served. It was more or less common land. The neighbouring farmer and Welsh fell out over cutting this hay and Welsh attacked the

neighbour with his sickle, threatening to cut the head off him. However as he made a dash the neighbour through the hay, Welsh fell and lost his sickle and the neighbour gave Welsh the hiding of his life. It was so bad he was confined to bed for 3 weeks. Gallagher at this time took great delight in threatening Hugh about the flogging he would receive when Welsh got out of bed again, because Hugh hadn't come to Welsh's assistance. Anyway, Gallagher passed some remark about Hugh's mother at this stage and being a big lad, Hugh hit Gallagher and laid him out. Now Hugh knew his days were numbered around the Boyne and he decided the time had come to get out. He talked it over with his neighbour and the neighbour who realised just how badly he was treated said he would help him with clothes, for at this stage Hugh had nothing but old clothes discarded by Welsh. He had no shoes or boots, but then, that was nothing out of the ordinary. However, the neighbour left him some clothes on the bank of the river, and boots, and in the pocket of the coat he had bread and a little money.

Hugh set off at night and walked north, through Castlebellingham, and Dundalk, he loved Castlebellingham but he did not like Dundalk. He had never been in a big town before — Dundalk was altogether too busy. He walked on out past Ballymascanlon and ended up in Carlingford. The food and money by this time were exhausted and he was looking for somewhere to sleep and something to eat and somewhere to get money. He saw smoke and he walked towards the smoke and he discovered lime kilns at a place called Mountpleasant. He got a job without any problem for the owner realised that this was a big strong lad. He told him if he worked hard he would get good money. Hugh said the job was dry and pleasant and he enjoyed it quite well for some time. He couldn't read or write but that wasn't necessary. The job was lighting the fires and keeping the heat in the kilns to burn the lime. The lime was quarried in rock



**Carol K. Brontë, Curator of the
Brontë Homeland Interpretative Centre,
Drumballyroney.**

form and put into the kiln on top of the logs and as they burned it rendered the lime down to a powder.

While he couldn't read or write he was a great story teller and he became very popular amongst the locals and workers — he could tell stories and make them very interesting.

For a few years that's the way it continued and he made friends with the customers who came from the North. One of the customers was Patrick McClorey, others were the McAllisters, and the Fletchers but he seemed to form a great attachment with Patrick McClorey. They just seemed to have something in common. He is recorded in Hugh's notes as 'Red Paddy'. Anyway they formed a close friend-



**The interior of Drumballyroney Interpretative
Centre.**



Haworth Parish Church where Patrick Brontë was incumbent for 40 years.

ship and each time Pat McClorey came up and down they talked a lot and he ended up by inviting Hugh home for Christmas. He realised that Hugh had no home. Hugh was making reasonable money at the lime kilns so he walked into Dundalk and bought himself a suit and shoes. He walked to Newry and got a car a side car to take him to Emdale where the McCloreys lived.

On arrival he met Alice McClorey at the door, and he says himself "It was love at first sight." He spent his Christmas holidays there, and they all went off to Mass on Christmas morning, except Hugh. Hugh for the first few years of his life would have been brought up to go to Church, we never knew what church exactly, possibly Anglican, (it wasn't Roman Catholic) but from he was 6 years old until he left Welsh, there was no going to church, there was nothing to do with religion at all. So although he had no objection to going to Mass he thought he would 'be out of it' and didn't want to show his ignorance. Anyway after the Christmas dinner — Hugh and Alice got talking and eventually they went for a ride on the horses, to show him round the country side. Now over the few days holidays, the romance blossomed and before he left he asked Alice to marry him. Alice was a sensible girl, she was very fond of Hugh but she realised they were

of different religions. In her words there would be "all hell let loose." But eventually she agreed. Paddy wasn't exactly in favour of this. At first he told Hugh that "no sister of mine is going to marry you." Of course, Hugh — not only was he of different religion but he hadn't a marvellous job, he had no money, no house, he wasn't a great 'catch'. But Hugh said himself that Paddy's temper flared up rapidly and cooled just as rapidly and before he left they shook hands and said 'We're still friends'.

Whether it was Alice's persuasion or the friendship of Paddy, Hugh came visiting at weekends. The neighbours brought a lot of pressure to bear on the McCloreys. They weren't keen to see one of their fairest young girls marrying this fellow, and there was another neighbour who had a farm, who was sweet on Alice. He was a widower called Burns, but he was good bit older. Hugh worried about this. He worried to such an extent that he neglected his job, sometimes the lime wasn't as well rendered as it ought to be, sometimes the fires went out. Eventually one weekend one of his workmates who was supposed to light the fires for him neglected to do so and on the Monday morning when Hugh and the rest turned up at work and the carts arrived for loads of lime, the fires hadn't been lit and there were just blocks of limestone. The owner sacked Hugh on the spot.

Now that was a tragedy for him, it certainly meant a change in where he was going to live. He walked to Newry and took up his place in a hiring fair and there got a job. He was hired by James Harshaw of Donaghmore for £6 a year including his board and lodging. The Harshaws were good to him. They realised he was a great lad, a bright young man and they taught him some reading and writing.



Patrick Brontë as an old man.

And it's interesting to note that here, a headstone in a graveyard in Rostrevor, known as "the Crag" is inscribed "Robert Martin, son of Samuel Martin and Jane Harshaw, born at Loughborne," Jane Harshaw was referred to on the stone as "daughter of James Harshaw." She married Samuel Martin and they had two sons, Robert and John. He was often known as "Honest John" and he was a close friend and associate of John Mitchel. The two were prominently associated with the Rising of the Young Irishmen in 1848. Consequently they were exiled but later pardoned. John and his brother Robert lived at Kilbroney House, Rostrevor.

At this stage, Hugh started to go to church. The Harshaws went to Donaghmore Parish church and often in those days if you worked for a man you were expected to attend his church. Well Hugh started to go to church. However, his worries were still there and hadn't cleared up and £6 a year wasn't a fortune to live on. He still wanted to marry Alice but it was difficult to see her. The neighbours were antagonistic and Hugh and Alice used to correspond by leaving notes in a hollow tree. It wasn't altogether an easy relationship at that stage. Anyway Alice confided in her priest her love for Hugh, and the priest did not condemn it. However Alice was put under great pressure to marry this man Burns, who was obviously a much better 'catch' as he was a prosperous farmer. Eventually Alice gave in and agreed but found after a short time that she couldn't bear the thought of marrying him. But plans for the wedding had gone ahead — a lot of food was bought, there were barrels of beer from Banbridge, wine from Dundalk — the whole countryside was going to be entertained at this wedding. It wasn't just an ordinary wedding. She wrote a letter to Hugh, "Something happened a day or two ago, and I thought I ought to tell you, in case you heard about

it from someone else. They have been getting at me to such an extent that I have no option other than to agree to the marriage to Mr. Burns. But I have a plan, in case anything happens to prevent our meeting, try again the next day and the next."

In the meantime, the plans for the wedding went ahead. It was tradition for the neighbours to gather up on the morning of the wedding, neighbouring farmers, those who had horses and they all went for a ride around the countryside. While they were gone, Alice saddled up her horse herself. She met Hugh and they went to Banbridge and through Banbridge to Magherally Church, where they were married.

A messenger came back to McClorey's with a letter and with the horse. Now this was a bit of let down for Mr. Burns in particular, Paddy wasn't exactly charmed! And Alice wrote in her letter: "Dear Friends, I just want to ask your forgiveness for all that has happened, but it had to happen. How could I enter into a marriage with Mr. Burns when I loved another man so deeply that I could never have been happy without him. I am now Mrs. Prunty. I apologise to Mr. Burns, he is a good man, and I hope he will understand. I ask you to go on with the wedding party and enjoy yourselves, as though everything had taken place as arranged! I ask for your blessing and hope you will drink to the health of Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Prunty."

Anyway there was a bit of a fuss made, the neighbours again went wild but after they had had a meal and something to drink, they began to settle down. Now Alice had an unlikely champion, the local priest. Although he was very sympathetic to Mr. Burns, he was obviously a very decent man, he told Mr. Burns, 'You're lucky. How could you be married to a young girl who wanted someone else? And someday you might find yourself too old for a wife and young family.'



The restored interior of Drumballyrone Church.

When they arrived back to Paddy's again he greeted them warmly and wished them well and said 'You know, I never thought happy about Alice marrying Burns — a decent man, but old'. Then they had to think about where they would live — they settled in a little two roomed cottage. They had nothing, money didn't just enter into their way of living at that stage. Alice had a spinning wheel, Paddy gave them a couple of sheep, some hens and a rood of ground to grow potatoes. They both worked hard and I would say, had a hard time, although possibly a happy time. Hugh made a kiln and from the local mill, which probably could have been Glascar Mill, he sub-contracted drying of grain and did this at his own house cutting timber and drying the grain and he got a portion of the grain as wages. The staple food at that stage would have been potatoes and oaten bread and possibly an odd egg. But they were able to live and save a bit of money. They got hens and pigs so they were getting up in the world. And then they moved to a larger house. They had a son born on March 17th, 1777, he was Patrick (the father of the famous Bronte Sisters). Anyway, they moved to this larger house and again Paddy gave them great help. Paddy loaned them the horse and cart and they went looking, and they found a house quite near, a vacant place down the road at Lisnacreevy. They moved in, the house was in fair condition — a bit of paint and lime here and there and they were able to move in. Their belongings were two or three chairs, a table of sorts, a bed, a cot, their pots and pans and they were all piled into Paddy's cart and they moved to the new house. And there they spent 16 years and prospered. Hugh continued with his corn drying, but he also took up the task of fence making and road repairing.,

Their household library consisted of 4 books when they were flitting, Alice's New Testament, Hugh's Bible, the Pilgrim's Progress and a copy of the works of Robert Burns. Hugh recollects four well-thumbed books. The girls in the family were good looking, of tall striking appearance, but they didn't marry.

To end, the following poem written by Hugh about Alice illustrates the source of his grandchildren's talent. It was corrected by his son Patrick.

*"The red rose paled before the blush,
That mantled o'er thy dimpled cheek,
The fresh bloom faded at the flush,
It tinged thy beauty right and meek.
Thy milk-white brow outshone the snow,
Thy lustrous eyes outglanced the stars,
Thy cherry lips with love aglow,
Burned redder than the blood red Mars.
Thy sweet low voice, waked in my heart,
Dead memories of my mothers' love
My long lost sisters' artless art
Lived in thy smile, my gentle dove.
Dear Alice, how thy charm and grace,
Kindled my dull and stagnant life,
From first I saw thy willing face
My whole heart claimed thee for my wife.
I thought you'd make me happy, dear,
I sought you for my very own
You clung to me through storm and fear
You loved me still, though poor and lone.
My love was centered all on self
Thy love was centered all on me,
True love above all pride and pelth
My life's deep current flows for thee.'
The finest fibres of my soul
Entwined with thine in love's strong fold,
Our tin cup is a golden bowl,
Love fills our cot with wealth untold."*