THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL

by Anne Brontë

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY MRS HUMPHREY WARD

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INTRODUCTION

Anne Brontë serves a twofold purpose in the study of what the Brontës wrote and were. In the first place, her gentle and delicate presence, her sad, short story, her hard life and early death, enter deeply into the poetry and tragedy that have always been entwined with the memory of the Brontës, as women and as writers; in the second, the books and poems that she wrote serve as matter of comparison by which to test the greatness of her two sisters. She is the measure of their genius—like them, yet not with them.

Many years after Anne's death her brother-in-law protested against a supposed portrait of her, as giving a totally wrong impression of the "dear, gentle Anne Brontë." "Dear" and "gentle" indeed she seems to have been through life, the youngest and prettiest of the sisters, with a delicate complexion, a slender neck, and small, pleasant features. Notwithstanding, she possessed in full the Brontë seriousness, the

Brontë strength of will. When her father asked her at four years old what a little child like her wanted most, the tiny creature replied—if it were not a Brontë it would be incredible!—"Age and experience." When the three children started their "Island Plays" together in 1827, Anne, who was then eight, chose Guernsey for her imaginary island, and peopled it with "Michael Sadler, Lord Bentinck, and Sir Henry Halford." She and Emily were constant companions, and there is evidence that they shared a common world of fancy from very early days to mature womanhood. "The Gondal Chronicles" seem to have amused them for many years, and to have branched out into innumerable books, written in the "tiny writing" of which Mr. Clement Shorter has given us facsimiles. "I am now engaged in writing the fourth volume of Solala Vernon's Life," says Anne at twenty-one. And four years later Emily says, "The Gondals still flourish bright as ever. I am at present writing a work on the First War. Anne has been writing some articles on this and a book by Henry Sophona. We intend sticking firm by the rascals as long as they delight us, which I am glad to say they do at present."

That the author of "Wildfell Hall" should ever have delighted in the Gondals, should ever have written the story of Solala Vernon or Henry Sophona, is pleasant to know. Then, for her too, as for her sisters, there was a moment when the power of "making out" could turn loneliness and disappointment into riches and content. For a time at least, and before a hard and degrading experience had broken the spring of her youth, and replaced the disinterested and spontaneous pleasure that is to be got from the life and play of imagination, by a sad sense of duty, and an inexorable consciousness of moral and religious mission, Anne Brontë wrote stories for her own amusement, and loved the "rascals" she created.

But already in 1841, when we first hear of the Gondals and Solala Vernon, the material for quite other books was in poor Anne's mind. She was then teaching in the family at Thorpe Green, where Branwell joined her as tutor in 1843, and where, owing to events that are still a mystery, she seems to have passed through an ordeal that left her shattered in health and nerve, with nothing gained but those melancholy and repulsive memories that she was afterwards to embody in "Wildfell Hall." She seems, indeed, to have been partly the victim of Branwell's morbid imagination, the imagination of an opium-eater and a drunkard. That he was neither the conqueror nor the villain that he made his sisters believe, all the evidence that has been gathered since Mrs. Gaskell wrote goes to show. But poor Anne believed his account of himself, and no doubt saw enough evidence of vicious character in Branwell's daily life to make the worst enormities credible. She seems to have passed the last months of her stay at Thorpe Green under a cloud of dread and miserable suspicion, and was thankful to escape from her situation in the summer of 1845. At the same moment

Branwell was summarily dismissed from his tutorship, his employer, Mr. Robinson, writing a stern letter of complaint to Branwell's father, concerned no doubt with the young man's disorderly and intemperate habits. Mrs. Gaskell says: "The premature deaths of two at least of the sisters—all the great possibilities of their earthly lives snapped short—may be dated from Midsummer 1845." The facts as we now know them hardly bear out so strong a judgment. There is nothing to show that Branwell's conduct was responsible in any way for Emily's illness and death, and Anne, in the contemporary fragment recovered by Mr. Shorter, gives a less tragic account of the matter. "During my stay (at Thorpe Green)," she writes on July 31, 1845, "I have had some very unpleasant and undreamt-of experience of human nature. . . . Branwell has . . . been a tutor at Thorpe Green, and had much tribulation and ill-health. . . . We hope he will be better and do better in future." And at the end of the paper she says, sadly, forecasting the coming years, "I for my part cannot well be flatter or older in mind than I am now." This is the language of disappointment and anxiety; but it hardly fits the tragic story that Mrs. Gaskell believed.

That story was, no doubt, the elaboration of Branwell's diseased fancy during the three years which elapsed between his dismissal from Thorpe Green and his death. He imagined a guilty romance with himself and his employer's wife for characters, and he imposed the horrid story upon his sisters. Opium and drink are the sufficient explanations; and no time need now be wasted upon unravelling the sordid mystery. But the vices of the brother, real or imaginary, have a certain importance in literature, because of the effect they produced upon his sisters. There can be no question that Branwell's opium madness, his bouts of drunkenness at the Black Bull, his violence at home, his free and coarse talk, and his perpetual boast of guilty secrets, influenced the imagination of his wholly pure and inexperienced sisters. Much of "Wuthering Heights," and all of "Wildfell Hall," show Branwell's mark, and there are many passages in Charlotte's books also where those who know the history of the parsonage can hear the voice of those sharp moral repulsions, those dismal moral questionings, to which Branwell's misconduct and ruin gave rise. Their brother's fate was an element in the genius of Emily and Charlotte which they were strong enough to assimilate, which may have done them some harm, and weakened in them certain delicate or sane perceptions, but was ultimately, by the strange alchemy of talent, far more profitable than hurtful, inasmuch as it troubled the waters of the soul, and brought them near to the more desperate realities of our "frail, fall'n humankind."

But Anne was not strong enough, her gift was not vigorous enough, to enable her thus to transmute experience and grief. The probability is that when she left Thorpe Green in 1845 she was already suffering from that religious melancholy of which Charlotte

discovered such piteous evidence among her papers after death. It did not much affect the writing of "Agnes Grey," which was completed in 1846, and reflected the minor pains and discomforts of her teaching experience, but it combined with the spectacle of Branwell's increasing moral and physical decay to produce that bitter mandate of conscience under which she wrote "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall."

"Hers was naturally a sensitive, reserved, and dejected nature. She hated her work, but would pursue it. It was written as a warning,"—so said Charlotte when, in the pathetic Preface of 1850, she was endeavouring to explain to the public how a creature so gentle and so good as Acton Bell should have written such a book as "Wildfell Hall." And in the second edition of "Wildfell Hall," which appeared in 1848, Anne Brontë herself justified her novel in a Preface which is reprinted in this volume for the first time. The little Preface is a curious document. It has the same determined didactic tone which pervades the book itself, the same narrowness of view, and inflation of expression, an inflation which is really due not to any personal egotism in the writer, but rather to that very gentleness and inexperience which must yet nerve itself under the stimulus of religion to its disagreeable and repulsive task. "I knew that such characters"—as Huntingdon and his companions—"do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps the book has not been written in vain." If the story has given more pain than pleasure to "any honest reader," the writer "craves his pardon, for such was far from my intention." But at the same time she cannot promise to limit her ambition to the giving of innocent pleasure, or to the production of "a perfect work of art." "Time and talent so spent I should consider wasted and misapplied." God has given her unpalatable truths to speak, and she must speak them.

The measure of misconstruction and abuse, therefore, which her book brought upon her she bore, says her sister, "as it was her custom to bear whatever was unpleasant, with mild, steady patience. She was a very sincere and practical Christian, but the tinge of religious melancholy communicated a sad shade to her brief, blameless life."

In spite of misconstruction and abuse, however, "Wildfell Hall" seems to have attained more immediate success than anything else written by the sisters before 1848, except "Jane Eyre." It went into a second edition within a very short time of its publication, and Messrs. Newby informed the American publishers with whom they were negotiating that it was the work of the same hand which had produced "Jane Eyre," and superior to either "Jane Eyre" or "Wuthering Heights"! It was, indeed, the sharp practice connected with this astonishing judgment which led to the sisters' hurried journey to London in 1848—the famous journey when the two little ladies in black revealed themselves to Mr. Smith, and proved to him that they were not one

Currer Bell, but two Miss Brontës. It was Anne's sole journey to London—her only contact with a world that was not Haworth, except that supplied by her school-life at Roehead and her two teaching engagements.

And there was and is a considerable narrative ability, a sheer moral energy in "Wildfell Hall," which would not be enough, indeed, to keep it alive if it were not the work of a Brontë, but still betray its kinship and source. The scenes of Huntingdon's wickedness are less interesting but less improbable than the country-house scenes of "Jane Eyre"; the story of his death has many true and touching passages; the last love-scene is well, even in parts admirably, written. But the book's truth, so far as it is true, is scarcely the truth of imagination; it is rather the truth of a tract or a report. There can be little doubt that many of the pages are close transcripts from Branwell's conduct and language,—so far as Anne's slighter personality enabled her to render her brother's temperament, which was more akin to Emily's than to her own. The same material might have been used by Emily or Charlotte; Emily, as we know, did make use of it in "Wuthering Heights"; but only after it had passed through that ineffable transformation, that mysterious, incommunicable heightening which makes and gives rank in literature. Some subtle, innate correspondence between eye and brain, between brain and hand, was present in Emily and Charlotte, and absent in Anne. There is no other account to be given of this or any other case of difference between serviceable talent and the high gifts of "Delos" and Patara's own "Apollo."

The same world of difference appears between her poems and those of her playfellow and comrade, Emily. If ever our descendants should establish the schools for writers which are even now threatened or attempted, they will hardly know perhaps any better than we what genius is, nor how it can be produced. But if they try to teach by example, then Anne and Emily Brontë are ready to their hand. Take the verses written by Emily at Roehead which contain the lovely lines which I have already quoted in an earlier "Introduction."[1] Just before those lines there are two or three verses which it is worth while to compare with a poem of Anne's called "Home." Emily was sixteen at the time of writing; Anne about twenty-one or twenty-two. Both sisters take for their motive the exile's longing thought of home. Emily's lines are full of faults, but they have the indefinable quality—here, no doubt, only in the bud, only as a matter of promise—which Anne's are entirely without. From the twilight schoolroom at Roehead, Emily turns in thought to the distant upland of Haworth and the little stone-built house upon its crest:—

There is a spot, 'mid barren hills,
  Where winter howls, and driving rain;
But, if the dreary tempest chills,

There is a light that warms again.

The house is old, the trees are bare,
Moonless above bends twilight's dome,
But what on earth is half so dear—
So longed for—as the hearth of home?

The mute bird sitting on the stone,
The dank moss dripping from the wall,
The thorn-trees gaunt, the walks o'ergrown,
I love them—how I love them all!

Anne's verses, written from one of the houses where she was a governess, express precisely the same feeling, and movement of mind. But notice the instinctive rightness and swiftness of Emily's, the blurred weakness of Anne's!—

For yonder garden, fair and wide,
With groves of evergreen,
Long winding walks, and borders trim,
And velvet lawns between—

Restore to me that little spot,
With gray walls compassed round,
Where knotted grass neglected lies,
And weeds usurp the ground.

Though all around this mansion high
Invites the foot to roam,
And though its halls are fair within—
Oh, give me back my Home!

A similar parallel lies between Anne's lines "Domestic Peace,"—a sad and true reflection of the terrible times with Branwell in 1846—and Emily's "Wanderer from the Fold"; while in Emily's "Last Lines," the daring spirit of the sister to whom the magic gift was granted separates itself for ever from the gentle and accustomed piety of the sister to whom it was denied. Yet Anne's "Last Lines"—"I hoped that with the brave and strong"—have sweetness and sincerity; they have gained and kept a place in English religious verse, and they must always appeal to those who love the Brontës because, in the language of Christian faith and submission, they record the death of Emily and the passionate affection which her sisters bore her.

And so we are brought back to the point from which we started. It is not as the writer of “Wildfell Hall,” but as the sister of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, that Anne Brontë escapes oblivion—as the frail “little one,” upon whom the other two lavished a tender and protecting care, who was a witness of Emily’s death, and herself, within a few minutes of her own farewell to life, bade Charlotte “take courage.”

“When my thoughts turn to Anne,” said Charlotte many years earlier, “they always see her as a patient, persecuted stranger,—more lonely, less gifted with the power of making friends even than I am.” Later on, however, this power of making friends seems to have belonged to Anne in greater measure than to the others. Her gentleness conquered; she was not set apart, as they were, by the lonely and self-sufficing activities of great powers; her Christianity, though sad and timid, was of a kind which those around her could understand; she made no grim fight with suffering and death as did Emily. Emily was “torn” from life “conscious, panting, reluctant,” to use Charlotte’s own words; Anne’s “sufferings were mild,” her mind “generally serene,” and at the last “she thanked God that death was come, and come so gently.” When Charlotte returned to the desolate house at Haworth, Emily’s large house-dog and Anne’s little spaniel welcomed her in “a strange, heart-touching way,” she writes to Mr. Williams. She alone was left, heir to all the memories and tragedies of the house. She took up again the task of life and labour. She cared for her father; she returned to the writing of “Shirley”; and when she herself passed away, four years later, she had so turned those years to account that not only all she did but all she loved had passed silently into the keeping of fame. Mrs. Gaskell’s touching and delightful task was ready for her, and Anne, no less than Charlotte and Emily, was sure of England’s remembrance.

MARY A. WARD.

AUTHOR’S PREFACE[2]
TO THE SECOND EDITION

While I acknowledge the success of the present work to have been greater than I anticipated, and the praises it has elicited from a few kind critics to have been greater than it deserved, I must also admit that from some other quarters it has been censured with an asperity which I was as little prepared to expect, and which my judgment, as well as my feelings, assures me is more bitter than just. It is scarcely the province of an author to refute the arguments of his censors and vindicate his own productions; but I may be allowed to make here a few observations with which I would have prefaced the first edition, had I foreseen the necessity of such precautions

against the misapprehensions of those who would read it with a prejudiced mind or be content to judge it by a hasty glance.

My object in writing the following pages was not simply to amuse the Reader; neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to ingratiate myself with the Press and the Public: I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it. But as the priceless treasure too frequently hides at the bottom of a well, it needs some courage to dive for it, especially as he that does so will be likely to incur more scorn and obloquy for the mud and water into which he has ventured to plunge, than thanks for the jewel he procures; as, in like manner, she who undertakes the cleansing of a careless bachelor's apartment will be liable to more abuse for the dust she raises than commendation for the clearance she effects. Let it not be imagined, however, that I consider myself competent to reform the errors and abuses of society, but only that I would fain contribute my humble quota towards so good an aim; and if I can gain the public ear at all, I would rather whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense.

As the story of "Agnes Grey" was accused of extravagant over-colouring in those very parts that were carefully copied from the life, with a most scrupulous avoidance of all exaggeration, so, in the present work, I find myself censured for depicting *con amore*, with "a morbid love of the coarse, if not of the brutal," those scenes which, I will venture to say, have not been more painful for the most fastidious of my critics to read than they were for me to describe. I may have gone too far; in which case I shall be careful not to trouble myself or my readers in the same way again; but when we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear. To represent a bad thing in its least offensive light is, doubtless, the most agreeable course for a writer of fiction to pursue; but is it the most honest, or the safest? Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveller, or to cover them with branches and flowers? Oh, reader! if there were less of this delicate concealment of facts—this whispering, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace, there would be less of sin and misery to the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience.

I would not be understood to suppose that the proceedings of the unhappy scapegrace, with his few profligate companions I have here introduced, are a specimen of the common practices of society—the case is an extreme one, as I trusted none would fail to perceive; but I know that such characters do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not

been written in vain. But, at the same time, if any honest reader shall have derived more pain than pleasure from its perusal, and have closed the last volume with a disagreeable impression on his mind, I humbly crave his pardon, for such was far from my intention; and I will endeavour to do better another time, for I love to give innocent pleasure. Yet, be it understood, I shall not limit my ambition to this—or even to producing "a perfect work of art": time and talents so spent, I should consider wasted and misapplied. Such humble talents as God has given me I will endeavour to put to their greatest use; if I am able to amuse, I will try to benefit too; and when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I *will* speak it, though it be to the prejudice of my name and to the detriment of my reader's immediate pleasure as well as my own.

One word more, and I have done. Respecting the author's identity, I would have it to be distinctly understood that Acton Bell is neither Currer nor Ellis Bell, and therefore let not his faults be attributed to them. As to whether the name be real or fictitious, it cannot greatly signify to those who know him only by his works. As little, I should think, can it matter whether the writer so designated is a man, or a woman, as one or two of my critics profess to have discovered. I take the imputation in good part, as a compliment to the just delineation of my female characters; and though I am bound to attribute much of the severity of my censors to this suspicion, I make no effort to refute it, because, in my own mind, I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be. All novels are, or should be, written for both men and women to read, and I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man.

July 22*nd*, 1848.

CHAPTER I

You must go back with me to the autumn of 1827.

My father, as you know, was a sort of gentleman farmer in ——shire; and I, by his express desire, succeeded him in the same quiet occupation, not very willingly, for ambition urged me to higher aims, and self-conceit assured me that, in disregarding its voice, I was burying my talent in the earth, and hiding my light under a bushel. My mother had done her utmost to persuade me that I was capable of great achievements; but my father, who thought ambition was the surest road to ruin, and change but another word for destruction, would listen to no scheme for bettering either my own condition, or that of my fellow mortals. He assured me it was all

rubbish, and exhorted me, with his dying breath, to continue in the good old way, to follow his steps, and those of his father before him, and let my highest ambition be to walk honestly through the world, looking neither to the right hand nor to the left, and to transmit the paternal acres to my children in, at least, as flourishing a condition as he left them to me.

"Well!—an honest and industrious farmer is one of the most useful members of society; and if I devote my talents to the cultivation of my farm, and the improvement of agriculture in general, I shall thereby benefit, not only my own immediate connections and dependants, but, in some degree, mankind at large:—hence I shall not have lived in vain."

With such reflections as these I was endeavouring to console myself, as I plodded home from the fields, one cold, damp, cloudy evening towards the close of October. But the gleam of a bright red fire through the parlour window had more effect in cheering my spirits, and rebuking my thankless repinings, than all the sage reflections and good resolutions I had forced my mind to frame;—for I was young then, remember—only four-and-twenty—and had not acquired half the rule over my own spirit that I now possess—trifling as that may be.

However, that haven of bliss must not be entered till I had exchanged my miry boots for a clean pair of shoes, and my rough surtout for a respectable coat, and made myself generally presentable before decent society; for my mother, with all her kindness, was vastly particular on certain points.

In ascending to my room I was met upon the stairs by a smart, pretty girl of nineteen, with a tidy, dumpy figure, a round face, bright, blooming cheeks, glossy, clustering curls, and little merry brown eyes. I need not tell you this was my sister Rose. She is, I know, a comely matron still, and, doubtless, no less lovely—in *your* eyes—than on the happy day you first beheld her. Nothing told me then that she, a few years hence, would be the wife of one entirely unknown to me as yet, but destined hereafter to become a closer friend than even herself, more intimate than that unmannerly lad of seventeen, by whom I was collared in the passage, on coming down, and well-nigh jerked off my equilibrium, and who, in correction for his impudence, received a resounding whack over the sconce, which, however, sustained no serious injury from the infliction; as, besides being more than commonly thick, it was protected by a redundant shock of short, reddish curls, that my mother called auburn.

On entering the parlour we found that honoured lady seated in her arm-chair at the fireside, working away at her knitting, according to her usual custom, when she had nothing else to do. She had swept the hearth, and made a bright blazing fire for our

reception; the servant had just brought in the tea-tray; and Rose was producing the sugar-basin and tea-caddy from the cupboard in the black oak side-board, that shone like polished ebony, in the cheerful parlour twilight.

“Well! here they both are,” cried my mother, looking round upon us without retarding the motion of her nimble fingers and glittering needles. “Now shut the door, and come to the fire, while Rose gets the tea ready; I’m sure you must be starved;—and tell me what you’ve been about all day;—I like to know what my children have been about.”

“I’ve been breaking in the grey colt—no easy business that—directing the ploughing of the last wheat stubble—for the ploughboy has not the sense to direct himself—and carrying out a plan for the extensive and efficient draining of the low meadowlands.”

“That’s my brave boy!—and Fergus, what have you been doing?”

“Badger-baiting.”

And here he proceeded to give a particular account of his sport, and the respective traits of prowess evinced by the badger and the dogs; my mother pretending to listen with deep attention, and watching his animated countenance with a degree of maternal admiration I thought highly disproportioned to its object.

“It’s time you should be doing something else, Fergus,” said I, as soon as a momentary pause in his narration allowed me to get in a word.

“What *can* I do?” replied he; “my mother won’t let me go to sea or enter the army; and I’m determined to do nothing else—except make myself such a nuisance to you all, that you will be thankful to get rid of me on any terms.”

Our parent soothingly stroked his stiff, short curls. He growled, and tried to look sulky, and then we all took our seats at the table, in obedience to the thrice-repeated summons of Rose.

“Now take your tea,” said she; “and I’ll tell you what *I’ve* been doing. I’ve been to call on the Wilsons; and it’s a *thousand* pities you didn’t go with me, Gilbert, for Eliza Millward was there!”

“Well! what of her?”

“Oh, nothing!—I’m not going to tell you about her;—only that she’s a nice, amusing little thing, when she is in a merry humour, and I shouldn’t mind calling her—”

“Hush, hush, my dear! your brother has no such idea!” whispered my mother earnestly, holding up her finger.

“Well,” resumed Rose; “I was going to tell you an important piece of news I heard there—I have been bursting with it ever since. You know it was reported a month ago, that somebody was going to take Wildfell Hall—and—what do you think? It has actually been inhabited above a week!—and we never knew!”

“Impossible!” cried my mother.

“Preposterous!!!” shrieked Fergus.

“It has indeed!—and by a single lady!”

“Good gracious, my dear! The place is in ruins!”

“She has had two or three rooms made habitable; and there she lives, all alone—except an old woman for a servant!”

“Oh, dear! that spoils it—I’d hoped she was a witch,” observed Fergus, while carving his inch-thick slice of bread and butter. “Nonsense, Fergus! But isn’t it strange, mamma?”

“Strange! I can hardly believe it.”

“But you may believe it; for Jane Wilson has seen her. She went with her mother, who, of course, when she heard of a stranger being in the neighbourhood, would be on pins and needles till she had seen her and got all she could out of her. She is called Mrs. Graham, and she is in mourning—not widow’s weeds, but slightish mourning—and she is quite young, they say,—not above five or six and twenty,—but *so* reserved! They tried all they could to find out who she was and where she came from, and, all about her, but neither Mrs. Wilson, with her pertinacious and impertinent home-thrusts, nor Miss Wilson, with her skilful manœuvring, could manage to elicit a single satisfactory answer, or even a casual remark, or chance expression calculated to allay their curiosity, or throw the faintest ray of light upon her history, circumstances, or connections. Moreover, she was barely civil to them, and evidently better pleased to say “good-by,” than “how do you do.” But Eliza Millward says her father intends to call upon her soon, to offer some pastoral advice, which he fears she needs, as, though she is known to have entered the neighbourhood early last week, she did not make her appearance at church on Sunday; and she—Eliza, that is—will beg to accompany him, and is sure *she* can succeed in wheedling something out of her—you know, Gilbert, *she* can do anything. And *we* should call some time, mamma; it’s only proper, you know.”

“Of course, my dear. Poor thing! How lonely she must feel!”

“And pray, be quick about it; and mind you bring me word how much sugar she puts in her tea, and what sort of caps and aprons she wears, and all about it; for I don’t know how I can live till I know,” said Fergus, very gravely.

But if he intended the speech to be hailed as a master-stroke of wit, he signally failed, for nobody laughed. However, he was not much disconcerted at that; for when he had taken a mouthful of bread and butter and was about to swallow a gulp of tea, the humour of the thing burst upon him with such irresistible force, that he was obliged to jump up from the table, and rush snorting and choking from the room; and a minute after, was heard screaming in fearful agony in the garden.

As for me, I was hungry, and contented myself with silently demolishing the tea, ham, and toast, while my mother and sister went on talking, and continued to discuss the apparent or non-apparent circumstances, and probable or improbable history of the mysterious lady; but I must confess that, after my brother’s misadventure, I once or twice raised the cup to my lips, and put it down again without daring to taste the contents, lest I should injure my dignity by a similar explosion.

The next day my mother and Rose hastened to pay their compliments to the fair recluse; and came back but little wiser than they went; though my mother declared she did not regret the journey, for if she had not gained much good, she flattered herself she had imparted some, and that was better: she had given some useful advice, which, she hoped, would not be thrown away; for Mrs. Graham, though she said little to any purpose, and appeared somewhat self-opinionated, seemed not incapable of reflection,—though she did not know where she had been all her life, poor thing, for she betrayed a lamentable ignorance on certain points, and had not even the sense to be ashamed of it.

“On what points, mother?” asked I.

“On household matters, and all the little niceties of cookery, and such things, that every lady ought to be familiar with, whether she be required to make a practical use of her knowledge or not. I gave her some useful pieces of information, however, and several excellent receipts, the value of which she evidently could not appreciate, for she begged I would not trouble myself, as she lived in such a plain, quiet way, that she was sure she should never make use of them. ‘No matter, my dear,’ said I; ‘it is what every respectable female ought to know;—and besides, though you are alone now, you will not be always so; you *have* been married, and probably—I might say almost certainly—will be again.’ ‘You are mistaken there, ma’am,’ said she, almost haughtily; ‘I am certain I never shall.’—But I told her *I* knew better.”

“Some romantic young widow, I suppose,” said I, “come there to end her days in solitude, and mourn in secret for the dear departed—but it won’t last long.”

“No, I think not,” observed Rose; “for she didn’t seem *very* disconsolate after all; and she’s excessively pretty—handsome rather—you must see her, Gilbert; you will call her a perfect beauty, though you could hardly pretend to discover a resemblance between her and Eliza Millward.”

“Well, I can imagine many faces more beautiful than Eliza’s, though not more charming. I allow she has small claims to perfection; but then, I maintain that, if she were more perfect, she would be less interesting.”

“And so you prefer her faults to other people’s perfections?”

“Just so—saving my mother’s presence.”

“Oh, my dear Gilbert, what nonsense you talk!—I know you don’t mean it; it’s quite out of the question,” said my mother, getting up, and bustling out of the room, under pretence of household business, in order to escape the contradiction that was trembling on my tongue.

After that Rose favoured me with further particulars respecting Mrs. Graham. Her appearance, manners, and dress, and the very furniture of the room she inhabited, were all set before me, with rather more clearness and precision than I cared to see them; but, as I was not a very attentive listener, I could not repeat the description if I would.

The next day was Saturday; and, on Sunday, everybody wondered whether or not the fair unknown would profit by the vicar’s remonstrance, and come to church. I confess I looked with some interest myself towards the old family pew, appertaining to Wildfell Hall, where the faded crimson cushions and lining had been unpressed and unrenewed so many years, and the grim escutcheons, with their lugubrious borders of rusty black cloth, frowned so sternly from the wall above.

And there I beheld a tall, lady-like figure, clad in black. Her face was towards me, and there was something in it which, once seen, invited me to look again. Her hair was raven black, and disposed in long glossy ringlets, a style of coiffure rather unusual in those days, but always graceful and becoming; her complexion was clear and pale; her eyes I could not see, for, being bent upon her prayer-book, they were concealed by their drooping lids and long black lashes, but the brows above were expressive and well defined; the forehead was lofty and intellectual, the nose, a perfect aquiline and the features, in general, unexceptionable—only there was a slight hollowness about

the cheeks and eyes, and the lips, though finely formed, were a little too thin, a little too firmly compressed, and had something about them that betokened, I thought, no very soft or amiable temper; and I said in my heart—"I would rather admire you from this distance, fair lady, than be the partner of your home."

Just then she happened to raise her eyes, and they met mine; I did not choose to withdraw my gaze, and she turned again to her book, but with a momentary, indefinable expression of quiet scorn, that was inexpressibly provoking to me.

"She thinks me an impudent puppy," thought I. "Humph!—she shall change her mind before long, if I think it worth while."

But then it flashed upon me that these were very improper thoughts for a place of worship, and that my behaviour, on the present occasion, was anything but what it ought to be. Previous, however, to directing my mind to the service, I glanced round the church to see if any one had been observing me;—but no,—all, who were not attending to their prayer-books, were attending to the strange lady,—my good mother and sister among the rest, and Mrs. Wilson and her daughter; and even Eliza Millward was slily glancing from the corners of her eyes towards the object of general attraction. Then she glanced at me, simpered a little, and blushed, modestly looked at her prayer-book, and endeavoured to compose her features.

Here I was transgressing again; and this time I was made sensible of it by a sudden dig in the ribs, from the elbow of my pert brother. For the present, I could only resent the insult by pressing my foot upon his toes, deferring further vengeance till we got out of church.

Now, Halford, before I close this letter, I'll tell you who Eliza Millward was: she was the vicar's younger daughter, and a very engaging little creature, for whom I felt no small degree of partiality;—and she knew it, though I had never come to any direct explanation, and had no definite intention of so doing, for my mother, who maintained there was no one good enough for me within twenty miles round, could not bear the thoughts of my marrying that insignificant little thing, who, in addition to her numerous other disqualifications, had not twenty pounds to call her own. Eliza's figure was at once slight and plump, her face small, and nearly as round as my sister's,—complexion, something similar to hers, but more delicate and less decidedly blooming,—nose, *retroussé*,—features, generally irregular; and, altogether, she was rather charming than pretty. But her eyes—I must not forget those remarkable features, for therein her chief attraction lay—in outward aspect at least;—they were long and narrow in shape, the irids black, or very dark brown, the expression various, and ever changing, but always either preternaturally—I had almost said *diabolically*—

wicked, or irresistibly bewitching—often both. Her voice was gentle and childish, her tread light and soft as that of a cat:—but her manners more frequently resembled those of a pretty playful kitten, that is now pert and roguish, now timid and demure, according to its own sweet will.

Her sister, Mary, was several years older, several inches taller, and of a larger, coarser build—a plain, quiet, sensible girl, who had patiently nursed their mother, through her last long, tedious illness, and been the housekeeper, and family drudge, from thence to the present time. She was trusted and valued by her father, loved and courted by all dogs, cats, children, and poor people, and slighted and neglected by everybody else.

The Reverend Michael Millward himself was a tall, ponderous elderly gentleman, who placed a shovel hat above his large, square, massive-featured face, carried a stout walking-stick in his hand, and incased his still powerful limbs in knee-breeches and gaiters,—or black silk stockings on state occasions. He was a man of fixed principles, strong prejudices, and regular habits, intolerant of dissent in any shape, acting under a firm conviction that *his* opinions were always right, and whoever differed from them must be either most deplorably ignorant, or wilfully blind.

In childhood, I had always been accustomed to regard him with a feeling of reverential awe—but lately, even now, surmounted, for, though he had a fatherly kindness for the well-behaved, he was a strict disciplinarian, and had often sternly reproved our juvenile failings and peccadilloes; and moreover, in those days, whenever he called upon our parents, we had to stand up before him, and say our catechism, or repeat, "How doth the little busy bee," or some other hymn, or—worse than all—be questioned about his last text, and the heads of the discourse, which we never could remember. Sometimes, the worthy gentleman would reprove my mother for being over-indulgent to her sons, with a reference to old Eli, or David and Absalom, which was particularly galling to her feelings; and, very highly as she respected him, and all his sayings, I once heard her exclaim, "I wish to goodness he had a son himself! He wouldn't be so ready with his advice to other people then;—he'd see what it is to have a couple of boys to keep in order."

He had a laudable care for his own bodily health—kept very early hours, regularly took a walk before breakfast, was vastly particular about warm and dry clothing, had never been known to preach a sermon without previously swallowing a raw egg—albeit he was gifted with good lungs and a powerful voice,—and was, generally, extremely particular about what he ate and drank, though by no means abstemious, and having a mode of dietary peculiar to himself,—being a great despiser of tea and such slops, and a patron of malt liquors, bacon and eggs, ham, hung beef, and other strong

meats, which agreed well enough with his digestive organs, and therefore were maintained by him to be good and wholesome for everybody, and confidently recommended to the most delicate convalescents or dyspeptics, who, if they failed to derive the promised benefit from his prescriptions, were told it was because they had not persevered, and if they complained of inconvenient results therefrom, were assured it was all fancy.

I will just touch upon two other persons whom I have mentioned, and then bring this long letter to a close. These are Mrs. Wilson and her daughter. The former was the widow of a substantial farmer, a narrow-minded, tattling old gossip, whose character is not worth describing. She had two sons, Robert, a rough countrified farmer, and Richard, a retiring, studious young man, who was studying the classics with the vicar's assistance, preparing for college, with a view to enter the church.

Their sister Jane was a young lady of some talents, and more ambition. She had, at her own desire, received a regular boarding-school education, superior to what any member of the family had obtained before. She had taken the polish well, acquired considerable elegance of manners, quite lost her provincial accent, and could boast of more accomplishments than the vicar's daughters. She was considered a beauty besides; but never for a moment could she number me amongst her admirers. She was about six and twenty, rather tall and very slender, her hair was neither chestnut nor auburn, but a most decided bright, light red; her complexion was remarkably fair and brilliant, her head small, neck long, chin well turned, but very short, lips thin and red, eyes clear hazel, quick, and penetrating, but entirely destitute of poetry or feeling. She had, or might have had, many suitors in her own rank of life, but scornfully repulsed or rejected them all; for none but a gentleman could please her refined taste, and none but a rich one could satisfy her soaring ambition. One gentleman there was, from whom she had lately received some rather pointed attentions, and upon whose heart, name, and fortune, it was whispered, she had serious designs. This was Mr. Lawrence, the young squire, whose family had formerly occupied Wildfell Hall, but had deserted it, some fifteen years ago, for a more modern and commodious mansion in the neighbouring parish.

Now, Halford, I bid you adieu for the present. This is the first instalment of my debt. If the coin suits you, tell me so, and I'll send you the rest at my leisure: if you would rather remain my creditor than stuff your purse with such ungainly, heavy pieces,—tell me still, and I'll pardon your bad taste, and willingly keep the treasure to myself.

Yours immutably,
GILBERT MARKHAM.

CHAPTER II

I perceive, with joy, my most valued friend, that the cloud of your displeasure has passed away; the light of your countenance blesses me once more, and you desire the continuation of my story: therefore, without more ado, you shall have it.

I think the day I last mentioned was a certain Sunday, the latest in the October of 1827. On the following Tuesday I was out with my dog and gun, in pursuit of such game as I could find within the territory of Linden-Car; but finding none at all, I turned my arms against the hawks and carrion crows, whose depredations, as I suspected, had deprived me of better prey. To this end I left the more frequented regions, the wooded valleys, the corn-fields, and the meadow-lands, and proceeded to mount the steep acclivity of Wildfell, the wildest and the loftiest eminence in our neighbourhood, where, as you ascend, the hedges, as well as the trees, become scanty and stunted, the former, at length, giving place to rough stone fences, partly greened over with ivy and moss, the latter to larches and Scotch fir-trees, or isolated blackthorns. The fields, being rough and stony, and wholly unfit for the plough, were mostly devoted to the pasturing of sheep and cattle; the soil was thin and poor: bits of grey rock here and there peeped out from the grassy hillocks; bilberry-plants and heather—relics of more savage wildness—grew under the walls; and in many of the enclosures, ragweeds and rushes usurped supremacy over the scanty herbage; but these were not *my* property.

Near the top of this hill, about two miles from Linden-Car, stood Wildfell Hall, a superannuated mansion of the Elizabethan era, built of dark grey stone, venerable and picturesque to look at, but doubtless, cold and gloomy enough to inhabit, with its thick stone mullions and little latticed panes, its time-eaten air-holes, and its too lonely, too unsheltered situation,—only shielded from the war of wind and weather by a group of Scotch firs, themselves half blighted with storms, and looking as stern and gloomy as the Hall itself. Behind it lay a few desolate fields, and then the brown heath-clad summit of the hill; before it (enclosed by stone walls, and entered by an iron gate, with large balls of grey granite—similar to those which decorated the roof and gables—surmounting the gate-posts) was a garden,—once stocked with such hard plants and flowers as could best brook the soil and climate, and such trees and shrubs as could best endure the gardener's torturing shears, and most readily assume the shapes he chose to give them,—now, having been left so many years untilled and untrimmed, abandoned to the weeds and the grass, to the frost and the wind, the rain and the drought, it presented a very singular appearance indeed. The close green walls of privet, that had bordered the principal walk, were two-thirds withered away, and the rest grown beyond all reasonable bounds; the old boxwood swan, that sat beside the scraper, had lost its neck and half its body: the castellated towers of laurel

in the middle of the garden, the gigantic warrior that stood on one side of the gateway, and the lion that guarded the other, were sprouted into such fantastic shapes as resembled nothing either in heaven or earth, or in the waters under the earth; but, to my young imagination, they presented all of them a goblinish appearance, that harmonised well with the ghostly legions and dark traditions our old nurse had told us respecting the haunted hall and its departed occupants.

I had succeeded in killing a hawk and two crows when I came within sight of the mansion; and then, relinquishing further depredations, I sauntered on, to have a look at the old place, and see what changes had been wrought in it by its new inhabitant. I did not like to go quite to the front and stare in at the gate; but I paused beside the garden wall, and looked, and saw no change—except in one wing, where the broken windows and dilapidated roof had evidently been repaired, and where a thin wreath of smoke was curling up from the stack of chimneys.

While I thus stood, leaning on my gun, and looking up at the dark gables, sunk in an idle reverie, weaving a tissue of wayward fancies, in which old associations and the fair young hermit, now within those walls, bore a nearly equal part, I heard a slight rustling and scrambling just within the garden; and, glancing in the direction whence the sound proceeded, I beheld a tiny hand elevated above the wall: it clung to the topmost stone, and then another little hand was raised to take a firmer hold, and then appeared a small white forehead, surmounted with wreaths of light brown hair, with a pair of deep blue eyes beneath, and the upper portion of a diminutive ivory nose.

The eyes did not notice me, but sparkled with glee on beholding Sancho, my beautiful black and white setter, that was coursing about the field with its muzzle to the ground. The little creature raised its face and called aloud to the dog. The good-natured animal paused, looked up, and wagged his tail, but made no further advances. The child (a little boy, apparently about five years old) scrambled up to the top of the wall, and

called again and again; but finding this of no avail, apparently made up his mind, like Mahomet, to go to the mountain, since the mountain would not come to him, and attempted to get over; but a crabbed old cherry-tree, that grew hard by, caught him by the frock in one of its crooked scraggy arms that stretched over the wall. In attempting to disengage himself his foot slipped, and down he tumbled—but not to the earth;—the tree still kept him suspended. There was a silent struggle, and then a piercing shriek;—but, in an instant, I had dropped my gun on the grass, and caught the little fellow in my arms.

I wiped his eyes with his frock, told him he was all right and called Sancho to pacify him. He was just putting little hand on the dog's neck and beginning to smile through his tears, when I heard behind me a click of the iron gate, and a rustle of female garments, and lo! Mrs. Graham darted upon me—her neck uncovered, her black locks streaming in the wind.

"Give me the child!" she said, in a voice scarce louder than a whisper, but with a tone of startling vehemence, and, seizing the boy, she snatched him from me, as if some dire contamination were in my touch, and then stood with one hand firmly clasping his, the other on his shoulder, fixing upon me her large, luminous dark eyes—pale, breathless, quivering with agitation.

"I was not harming the child, madam," said I, scarce knowing whether to be most astonished or displeased; "he was tumbling off the wall there; and I was so fortunate as to catch him, while he hung suspended headlong from that tree, and prevent I know not what catastrophe."

"I beg your pardon, sir," stammered she;—suddenly calming down,—the light of reason seeming to break upon her beclouded spirit, and a faint blush mantling on her cheek—"I did not know you;—and I thought—"

She stooped to kiss the child, and fondly clasped her arm round his neck.

"You thought I was going to kidnap your son, I suppose?"

She stroked his head with a half-embarrassed laugh, and replied,—"I did not know he had attempted to climb the wall.—I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Markham, I believe?" she added, somewhat abruptly.

I bowed, but ventured to ask how she knew me.

"Your sister called here, a few days ago, with Mrs. Markham."

“Is the resemblance so strong then?” I asked, in some surprise, and not so greatly flattered at the idea as I ought to have been.

“There is a likeness about the eyes and complexion I think,” replied she, somewhat dubiously surveying my face;—“and I think I saw you at church on Sunday.”

I smiled.—There was something either in that smile or the recollections it awakened that was particularly displeasing to her, for she suddenly assumed again that proud, chilly look that had so unspeakably roused my aversion at church—a look of repellent scorn, so easily assumed, and so entirely without the least distortion of a single feature, that, while there, it seemed like the natural expression of the face, and was the more provoking to me, because I could not think it affected.

“Good-morning, Mr. Markham,” said she; and without another word or glance, she withdrew, with her child, into the garden; and I returned home, angry and dissatisfied—I could scarcely tell you why, and therefore will not attempt it.

I only stayed to put away my gun and powder-horn, and give some requisite directions to one of the farming-men, and then repaired to the vicarage, to solace my spirit and soothe my ruffled temper with the company and conversation of Eliza Millward.

I found her, as usual, busy with some piece of soft embroidery (the mania for Berlin wools had not yet commenced), while her sister was seated at the chimney-corner, with the cat on her knee, mending a heap of stockings.

“Mary—Mary! put them away!” Eliza was hastily saying, just as I entered the room.

“Not I, indeed!” was the phlegmatic reply; and my appearance prevented further discussion.

“You’re so unfortunate, Mr. Markham!” observed the younger sister, with one of her arch, sidelong glances. “Papa’s just gone out into the parish, and not likely to be back for an hour!”

“Never mind; I can manage to spend a few minutes with his daughters, if they’ll allow me,” said I, bringing a chair to the fire, and seating myself therein, without waiting to be asked.

“Well, if you’ll be very good and amusing, we shall not object.”

“Let your permission be unconditional, pray; for I came not to give pleasure, but to seek it,” I answered.

However, I thought it but reasonable to make some slight exertion to render my company agreeable; and what little effort I made, was apparently pretty successful, for Miss Eliza was never in a better humour. We seemed, indeed, to be mutually pleased with each other, and managed to maintain between us a cheerful and animated though not very profound conversation. It was little better than a *tête-à-tête*, for Miss Millward never opened her lips, except occasionally to correct some random assertion or exaggerated expression of her sister's, and once to ask her to pick up the ball of cotton that had rolled under the table. I did this myself, however, as in duty bound.

"Thank you, Mr. Markham," said she, as I presented it to her. "I would have picked it up myself; only I did not want to disturb the cat."

"Mary, dear, *that* won't excuse you in Mr. Markham's eyes," said Eliza; "he hates cats, I daresay, as cordially as he does old maids—like all other gentlemen. Don't you, Mr. Markham?"

"I believe it is natural for our unamiable sex to dislike the creatures," replied I; "for you ladies lavish so many caresses upon them."

"Bless them—little darlings!" cried she, in a sudden burst of enthusiasm, turning round and overwhelming her sister's pet with a shower of kisses.

"Don't, Eliza!" said Miss Millward, somewhat gruffly, as she impatiently pushed her away.

But it was time for me to be going: make what haste I would, I should still be too late for tea; and my mother was the soul of order and punctuality.

My fair friend was evidently unwilling to bid me adieu. I tenderly squeezed her little hand at parting; and she repaid me with one of her softest smiles and most bewitching glances. I went home very happy, with a heart brimful of complacency for myself, and overflowing with love for Eliza.

CHAPTER III

Two days after, Mrs. Graham called at Linden-Car, contrary to the expectation of Rose, who entertained an idea that the mysterious occupant of Wildfell Hall would wholly disregard the common observances of civilized life,—in which opinion she was supported by the Wilsons, who testified that neither their call nor the Millwards' had been returned as yet. Now, however, the cause of that omission was explained, though not entirely to the satisfaction of Rose. Mrs. Graham had brought her child with her, and on my mother's expressing surprise that he could walk so far, she replied,—

“It is a long walk for him; but I must have either taken him with me, or relinquished the visit altogether; for I never leave him alone; and I think, Mrs. Markham, I must beg you to make my excuses to the Millwards and Mrs. Wilson, when you see them, as I fear I cannot do myself the pleasure of calling upon them till my little Arthur is able to accompany me.”

“But you have a servant,” said Rose; “could you not leave him with her?”

“She has her own occupations to attend to; and besides, she is too old to run after a child, and he is too mercurial to be tied to an elderly woman.”

“But you left him to come to church.”

“Yes, once; but I would not have left him for any other purpose; and I think, in future, I must contrive to bring him with me, or stay at home.”

“Is he so mischievous?” asked my mother, considerably shocked.

“No,” replied the lady, sadly smiling, as she stroked the wavy locks of her son, who was seated on a low stool at her feet; “but he is my only treasure, and I am his only friend: so we don’t like to be separated.”

“But, my dear, I call that doting,” said my plain-spoken parent. “You should try to suppress such foolish fondness, as well to save your son from ruin as yourself from ridicule.”

“*Ruin!* Mrs. Markham!”

“Yes; it is spoiling the child. Even at *his* age, he ought not to be always tied to his mother’s apron-string; he should learn to be ashamed of it.”

“Mrs. Markham, I beg you will not say such things, in *his* presence, at least. I trust my son will *never* be ashamed to love his mother!” said Mrs. Graham, with a serious energy that startled the company.

My mother attempted to appease her by an explanation; but she seemed to think enough had been said on the subject, and abruptly turned the conversation.

“Just as I thought,” said I to myself: “the lady’s temper is none of the mildest, notwithstanding her sweet, pale face and lofty brow, where thought and suffering seem equally to have stamped their impress.”

All this time I was seated at a table on the other side of the room, apparently immersed in the perusal of a volume of the *Farmer’s Magazine*, which I happened to

have been reading at the moment of our visitor's arrival; and, not choosing to be over civil, I had merely bowed as she entered, and continued my occupation as before.

In a little while, however, I was sensible that some one was approaching me, with a light, but slow and hesitating tread. It was little Arthur, irresistibly attracted by my dog Sancho, that was lying at my feet. On looking up I beheld him standing about two yards off, with his clear blue eyes wistfully gazing on the dog, transfixed to the spot, not by fear of the animal, but by a timid disinclination to approach its master. A little encouragement, however, induced him to come forward. The child, though shy, was not sullen. In a minute he was kneeling on the carpet, with his arms round Sancho's neck, and, in a minute or two more, the little fellow was seated on my knee, surveying with eager interest the various specimens of horses, cattle, pigs, and model farms portrayed in the volume before me. I glanced at his mother now and then to see how she relished the new-sprung intimacy; and I saw, by the unquiet aspect of her eye, that for some reason or other she was uneasy at the child's position.

"Arthur," said she, at length, "come here. You are troublesome to Mr. Markham: he wishes to read."

"By no means, Mrs. Graham; pray let him stay. I am as much amused as he is," pleaded I. But still, with hand and eye, she silently called him to her side.

"No, mamma," said the child; "let me look at these pictures first; and then I'll come, and tell you all about them."

"We are going to have a small party on Monday, the fifth of November," said my mother; "and I hope you will not refuse to make one, Mrs. Graham. You can bring your little boy with you, you know—I daresay we shall be able to amuse him;—and then you can make your own apologies to the Millwards and Wilsons—they will all be here, I expect."

"Thank you, I never go to parties."

"Oh! but this will be quite a family concern—early hours, and nobody here but ourselves, and just the Millwards and Wilsons, most of whom you already know, and Mr. Lawrence, your landlord, with whom you ought to make acquaintance."

"I do know something of him—but you must excuse me this time; for the evenings, now, are dark and damp, and Arthur, I fear, is too delicate to risk exposure to their influence with impunity. We must defer the enjoyment of your hospitality till the return of longer days and warmer nights."

Rose, now, at a hint from my mother, produced a decanter of wine, with accompaniments of glasses and cake, from the cupboard and the oak sideboard, and the refreshment was duly presented to the guests. They both partook of the cake, but obstinately refused the wine, in spite of their hostess's hospitable attempts to force it upon them. Arthur, especially shrank from the ruby nectar as if in terror and disgust, and was ready to cry when urged to take it.

"Never mind, Arthur," said his mamma; "Mrs. Markham thinks it will do you good, as you were tired with your walk; but she will not oblige you to take it!—I daresay you will do very well without. He detests the very sight of wine," she added, "and the smell of it almost makes him sick. I have been accustomed to make him swallow a little wine or weak spirits-and-water, by way of medicine, when he was sick, and, in fact, I have done what I could to make him hate them."

Everybody laughed, except the young widow and her son.

"Well, Mrs. Graham," said my mother, wiping the tears of merriment from her bright blue eyes—"well, you surprise me! I really gave you credit for having more sense.—The poor child will be the veriest milksop that ever was sopped! Only think what a man you will make of him, if you persist in—"

"I think it a very excellent plan," interrupted Mrs. Graham, with imperturbable gravity. "By that means I hope to save him from one degrading vice at least. I wish I could render the incentives to every other equally innoxious in his case."

"But by such means," said I, "you will never render him virtuous.—What is it that constitutes virtue, Mrs. Graham? Is it the circumstance of being able and willing to resist temptation; or that of having no temptations to resist?—Is he a strong man that overcomes great obstacles and performs surprising achievements, though by dint of great muscular exertion, and at the risk of some subsequent fatigue, or he that sits in his chair all day, with nothing to do more laborious than stirring the fire, and carrying his food to his mouth? If you would have your son to walk honourably through the world, you must not attempt to clear the stones from his path, but teach him to walk firmly over them—not insist upon leading him by the hand, but let him learn to go alone."

"I will lead him by the hand, Mr. Markham, till he has strength to go alone; and I will clear as many stones from his path as I can, and teach him to avoid the *rest*—or walk firmly over them, as you say;—for when I have done my utmost, in the way of clearance, there will still be plenty left to exercise all the agility, steadiness, and circumspection he will ever have.—It is all very well to talk about noble resistance,

and trials of virtue; but for fifty—or five hundred men that have yielded to temptation, show me one that has had virtue to resist. And why should I take it for granted that my son will be one in a thousand?—and not rather prepare for the worst, and suppose he will be like his—like the rest of mankind, unless I take care to prevent it?"

"You are very complimentary to us all," I observed.

"I know nothing about *you*—I speak of those I do know—and when I see the whole race of mankind (with a few rare exceptions) stumbling and blundering along the path of life, sinking into every pitfall, and breaking their shins over every impediment that lies in their way, shall I not use all the means in my power to insure for him a smoother and a safer passage?"

"Yes, but the surest means will be to endeavour to fortify him *against* temptation, not to remove it out of his way."

"I will do both, Mr. Markham. God knows he will have temptations enough to assail him, both from within and without, when I have done all I can to render vice as uninviting to him, as it is abominable in its own nature—I myself have had, indeed, but few incentives to what the world calls vice, but yet I have experienced temptations and trials of another kind, that have required, on many occasions, more watchfulness and firmness to resist than I have hitherto been able to muster against them. And this, I believe, is what most others would acknowledge who are accustomed to reflection, and wishful to strive against their natural corruptions."

"Yes," said my mother, but half apprehending her drift; "but you would not judge of a boy by yourself—and, my dear Mrs. Graham, let me warn you in good time against the error—the fatal error, I may call it—of taking that boy's education upon yourself. Because you are clever in some things and well informed, you may fancy yourself equal to the task; but indeed you are not; and if you persist in the attempt, believe me you will bitterly repent it when the mischief is done."

"I am to send him to school, I suppose, to learn to despise his mother's authority and affection!" said the lady, with rather a bitter smile.

"Oh, *no!*—But if you would have a boy to despise his mother, let her keep him at home, and spend her life in petting him up, and slaving to indulge his follies and caprices."

"I perfectly agree with you, Mrs. Markham; but nothing can be further from my principles and practice than such criminal weakness as that."

"Well, but you will treat him like a girl—you'll spoil his spirit, and make a mere Miss Nancy of him—you will, indeed, Mrs. Graham, whatever you may think. But I'll get Mr.

Millward to talk to you about it:—*he'll* tell you the consequences;—he'll set it before you as plain as the day;—and tell you what you ought to do, and all about it;—and, I don't doubt, he'll be able to convince you in a minute."

"No occasion to trouble the vicar," said Mrs. Graham, glancing at me—I suppose I was smiling at my mother's unbounded confidence in that worthy gentleman—"Mr. Markham here thinks his powers of conviction at least equal to Mr. Millward's. If I hear not him, neither should I be convinced though one rose from the dead, he would tell you. Well, Mr. Markham, you that maintain that a boy should not be shielded from evil, but sent out to battle against it, alone and unassisted—not taught to avoid the snares of life, but boldly to rush into them, or over them, as he may—to seek danger, rather than shun it, and feed his virtue by temptation,—would you—?"

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Graham—but you get on too fast. I have not yet said that a boy should be taught to rush into the snares of life,—or even wilfully to seek temptation for the sake of exercising his virtue by overcoming it;—I only say that it is better to arm and strengthen your hero, than to disarm and enfeeble the foe;—and if you were to rear an oak sapling in a hothouse, tending it carefully night and day, and shielding it from every breath of wind, you could not expect it to become a hardy tree, like that which has grown up on the mountain-side, exposed to all the action of the elements, and not even sheltered from the shock of the tempest."

"Granted;—but would you use the same argument with regard to a girl?"

"Certainly not."

"No; you would have her to be tenderly and delicately nurtured, like a hot-house plant—taught to cling to others for direction and support, and guarded, as much as possible, from the very knowledge of evil. But will you be so good as to inform me why you make this distinction? Is it that you think she *has* no virtue?"

"Assuredly not."

"Well, but you affirm that virtue is only elicited by temptation;—and you think that a woman cannot be too little exposed to temptation, or too little acquainted with vice, or anything connected therewith. It *must* be either that you think she is essentially so vicious, or so feeble-minded, that she *cannot* withstand temptation,—and though she may be pure and innocent as long as she is kept in ignorance and restraint, yet, being destitute of *real* virtue, to teach her how to sin is at once to make her a sinner, and the greater her knowledge, the wider her liberty, the deeper will be her depravity,—whereas, in the nobler sex, there is a natural tendency to goodness, guarded by a

superior fortitude, which, the more it is exercised by trials and dangers, is only the further developed—"

"Heaven forbid that I should think so!" I interrupted her at last.

"Well, then, it must be that you think they are *both* weak and prone to err, and the slightest error, the merest shadow of pollution, will ruin the one, while the character of the other will be strengthened and embellished—his education properly finished by a little practical acquaintance with forbidden things. Such experience, to him (to use a trite simile), will be like the storm to the oak, which, though it may scatter the leaves, and snap the smaller branches, serves but to rivet the roots, and to harden and condense the fibres of the tree. You would have us encourage our sons to prove all things by their own experience, while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others. Now *I* would have both so to benefit by the experience of others, and the precepts of a higher authority, that they should know beforehand to refuse the evil and choose the good, and require no experimental proofs to teach them the evil of transgression. I would not send a poor girl into the world, unarmed against her foes, and ignorant of the snares that beset her path; nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power or the will to watch and guard herself;—and as for my son—if I thought he would grow up to be what you call a man of the world—one that has '*seen life*,' and glories in his experience, even though he should so far profit by it as to sober down, at length, into a useful and respected member of society—I would rather that he died to-morrow!—rather a thousand times!" she earnestly repeated, pressing her darling to her side and kissing his forehead with intense affection. He had already left his new companion, and been standing for some time beside his mother's knee, looking up into her face, and listening in silent wonder to her incomprehensible discourse.

"Well! you ladies must always have the last word, I suppose," said I, observing her rise, and begin to take leave of my mother.

"You may have as many words as you please,—only I can't stay to hear them."

"No; that is the way: you hear just as much of an argument as you please; and the rest may be spoken to the wind."

"If you are anxious to say anything more on the subject," replied she, as she shook hands with Rose, "you must bring your sister to see me some fine day, and I'll listen, as patiently as you could wish, to whatever you please to say. I would rather be lectured by you than the vicar, because I should have less remorse in telling you, at

the end of the discourse, that I preserve my own opinion precisely the same as at the beginning—as would be the case, I am persuaded, with regard to either logician."

"Yes, of course," replied I, determined to be as provoking as herself; "for when a lady does consent to listen to an argument against her own opinions, she is always predetermined to withstand it—to listen only with her bodily ears, keeping the mental organs resolutely closed against the strongest reasoning."

"Good-morning, Mr. Markham," said my fair antagonist, with a pitying smile; and deigning no further rejoinder, she slightly bowed, and was about to withdraw; but her son, with childish impertinence, arrested her by exclaiming,—"Mamma, you have not shaken hands with Mr. Markham!"

She laughingly turned round and held out her hand. I gave it a spiteful squeeze, for I was annoyed at the continual injustice she had done me from the very dawn of our acquaintance. Without knowing anything about my real disposition and principles, she was evidently prejudiced against me, and seemed bent upon showing me that her opinions respecting me, on every particular, fell far below those I entertained of myself. I was naturally touchy, or it would not have vexed me so much. Perhaps, too, I was a little bit spoiled by my mother and sister, and some other ladies of my acquaintance;—and yet I was by no means a fop—of that I am fully convinced, whether *you* are or not.

CHAPTER IV

Our party, on the 5th of November, passed off very well, in spite of Mrs. Graham's refusal to grace it with her presence. Indeed, it is probable that, had she been there, there would have been less cordiality, freedom, and frolic amongst us than there was without her.

My mother, as usual, was cheerful and chatty, full of activity and good-nature, and only faulty in being too anxious to make her guests happy, thereby forcing several of them to do what their soul abhorred in the way of eating or drinking, sitting opposite the blazing fire, or talking when they would be silent. Nevertheless, they bore it very well, being all in their holiday humours.

Mr. Millward was mighty in important dogmas and sententious jokes, pompous anecdotes and oracular discourses, dealt out for the edification of the whole assembly in general, and of the admiring Mrs. Markham, the polite Mr. Lawrence, the sedate Mary Millward, the quiet Richard Wilson, and the matter-of-fact Robert in particular,—as being the most attentive listeners.

Mrs. Wilson was more brilliant than ever, with her budgets of fresh news and old scandal, strung together with trivial questions and remarks, and oft-repeated observations, uttered apparently for the sole purpose of denying a moment's rest to her inexhaustible organs of speech. She had brought her knitting with her, and it seemed as if her tongue had laid a wager with her fingers, to outdo them in swift and ceaseless motion.

Her daughter Jane was, of course, as graceful and elegant, as witty and seductive, as she could possibly manage to be; for here were all the ladies to outshine, and all the gentlemen to charm,—and Mr. Lawrence, especially, to capture and subdue. Her little arts to effect his subjugation were too subtle and impalpable to attract my observation; but I thought there was a certain *refined* affectation of superiority, and an ungenial self-consciousness about her, that negatived all her advantages; and after she was gone, Rose interpreted to me her various looks, words, and actions with a mingled acuteness and asperity that made me wonder, equally, at the lady's artifice and my sister's penetration, and ask myself if she too had an eye to the squire—but never mind, Halford; she had not.

Richard Wilson, Jane's younger brother, sat in a corner, apparently good-tempered, but silent and shy, desirous to escape observation, but willing enough to listen and observe: and, although somewhat out of his element, he would have been happy enough in his own quiet way, if my mother could only have let him alone; but in her mistaken kindness, she would keep persecuting him with her attentions—pressing upon him all manner of viands, under the notion that he was too bashful to help himself, and obliging him to shout across the room his monosyllabic replies to the numerous questions and observations by which she vainly attempted to draw him into conversation.

Rose informed me that he never would have favoured us with his company but for the importunities of his sister Jane, who was most anxious to show Mr. Lawrence that she had at least one brother more gentlemanly and refined than Robert. That worthy individual she had been equally solicitous to keep away; but he affirmed that he saw no reason why he should not enjoy a crack with Markham and the old lady (my mother was not old, really), and bonny Miss Rose and the parson, as well as the best;—and he was in the right of it too. So he talked common-place with my mother and Rose, and discussed parish affairs with the vicar, farming matters with me, and politics with us both.

Mary Millward was another mute,—not so much tormented with cruel kindness as Dick Wilson, because she had a certain short, decided way of answering and refusing,

and was supposed to be rather sullen than diffident. However that might be, she certainly did not give much pleasure to the company;—nor did she appear to derive much from it. Eliza told me she had only come because her father insisted upon it, having taken it into his head that she devoted herself too exclusively to her household duties, to the neglect of such relaxations and innocent enjoyments as were proper to her age and sex. She seemed to me to be good-humoured enough on the whole. Once or twice she was provoked to laughter by the wit or the merriment of some favoured individual amongst us; and then I observed she sought the eye of Richard Wilson, who sat over against her. As he studied with her father, she had some acquaintance with him, in spite of the retiring habits of both, and I suppose there was a kind of fellow-feeling established between them.

My Eliza was charming beyond description, coquettish without affectation, and evidently more desirous to engage my attention than that of all the room besides. Her delight in having me near her, seated or standing by her side, whispering in her ear, or pressing her hand in the dance, was plainly legible in her glowing face and heaving bosom, however belied by saucy words and gestures. But I had better hold my tongue: if I boast of these things now, I shall have to blush hereafter.

To proceed, then, with the various individuals of our party; Rose was simple and natural as usual, and full of mirth and vivacity.

Fergus was impertinent and absurd; but his impertinence and folly served to make others laugh, if they did not raise himself in their estimation.

And finally (for I omit myself), Mr. Lawrence was gentlemanly and inoffensive to all, and polite to the vicar and the ladies, especially his hostess and her daughter, and Miss Wilson—misguided man; he had not the taste to prefer Eliza Millward. Mr. Lawrence and I were on tolerably intimate terms. Essentially of reserved habits, and but seldom quitting the secluded place of his birth, where he had lived in solitary state since the death of his father, he had neither the opportunity nor the inclination for forming many acquaintances; and, of all he had ever known, I (judging by the results) was the companion most agreeable to his taste. I liked the man well enough, but he was too cold, and shy, and self-contained, to obtain my cordial sympathies. A spirit of candour and frankness, when wholly unaccompanied with coarseness, he admired in others, but he could not acquire it himself. His excessive reserve upon all his own concerns was, indeed, provoking and chilly enough; but I forgave it, from a conviction that it originated less in pride and want of confidence in his friends, than in a certain morbid feeling of delicacy, and a peculiar diffidence, that he was sensible of, but wanted energy to overcome. His heart was like a sensitive plant, that opens for a

moment in the sunshine, but curls up and shrinks into itself at the slightest touch of the finger, or the lightest breath of wind. And, upon the whole, our intimacy was rather a mutual predilection than a deep and solid friendship, such as has since arisen between myself and you, Halford, whom, in spite of your occasional crustiness, I can liken to nothing so well as an old coat, unimpeachable in texture, but easy and loose—that has conformed itself to the shape of the wearer, and which he may use as he pleases, without being bothered with the fear of spoiling it;—whereas Mr. Lawrence was like a new garment, all very neat and trim to look at, but so tight in the elbows, that you would fear to split the seams by the unrestricted motion of your arms, and so smooth and fine in surface that you scruple to expose it to a single drop of rain.

Soon after the arrival of the guests, my mother mentioned Mrs. Graham, regretted she was not there to meet them, and explained to the Millwards and Wilsons the reasons she had given for neglecting to return their calls, hoping they would excuse her, as she was sure she did not mean to be uncivil, and would be glad to see them at any time.—"But she is a very singular lady, Mr. Lawrence," added she; "we don't know what to make of her—but I daresay you can tell us something about her, for she is your tenant, you know,—and she said she knew you a little."

All eyes were turned to Mr. Lawrence. I thought he looked unnecessarily confused at being so appealed to.

"I, Mrs. Markham!" said he; "you are mistaken—I don't—that is—I have seen her, certainly; but I am the last person you should apply to for information respecting Mrs. Graham."

He then immediately turned to Rose, and asked her to favour the company with a song, or a tune on the piano.

"No," said she, "you must ask Miss Wilson: she outshines us all in singing, and music too."

Miss Wilson demurred.

"*She'll* sing readily enough," said Fergus, "if you'll undertake to stand by her, Mr. Lawrence, and turn over the leaves for her."

"I shall be most happy to do so, Miss Wilson; will you allow me?"

She bridled her long neck and smiled, and suffered him to lead her to the instrument, where she played and sang, in her very best style, one piece after another; while he stood patiently by, leaning one hand on the back of her chair, and turning over the leaves of her book with the other. Perhaps he was as much charmed with her

performance as she was. It was all very fine in its way; but I cannot say that it moved me very deeply. There was plenty of skill and execution, but precious little feeling.

But we had not done with Mrs. Graham yet.

“I don’t take wine, Mrs. Markham,” said Mr. Millward, upon the introduction of that beverage; “I’ll take a little of your home-brewed ale. I always prefer your home-brewed to anything else.”

Flattered at this compliment, my mother rang the bell, and a china jug of our best ale was presently brought and set before the worthy gentleman who so well knew how to appreciate its excellences.

“Now THIS is the thing!” cried he, pouring out a glass of the same in a long stream, skilfully directed from the jug to the tumbler, so as to produce much foam without spilling a drop; and, having surveyed it for a moment opposite the candle, he took a deep draught, and then smacked his lips, drew a long breath, and refilled his glass, my mother looking on with the greatest satisfaction.

“There’s nothing like this, Mrs. Markham!” said he. “I always maintain that there’s nothing to compare with your home-brewed ale.”

“I’m sure I’m glad you like it, sir. I always look after the brewing myself, as well as the cheese and the butter—I like to have things well done, while we’re about it.”

“*Quite right*, Mrs. Markham!”

“But then, Mr. Millward, you don’t think it *wrong* to take a little wine now and then—or a little spirits either!” said my mother, as she handed a smoking tumbler of gin-and-water to Mrs. Wilson, who affirmed that wine sat heavy on her stomach, and whose son Robert was at that moment helping himself to a pretty stiff glass of the same.

“By no means!” replied the oracle, with a Jove-like nod; “these things are all blessings and mercies, if we only knew how to make use of them.”

“But Mrs. Graham doesn’t think so. You shall just hear now what she told us the other day—I *told* her I’d tell you.”

And my mother favoured the company with a particular account of that lady’s mistaken ideas and conduct regarding the matter in hand, concluding with, “Now, don’t you think it is wrong?”

“Wrong!” repeated the vicar, with more than common solemnity—“criminal, I should say—criminal! Not only is it making a fool of the boy, but it is despising the gifts of Providence, and teaching him to trample them under his feet.”

He then entered more fully into the question, and explained at large the folly and impiety of such a proceeding. My mother heard him with profoundest reverence; and even Mrs. Wilson vouchsafed to rest her tongue for a moment, and listen in silence, while she complacently sipped her gin-and-water. Mr. Lawrence sat with his elbow on the table, carelessly playing with his half-empty wine-glass, and covertly smiling to himself.

“But don’t you think, Mr. Millward,” suggested he, when at length that gentleman paused in his discourse, “that when a child may be naturally prone to intemperance—by the fault of its parents or ancestors, for instance—some precautions are advisable?” (Now it was generally believed that Mr. Lawrence’s father had shortened his days by intemperance.)

“Some precautions, it may be; but temperance, sir, is one thing, and abstinence another.”

“But I have heard that, with some persons, temperance—that is, moderation—is almost impossible; and if abstinence be an evil (which some have doubted), no one will deny that excess is a greater. Some parents have entirely prohibited their children from tasting intoxicating liquors; but a parent’s authority cannot last for ever; children are naturally prone to hanker after forbidden things; and a child, in such a case, would be likely to have a strong curiosity to taste, and try the effect of what has been so lauded and enjoyed by others, so strictly forbidden to himself—which curiosity would generally be gratified on the first convenient opportunity; and the restraint once broken, serious consequences might ensue. I don’t pretend to be a judge of such matters, but it seems to me, that this plan of Mrs. Graham’s, as you describe it, Mrs. Markham, extraordinary as it may be, is not without its advantages; for here you see the child is delivered at once from temptation; he has no secret curiosity, no hankering desire; he is as well acquainted with the tempting liquors as he ever wishes to be; and is thoroughly disgusted with them, without having suffered from their effects.”

“And is that right, sir? Have I not proven to you how wrong it is—how contrary to Scripture and to reason, to teach a child to look with contempt and disgust upon the blessings of Providence, instead of to use them aright?”

“You may consider laudanum a blessing of Providence, sir,” replied Mr. Lawrence, smiling; “and yet, you will allow that most of us had better abstain from it, even in moderation; but,” added he, “I would not desire you to follow out my simile too closely—in witness whereof I finish my glass.”

“And take another, I hope, Mr. Lawrence,” said my mother, pushing the bottle towards him.

He politely declined, and pushing his chair a little away from the table, leant back towards me—I was seated a trifle behind, on the sofa beside Eliza Millward—and carelessly asked me if I knew Mrs. Graham.

“I have met her once or twice,” I replied.

“What do you think of her?”

“I cannot say that I like her much. She is handsome—or rather I should say distinguished and interesting—in her appearance, but by no means amiable—a woman liable to take strong prejudices, I should fancy, and stick to them through thick and thin, twisting everything into conformity with her own preconceived opinions—too hard, too sharp, too bitter for my taste.”

He made no reply, but looked down and bit his lip, and shortly after rose and sauntered up to Miss Wilson, as much repelled by me, I fancy, as attracted by her. I scarcely noticed it at the time, but afterwards I was led to recall this and other trifling facts, of a similar nature, to my remembrance, when—but I must not anticipate.

We wound up the evening with dancing—our worthy pastor thinking it no scandal to be present on the occasion, though one of the village musicians was engaged to direct our evolutions with his violin. But Mary Millward obstinately refused to join us; and so did Richard Wilson, though my mother earnestly entreated him to do so, and even offered to be his partner.

We managed very well without them, however. With a single set of quadrilles, and several country dances, we carried it on to a pretty late hour; and at length, having called upon our musician to strike up a waltz, I was just about to whirl Eliza round in that delightful dance, accompanied by Lawrence and Jane Wilson, and Fergus and Rose, when Mr. Millward interposed with:—“No, no; I don’t allow that! Come, it’s time to be going now.”

“Oh, no, papa!” pleaded Eliza.

“High time, my girl—high time! Moderation in all things, remember! That’s the plan—‘Let your moderation be known unto all men!’”

But in revenge I followed Eliza into the dimly-lighted passage, where, under pretence of helping her on with her shawl, I fear I must plead guilty to snatching a kiss behind her father’s back, while he was enveloping his throat and chin in the folds of a mighty comforter. But alas! in turning round, there was my mother close beside me. The consequence was, that no sooner were the guests departed, than I was doomed to a very serious remonstrance, which unpleasantly checked the galloping course of my spirits, and made a disagreeable close to the evening.

“My dear Gilbert,” said she, “I wish you wouldn’t do so! You know how deeply I have your advantage at heart, how I love you and prize you above everything else in the world, and how much I long to see you well settled in life—and how bitterly it would grieve me to see you married to that girl—or any other in the neighbourhood. What you *see* in her I don’t know. It isn’t only the want of money that I think about—nothing of the kind—but there’s neither beauty, nor cleverness, nor goodness, nor anything else that’s desirable. If you knew your own value, as I do, you wouldn’t dream of it. Do wait awhile and see! If you bind yourself to her, you’ll repent it all your lifetime when you look round and see how many better there are. Take my word for it, you will.”

“Well, mother, do be quiet!—I hate to be lectured!—I’m not going to marry yet, I tell you; but—dear me! mayn’t I enjoy myself at *all*?”

“Yes, my dear boy, but not in that way. Indeed, you shouldn’t do such things. You would be wronging the girl, if she were what she ought to be; but I assure you she is as artful a little hussy as anybody need wish to see; and you’ll get entangled in her snares before you know where you are. And if you *do* marry her, Gilbert, you’ll break my heart—so there’s an end of it.”

“Well, don’t cry about it, mother,” said I, for the tears were gushing from her eyes; “there, let that kiss efface the one I gave Eliza; don’t abuse her any more, and set your mind at rest; for I’ll promise never—that is, I’ll promise to think twice before I take any important step you seriously disapprove of.”

So saying, I lighted my candle, and went to bed, considerably quenched in spirit.

CHAPTER V

It was about the close of the month, that, yielding at length to the urgent importunities of Rose, I accompanied her in a visit to Wildfell Hall. To our surprise, we were ushered into a room where the first object that met the eye was a painter’s easel, with a table

beside it covered with rolls of canvas, bottles of oil and varnish, palette, brushes, paints, &c. Leaning against the wall were several sketches in various stages of progression, and a few finished paintings—mostly of landscapes and figures.

“I must make you welcome to my studio,” said Mrs. Graham; “there is no fire in the sitting-room to-day, and it is rather too cold to show you into a place with an empty grate.”

And disengaging a couple of chairs from the artistical lumber that usurped them, she bid us be seated, and resumed her place beside the easel—not facing it exactly, but now and then glancing at the picture upon it while she conversed, and giving it an occasional touch with her brush, as if she found it impossible to wean her attention entirely from her occupation to fix it upon her guests. It was a view of Wildfell Hall, as seen at early morning from the field below, rising in dark relief against a sky of clear silvery blue, with a few red streaks on the horizon, faithfully drawn and coloured, and very elegantly and artistically handled.

“I see your heart is in your work, Mrs. Graham,” observed I: “I must beg you to go on with it; for if you suffer our presence to interrupt you, we shall be constrained to regard ourselves as unwelcome intruders.”

“Oh, no!” replied she, throwing her brush on to the table, as if startled into politeness. “I am not so beset with visitors but that I can readily spare a few minutes to the few that do favour me with their company.”

“You have almost completed your painting,” said I, approaching to observe it more closely, and surveying it with a greater degree of admiration and delight than I cared to express. “A few more touches in the foreground will finish it, I should think. But why have you called it Fernley Manor, Cumberland, instead of Wildfell Hall, ——shire?” I asked, alluding to the name she had traced in small characters at the bottom of the canvas.

But immediately I was sensible of having committed an act of impertinence in so doing; for she coloured and hesitated; but after a moment’s pause, with a kind of desperate frankness, she replied:—

“Because I have friends—acquaintances at least—in the world, from whom I desire my present abode to be concealed; and as they might see the picture, and might possibly recognise the style in spite of the false initials I have put in the corner, I take the precaution to give a false name to the place also, in order to put them on a wrong scent, if they should attempt to trace me out by it.”

“Then you don’t intend to keep the picture?” said I, anxious to say anything to change the subject.

“No; I cannot afford to paint for my own amusement.”

“Mamma sends all her pictures to London,” said Arthur; “and somebody sells them for her there, and sends us the money.”

In looking round upon the other pieces, I remarked a pretty sketch of Lindenhope from the top of the hill; another view of the old hall basking in the sunny haze of a quiet summer afternoon; and a simple but striking little picture of a child brooding, with looks of silent but deep and sorrowful regret, over a handful of withered flowers, with glimpses of dark low hills and autumnal fields behind it, and a dull beclouded sky above.

“You see there is a sad dearth of subjects,” observed the fair artist. “I took the old hall once on a moonlight night, and I suppose I must take it again on a snowy winter’s day, and then again on a dark cloudy evening; for I really have nothing else to paint. I have been told that you have a fine view of the sea somewhere in the neighbourhood. Is it true?—and is it within walking distance?”

“Yes, if you don’t object to walking four miles—or nearly so—little short of eight miles, there and back—and over a somewhat rough, fatiguing road.”

“In what direction does it lie?”

I described the situation as well as I could, and was entering upon an explanation of the various roads, lanes, and fields to be traversed in order to reach it, the goings straight on, and turnings to the right and the left, when she checked me with,—

“Oh, stop! don’t tell me now: I shall forget every word of your directions before I require them. I shall not think about going till next spring; and then, perhaps, I may trouble you. At present we have the winter before us, and—”

She suddenly paused, with a suppressed exclamation, started up from her seat, and saying, “Excuse me one moment,” hurried from the room, and shut the door behind her.

Curious to see what had startled her so, I looked towards the window—for her eyes had been carelessly fixed upon it the moment before—and just beheld the skirts of a man’s coat vanishing behind a large holly-bush that stood between the window and the porch.

“It’s mamma’s friend,” said Arthur.

Rose and I looked at each other.

“I don’t know what to make of her at all,” whispered Rose.

The child looked at her in grave surprise. She straightway began to talk to him on indifferent matters, while I amused myself with looking at the pictures. There was one in an obscure corner that I had not before observed. It was a little child, seated on the grass with its lap full of flowers. The tiny features and large blue eyes, smiling through a shock of light brown curls, shaken over the forehead as it bent above its treasure, bore sufficient resemblance to those of the young gentleman before me to proclaim it a portrait of Arthur Graham in his early infancy.

In taking this up to bring it to the light, I discovered another behind it, with its face to the wall. I ventured to take that up too. It was the portrait of a gentleman in the full prime of youthful manhood—handsome enough, and not badly executed; but if done by the same hand as the others, it was evidently some years before; for there was far more careful minuteness of detail, and less of that freshness of colouring and freedom of handling that delighted and surprised me in them. Nevertheless, I surveyed it with considerable interest. There was a certain individuality in the features and expression that stamped it, at once, a successful likeness. The bright blue eyes regarded the spectator with a kind of lurking drollery—you almost expected to see them wink; the lips—a little too voluptuously full—seemed ready to break into a smile; the warmly-tinted cheeks were embellished with a luxuriant growth of reddish whiskers; while the bright chestnut hair, clustering in abundant, wavy curls, trespassed too much upon the forehead, and seemed to intimate that the owner thereof was prouder of his beauty than his intellect—as, perhaps, he had reason to be; and yet he looked no fool.

I had not had the portrait in my hands two minutes before the fair artist returned.

“Only some one come about the pictures,” said she, in apology for her abrupt departure: “I told him to wait.”

“I fear it will be considered an act of impertinence,” I said “to presume to look at a picture that the artist has turned to the wall; but may I ask—”

“It *is* an act of very great impertinence, sir; and therefore I beg you will ask nothing about it, for your curiosity will not be gratified,” replied she, attempting to cover the tartness of her rebuke with a smile; but I could see, by her flushed cheek and kindling eye, that she was seriously annoyed.

“I was only going to ask if you had painted it yourself,” said I, sulkily resigning the picture into her hands; for without a grain of ceremony she took it from me; and quickly restoring it to the dark corner, with its face to the wall, placed the other against it as before, and then turned to me and laughed.

But I was in no humour for jesting. I carelessly turned to the window, and stood looking out upon the desolate garden, leaving her to talk to Rose for a minute or two; and then, telling my sister it was time to go, shook hands with the little gentleman, coolly bowed to the lady, and moved towards the door. But, having bid adieu to Rose, Mrs. Graham presented her hand to me, saying, with a soft voice, and by no means a disagreeable smile,—“Let not the sun go down upon your wrath, Mr. Markham. I’m sorry I offended you by my abruptness.”

When a lady condescends to apologise, there is no keeping one’s anger, of course; so we parted good friends for once; and *this* time I squeezed her hand with a cordial, not a spiteful pressure.

CHAPTER VI

During the next four months I did not enter Mrs. Graham’s house, nor she mine; but still the ladies continued to talk about her, and still our acquaintance continued, though slowly, to advance. As for their talk, I paid but little attention to that (when it related to the fair hermit, I mean), and the only information I derived from it was, that one fine frosty day she had ventured to take her little boy as far as the vicarage, and that, unfortunately, nobody was at home but Miss Millward; nevertheless, she had sat a long time, and, by all accounts, they had found a good deal to say to each other, and parted with a mutual desire to meet again. But Mary liked children, and fond mammas like those who can duly appreciate their treasures.

But sometimes I saw her myself, not only when she came to church, but when she was out on the hills with her son, whether taking a long, purpose-like walk, or—on special fine days—leisurely rambling over the moor or the bleak pasture-lands, surrounding the old hall, herself with a book in her hand, her son gambolling about her; and, on any of these occasions, when I caught sight of her in my solitary walks or rides, or while following my agricultural pursuits, I generally contrived to meet or overtake her, for I rather liked to see Mrs. Graham, and to talk to her, and I decidedly liked to talk to her little companion, whom, when once the ice of his shyness was fairly broken, I found to be a very amiable, intelligent, and entertaining little fellow; and we soon became excellent friends—how much to the gratification of his mamma I cannot undertake to say. I suspected at first that she was desirous of throwing cold water on this growing intimacy—to quench, as it were, the kindling flame of our friendship—but

discovering, at length, in spite of her prejudice against me, that I was perfectly harmless, and even well-intentioned, and that, between myself and my dog, her son derived a great deal of pleasure from the acquaintance that he would not otherwise have known, she ceased to object, and even welcomed my coming with a smile.

As for Arthur, he would shout his welcome from afar, and run to meet me fifty yards from his mother's side. If I happened to be on horseback he was sure to get a canter or a gallop; or, if there was one of the draught horses within an available distance, he was treated to a steady ride upon that, which served his turn almost as well; but his mother would always follow and trudge beside him—not so much, I believe, to ensure his safe conduct, as to see that I instilled no objectionable notions into his infant mind, for she was ever on the watch, and never would allow him to be taken out of her sight. What pleased her best of all was to see him romping and racing with Sancho, while I walked by her side—not, I fear, for love of my company (though I sometimes deluded myself with that idea), so much as for the delight she took in seeing her son thus happily engaged in the enjoyment of those active sports so invigorating to his tender frame, yet so seldom exercised for want of playmates suited to his years: and, perhaps, her pleasure was sweetened not a little by the fact of my being with *her* instead of with *him*, and therefore incapable of doing him any injury directly or indirectly, designedly or otherwise, small thanks to her for that same.

But sometimes, I believe, she really had some little gratification in conversing with me; and one bright February morning, during twenty minutes' stroll along the moor, she laid aside her usual asperity and reserve, and fairly entered into conversation with me, discoursing with so much eloquence and depth of thought and feeling on a subject happily coinciding with my own ideas, and looking so beautiful withal, that I went home enchanted; and on the way (morally) started to find myself thinking that, after all, it would, perhaps, be better to spend one's days with such a woman than with Eliza Millward; and then I (figuratively) blushed for my inconstancy.

On entering the parlour I found Eliza there with Rose, and no one else. The surprise was not altogether so agreeable as it ought to have been. We chatted together a long time, but I found her rather frivolous, and even a little insipid, compared with the more mature and earnest Mrs. Graham. Alas, for human constancy!

"However," thought I, "I ought not to marry Eliza, since my mother so strongly objects to it, and I ought not to delude the girl with the idea that I intended to do so. Now, if this mood continue, I shall have less difficulty in emancipating my affections from her soft yet unrelenting sway; and, though Mrs. Graham might be equally objectionable, I may be permitted, like the doctors, to cure a greater evil by a less, for I shall not fall

seriously in love with the young widow, I think, nor she with me—that's certain—but if I find a little pleasure in her society I may surely be allowed to seek it; and if the star of her divinity be bright enough to dim the lustre of Eliza's, so much the better, but I scarcely can think it."

And thereafter I seldom suffered a fine day to pass without paying a visit to Wildfell about the time my new acquaintance usually left her hermitage; but so frequently was I baulked in my expectations of another interview, so changeable was she in her times of coming forth and in her places of resort, so transient were the occasional glimpses I was able to obtain, that I felt half inclined to think she took as much pains to avoid my company as I to seek hers; but this was too disagreeable a supposition to be entertained a moment after it could conveniently be dismissed.

One calm, clear afternoon, however, in March, as I was superintending the rolling of the meadow-land, and the repairing of a hedge in the valley, I saw Mrs. Graham down by the brook, with a sketch-book in her hand, absorbed in the exercise of her favourite art, while Arthur was putting on the time with constructing dams and breakwaters in the shallow, stony stream. I was rather in want of amusement, and so rare an opportunity was not to be neglected; so, leaving both meadow and hedge, I quickly repaired to the spot, but not before Sancho, who, immediately upon perceiving his young friend, scoured at full gallop the intervening space, and pounced upon him with an impetuous mirth that precipitated the child almost into the middle of the beck; but, happily, the stones preserved him from any serious wetting, while their smoothness prevented his being too much hurt to laugh at the untoward event.

Mrs. Graham was studying the distinctive characters of the different varieties of trees in their winter nakedness, and copying, with a spirited, though delicate touch, their various ramifications. She did not talk much, but I stood and watched the progress of her pencil: it was a pleasure to behold it so dexterously guided by those fair and graceful fingers. But ere long their dexterity became impaired, they began to hesitate, to tremble slightly, and make false strokes, and then suddenly came to a pause, while their owner laughingly raised her face to mine, and told me that her sketch did not profit by my superintendence.

"Then," said I, "I'll talk to Arthur till you've done."

"I should like to have a ride, Mr. Markham, if mamma will let me," said the child.

"What on, my boy?"

"I think there's a horse in that field," replied he, pointing to where the strong black mare was pulling the roller.

“No, no, Arthur; it’s too far,” objected his mother.

But I promised to bring him safe back after a turn or two up and down the meadow; and when she looked at his eager face she smiled and let him go. It was the first time she had even allowed me to take him so much as half a field’s length from her side.

Enthroned upon his monstrous steed, and solemnly proceeding up and down the wide, steep field, he looked the very incarnation of quiet, gleeful satisfaction and delight. The rolling, however, was soon completed; but when I dismounted the gallant horseman, and restored him to his mother, she seemed rather displeased at my keeping him so long. She had shut up her sketch-book, and been, probably, for some minutes impatiently waiting his return.

It was now high time to go home, she said, and would have bid me good-evening, but I was not going to leave her yet: I accompanied her half-way up the hill. She became more sociable, and I was beginning to be very happy; but, on coming within sight of the grim old hall, she stood still, and turned towards me while she spoke, as if expecting I should go no further, that the conversation would end here, and I should now take leave and depart—as, indeed, it was time to do, for “the clear, cold eve” was fast “declining,” the sun had set, and the gibbous moon was visibly brightening in the pale grey sky; but a feeling almost of compassion riveted me to the spot. It seemed hard to leave her to such a lonely, comfortless home. I looked up at it. Silent and grim it frowned before us. A faint, red light was gleaming from the lower windows of one wing, but all the other windows were in darkness, and many exhibited their black, cavernous gulfs, entirely destitute of glazing or framework.

“Do you not find it a desolate place to live in?” said I, after a moment of silent contemplation.

“I do, sometimes,” replied she. “On winter evenings, when Arthur is in bed, and I am sitting there alone, hearing the bleak wind moaning round me and howling through the ruinous old chambers, no books or occupations can repress the dismal thoughts and apprehensions that come crowding in—but it is folly to give way to such weakness, I know. If Rachel is satisfied with such a life, why should not I?—Indeed, I cannot be too thankful for such an asylum, while it is left me.”

The closing sentence was uttered in an under-tone, as if spoken rather to herself than to me. She then bid me good-evening and withdrew.

I had not proceeded many steps on my way homewards when I perceived Mr. Lawrence, on his pretty grey pony, coming up the rugged lane that crossed over the hill-top. I went a little out of my way to speak to him; for we had not met for some time.

“Was that Mrs. Graham you were speaking to just now?” said he, after the first few words of greeting had passed between us.

“Yes.”

“Humph! I thought so.” He looked contemplatively at his horse’s mane, as if he had some serious cause of dissatisfaction with it, or something else.

“Well! what then?”

“Oh, nothing!” replied he. “Only I thought you disliked her,” he quietly added, curling his classic lip with a slightly sarcastic smile.

“Suppose I did; mayn’t a man change his mind on further acquaintance?”

“Yes, of course,” returned he, nicely reducing an entanglement in the pony’s redundant hoary mane. Then suddenly turning to me, and fixing his shy, hazel eyes upon me with a steady penetrating gaze, he added, “Then you *have* changed your mind?”

“I can’t say that I have exactly. No; I think I hold the same opinion respecting her as before—but slightly ameliorated.”

“Oh!” He looked round for something else to talk about; and glancing up at the moon, made some remark upon the beauty of the evening, which I did not answer, as being irrelevant to the subject.

“Lawrence,” said I, calmly looking him in the face, “are you in love with Mrs. Graham?”

Instead of his being deeply offended at this, as I more than half expected he would, the first start of surprise, at the audacious question, was followed by a tittering laugh, as if he was highly amused at the idea.

"*I* in love with her!" repeated he. "What makes you dream of such a thing?"

"From the interest you take in the progress of my acquaintance with the lady, and the changes of my opinion concerning her, I thought you might be jealous."

He laughed again. "Jealous! no. But I thought you were going to marry Eliza Millward."

"You thought wrong, then; I am not going to marry either one or the other—that I know of—"

"Then I think you'd better let them alone."

"Are you going to marry Jane Wilson?"

He coloured, and played with the mane again, but answered—"No, I think not."

"Then you had better let her alone."

"She won't let me alone," he might have said; but he only looked silly and said nothing for the space of half a minute, and then made another attempt to turn the conversation; and this time I let it pass; for he had borne enough: another word on the subject would have been like the last atom that breaks the camel's back.

I was too late for tea; but my mother had kindly kept the teapot and muffin warm upon the hobs, and, though she scolded me a little, readily admitted my excuses; and when I complained of the flavour of the overdrawn tea, she poured the remainder into the slop-basin, and bade Rose put some fresh into the pot, and reboil the kettle, which offices were performed with great commotion, and certain remarkable comments.

"Well!—if it had been me now, I should have had no tea at all—if it had been Fergus, even, he would have to put up with such as there was, and been told to be thankful, for it was far too good for him; but *you*—we can't do too much for you. It's always so—if there's anything particularly nice at table, mamma winks and nods at me to abstain from it, and if I don't attend to that, she whispers, 'Don't eat so much of that, Rose; Gilbert will like it for his supper.'—*I'm* nothing at all. In the parlour, it's 'Come, Rose, put away your things, and let's have the room nice and tidy against they come in; and keep up a good fire; Gilbert likes a cheerful fire.' In the kitchen—'Make that pie a large one, Rose; I daresay the boys'll be hungry; and don't put so much pepper in, they'll not like it, I'm sure'—or, 'Rose, don't put so many spices in the pudding, Gilbert likes it plain,'—or, 'Mind you put plenty of currants in the cake, Fergus liked plenty.' If I say,

‘Well, Mamma, *I* don’t,’ I’m told I ought not to think of myself. ‘You know, Rose, in all household matters, we have only two things to consider, first, what’s proper to be done; and, secondly, what’s most agreeable to the gentlemen of the house—anything will do for the ladies.’”

“And very good doctrine too,” said my mother. “Gilbert thinks so, I’m sure.”

“Very convenient doctrine, for us, at all events,” said I; “but if you would really study my pleasure, mother, you must consider your own comfort and convenience a little more than you do—as for Rose, I have no doubt she’ll take care of herself; and whenever she does make a sacrifice or perform a remarkable act of devotedness, she’ll take good care to let me know the extent of it. But for *you*, I might sink into the grossest condition of self-indulgence and carelessness about the wants of others, from the mere habit of being constantly cared for myself, and having all my wants anticipated or immediately supplied, while left in total ignorance of what is done for me,—if Rose did not enlighten me now and then; and I should receive all your kindness as a matter of course, and never know how much I owe you.”

“Ah! and you never *will* know, Gilbert, till you’re married. Then, when you’ve got some trifling, self-conceited girl like Eliza Millward, careless of everything but her own immediate pleasure and advantage, or some misguided, obstinate woman, like Mrs. Graham, ignorant of her principal duties, and clever only in what concerns her least to know—then you’ll find the difference.”

“It will do me good, mother; I was not sent into the world merely to exercise the good capacities and good feelings of others—was I?—but to exert my own towards them; and when I marry, I shall expect to find more pleasure in making my wife happy and comfortable, than in being made so by her: I would rather give than receive.”

“Oh! that’s all nonsense, my dear. It’s mere boy’s talk that! You’ll soon tire of petting and humouring your wife, be she ever so charming, and *then* comes the trial.”

“Well, then, we must bear one another’s burdens.”

“Then you must fall each into your proper place. You’ll do your business, and she, if she’s worthy of you, will do hers; but it’s your business to please yourself, and hers to please you. I’m sure your poor, dear father was as good a husband as ever lived, and after the first six months or so were over, I should as soon have expected him to fly, as to put himself out of his way to pleasure me. He always said I was a good wife, and did my duty; and he always did his—bless him!—he was steady and punctual, seldom found fault without a reason, always did justice to my good dinners, and hardly ever

spoiled my cookery by delay—and that's as much as any woman can expect of any man."

Is it so, Halford? Is that the extent of *your* domestic virtues; and does your happy wife exact no more?

CHAPTER VII

Not many days after this, on a mild sunny morning—rather soft under foot; for the last fall of snow was only just wasted away, leaving yet a thin ridge, here and there, lingering on the fresh green grass beneath the hedges; but beside them already, the young primroses were peeping from among their moist, dark foliage, and the lark above was singing of summer, and hope, and love, and every heavenly thing—I was out on the hill-side, enjoying these delights, and looking after the well-being of my young lambs and their mothers, when, on glancing round me, I beheld three persons ascending from the vale below. They were Eliza Millward, Fergus, and Rose; so I crossed the field to meet them; and, being told they were going to Wildfell Hall, I declared myself willing to go with them, and offering my arm to Eliza, who readily accepted it in lieu of my brother's, told the latter he might go back, for I would accompany the ladies.

"I beg *your* pardon!" exclaimed he. "It's the ladies that are accompanying me, not I them. You had all had a peep at this wonderful stranger but me, and I could endure my wretched ignorance no longer—come what would, I must be satisfied; so I begged Rose to go with me to the Hall, and introduce me to her at once. She swore she would not, unless Miss Eliza would go too; so I ran to the vicarage and fetched her; and we've come hooked all the way, as fond as a pair of lovers—and now you've taken her from me; and you want to deprive me of my walk and my visit besides. Go back to your fields and your cattle, you lubberly fellow; you're not fit to associate with ladies and gentlemen like us, that have nothing to do but to run snooking about to our neighbours' houses, peeping into their private corners, and scenting out their secrets, and picking holes in their coats, when we don't find them ready made to our hands—you don't understand such refined sources of enjoyment."

"Can't you both go?" suggested Eliza, disregarding the latter half of the speech.

"Yes, both, to be sure!" cried Rose; "the more the merrier—and I'm sure we shall want all the cheerfulness we can carry with us to that great, dark, gloomy room, with its narrow latticed windows, and its dismal old furniture—unless she shows us into her studio again."

So we went all in a body; and the meagre old maid-servant, that opened the door, ushered us into an apartment such as Rose had described to me as the scene of her first introduction to Mrs. Graham, a tolerably spacious and lofty room, but obscurely lighted by the old-fashioned windows, the ceiling, panels, and chimney-piece of grim black oak—the latter elaborately but not very tastefully carved,—with tables and chairs to match, an old bookcase on one side of the fire-place, stocked with a motley assemblage of books, and an elderly cabinet piano on the other.

The lady was seated in a stiff, high-backed arm-chair, with a small round table, containing a desk and a work-basket on one side of her, and her little boy on the other, who stood leaning his elbow on her knee, and reading to her, with wonderful fluency, from a small volume that lay in her lap; while she rested her hand on his shoulder, and abstractedly played with the long, wavy curls that fell on his ivory neck. They struck me as forming a pleasing contrast to all the surrounding objects; but of course their position was immediately changed on our entrance. I could only observe the picture during the few brief seconds that Rachel held the door for our admittance.

I do not think Mrs. Graham was particularly delighted to see us: there was something indescribably chilly in her quiet, calm civility; but I did not talk much to her. Seating myself near the window, a little back from the circle, I called Arthur to me, and he and I and Sancho amused ourselves very pleasantly together, while the two young ladies baited his mother with small talk, and Fergus sat opposite with his legs crossed and his hands in his breeches-pockets, leaning back in his chair, and staring now up at the ceiling, now straight forward at his hostess (in a manner that made me strongly inclined to kick him out of the room), now whistling sotto voce to himself a snatch of a favourite air, now interrupting the conversation, or filling up a pause (as the case might be) with some most impertinent question or remark. At one time it was,—"It, amazes me, Mrs. Graham, how you could choose such a dilapidated, rickety old place as this to live in. If you couldn't afford to occupy the whole house, and have it mended up, why couldn't you take a neat little cottage?"

"Perhaps I was too proud, Mr. Fergus," replied she, smiling; "perhaps I took a particular fancy for this romantic, old-fashioned place—but, indeed, it has many advantages over a cottage—in the first place, you see, the rooms are larger and more airy; in the second place, the unoccupied apartments, which I don't pay for, may serve as lumber-rooms, if I have anything to put in them; and they are very useful for my little boy to run about in on rainy days when he can't go out; and then there is the garden for him to play in, and for me to work in. You see I have effected some little improvement already," continued she, turning to the window. "There is a bed of young vegetables in

that corner, and here are some snowdrops and primroses already in bloom—and there, too, is a yellow crocus just opening in the sunshine."

"But then how can you bear such a situation—your nearest neighbours two miles distant, and nobody looking in or passing by? Rose would go stark mad in such a place. She can't put on life unless she sees half a dozen fresh gowns and bonnets a day—not to speak of the faces within; but you might sit watching at these windows all day long, and never see so much as an old woman carrying her eggs to market."

"I am not sure the loneliness of the place was not one of its chief recommendations. I take no pleasure in watching people pass the windows; and I like to be quiet."

"Oh! as good as to say you wish we would all of us mind our own business, and let you alone."

"No, I dislike an extensive acquaintance; but if I have a few friends, of course I am glad to see them occasionally. No one can be happy in eternal solitude. Therefore, Mr. Fergus, if you choose to enter my house as a friend, I will make you welcome; if not, I must confess, I would rather you kept away." She then turned and addressed some observation to Rose or Eliza.

"And, Mrs. Graham," said he again, five minutes after, "we were disputing, as we came along, a question that you can readily decide for us, as it mainly regarded yourself—and, indeed, we often hold discussions about you; for some of us have nothing better to do than to talk about our neighbours' concerns, and we, the indigenous plants of the soil, have known each other so long, and talked each other over so often, that we are quite sick of that game; so that a stranger coming amongst us makes an invaluable addition to our exhausted sources of amusement. Well, the question, or questions, you are requested to solve—"

"Hold your tongue, Fergus!" cried Rose, in a fever of apprehension and wrath.

"I won't, I tell you. The questions you are requested to solve are these:—First, concerning your birth, extraction, and previous residence. Some will have it that you are a foreigner, and some an Englishwoman; some a native of the north country, and some of the south; some say—"

"Well, Mr. Fergus, I'll tell you. I'm an Englishwoman—and I don't see why any one should doubt it—and I was born in the country, neither in the extreme north nor south of our happy isle; and in the country I have chiefly passed my life, and now I hope you are satisfied; for I am not disposed to answer any more questions at present."

"Except this—"

“No, not one more!” laughed she, and, instantly quitting her seat, she sought refuge at the window by which I was seated, and, in very desperation, to escape my brother’s persecutions, endeavoured to draw me into conversation.

“Mr. Markham,” said she, her rapid utterance and heightened colour too plainly evincing her disquietude, “have you forgotten the fine sea-view we were speaking of some time ago? I think I must trouble you, now, to tell me the nearest way to it; for if this beautiful weather continue, I shall, perhaps, be able to walk there, and take my sketch; I have exhausted every other subject for painting; and I long to see it.”

I was about to comply with her request, but Rose would not suffer me to proceed.

“Oh, don’t tell her, Gilbert!” cried she; “she shall go with us. It’s —— Bay you are thinking about, I suppose, Mrs. Graham? It is a very long walk, too far for you, and out of the question for Arthur. But we were thinking about making a picnic to see it some fine day; and, if you will wait till the settled fine weather comes, I’m sure we shall all be delighted to have you amongst us.”

Poor Mrs. Graham looked dismayed, and attempted to make excuses, but Rose, either compassionating her lonely life, or anxious to cultivate her acquaintance, was determined to have her; and every objection was overruled. She was told it would only be a small party, and all friends, and that the best view of all was from —— Cliffs, full five miles distant.

“Just a nice walk for the gentlemen,” continued Rose; “but the ladies will drive and walk by turns; for we shall have our pony-carriage, which will be plenty large enough to contain little Arthur and three ladies, together with your sketching apparatus, and our provisions.”

So the proposal was finally acceded to; and, after some further discussion respecting the time and manner of the projected excursion, we rose, and took our leave.

But this was only March: a cold, wet April, and two weeks of May passed over before we could venture forth on our expedition with the reasonable hope of obtaining that pleasure we sought in pleasant prospects, cheerful society, fresh air, good cheer and exercise, without the alloy of bad roads, cold winds, or threatening clouds. Then, on a glorious morning, we gathered our forces and set forth. The company consisted of Mrs. and Master Graham, Mary and Eliza Millward, Jane and Richard Wilson, and Rose, Fergus, and Gilbert Markham.

Mr. Lawrence had been invited to join us, but, for some reason best known to himself, had refused to give us his company. I had solicited the favour myself. When I did so, he

hesitated, and asked who were going. Upon my naming Miss Wilson among the rest, he seemed half inclined to go, but when I mentioned Mrs. Graham, thinking it might be a further inducement, it appeared to have a contrary effect, and he declined it altogether, and, to confess the truth, the decision was not displeasing to me, though I could scarcely tell you why.

It was about midday when we reached the place of our destination. Mrs. Graham walked all the way to the cliffs; and little Arthur walked the greater part of it too; for he was now much more hardy and active than when he first entered the neighbourhood, and he did not like being in the carriage with strangers, while all his four friends, mamma, and Sancho, and Mr. Markham, and Miss Millward, were on foot, journeying far behind, or passing through distant fields and lanes.

I have a very pleasant recollection of that walk, along the hard, white, sunny road, shaded here and there with bright green trees, and adorned with flowery banks and blossoming hedges of delicious fragrance; or through pleasant fields and lanes, all glorious in the sweet flowers and brilliant verdure of delightful May. It was true, Eliza was not beside me; but she was with her friends in the pony-carriage, as happy, I trusted, as I was; and even when we pedestrians, having forsaken the highway for a short cut across the fields, beheld the little carriage far away, disappearing amid the green, embowering trees, I did not hate those trees for snatching the dear little bonnet and shawl from my sight, nor did I feel that all those intervening objects lay between my happiness and me; for, to confess the truth, I was too happy in the company of Mrs. Graham to regret the absence of Eliza Millward.

The former, it is true, was most provokingly unsociable at first—seemingly bent upon talking to no one but Mary Millward and Arthur. She and Mary journeyed along together, generally with the child between them;—but where the road permitted, I always walked on the other side of her, Richard Wilson taking the other side of Miss Millward, and Fergus roving here and there according to his fancy; and, after a while, she became more friendly, and at length I succeeded in securing her attention almost entirely to myself—and then I was happy indeed; for whenever she did condescend to converse, I liked to listen. Where her opinions and sentiments tallied with mine, it was her extreme good sense, her exquisite taste and feeling, that delighted me; where they differed, it was still her uncompromising boldness in the avowal or defence of that difference, her earnestness and keenness, that piqued my fancy: and even when she angered me by her unkind words or looks, and her uncharitable conclusions respecting me, it only made me the more dissatisfied with myself for having so unfavourably impressed her, and the more desirous to vindicate my character and disposition in her eyes, and, if possible, to win her esteem.

At length our walk was ended. The increasing height and boldness of the hills had for some time intercepted the prospect; but, on gaining the summit of a steep acclivity, and looking downward, an opening lay before us—and the blue sea burst upon our sight!—deep violet blue—not deadly calm, but covered with glinting breakers—diminutive white specks twinkling on its bosom, and scarcely to be distinguished, by the keenest vision, from the little seamews that sported above, their white wings glittering in the sunshine: only one or two vessels were visible, and those were far away.

I looked at my companion to see what she thought of this glorious scene. She said nothing: but she stood still, and fixed her eyes upon it with a gaze that assured me she was not disappointed. She had very fine eyes, by-the-by—I don't know whether I have told you before, but they were full of soul, large, clear, and nearly black—not brown, but very dark grey. A cool, reviving breeze blew from the sea—soft, pure, salubrious: it waved her drooping ringlets, and imparted a livelier colour to her usually too pallid lip and cheek. She felt its exhilarating influence, and so did I—I felt it tingling through my frame, but dared not give way to it while she remained so quiet. There was an aspect of subdued exhilaration in her face, that kindled into almost a smile of exalted, glad intelligence as her eye met mine. Never had she looked so lovely: never had my heart so warmly cleaved to her as now. Had we been left two minutes longer standing there alone, I cannot answer for the consequences. Happily for my discretion, perhaps for my enjoyment during the remainder of the day, we were speedily summoned to the repast—a very respectable collation, which Rose, assisted by Miss Wilson and Eliza, who, having shared her seat in the carriage, had arrived with her a little before the rest, had set out upon an elevated platform overlooking the sea, and sheltered from the hot sun by a shelving rock and overhanging trees.

Mrs. Graham seated herself at a distance from me. Eliza was my nearest neighbour. She exerted herself to be agreeable, in her gentle, unobtrusive way, and was, no doubt, as fascinating and charming as ever, if I could only have felt it. But soon my heart began to warm towards her once again; and we were all very merry and happy together—as far as I could see—throughout the protracted social meal.

When that was over, Rose summoned Fergus to help her to gather up the fragments, and the knives, dishes, &c., and restore them to the baskets; and Mrs. Graham took her camp-stool and drawing materials; and having begged Miss Millward to take charge of her precious son, and strictly enjoined him not to wander from his new guardian's side, she left us and proceeded along the steep, stony hill, to a loftier, more precipitous eminence at some distance, whence a still finer prospect was to be had,

where she preferred taking her sketch, though some of the ladies told her it was a frightful place, and advised her not to attempt it.

When she was gone, I felt as if there was to be no more fun—though it is difficult to say what she had contributed to the hilarity of the party. No jests, and little laughter, had escaped her lips; but her smile had animated my mirth; a keen observation or a cheerful word from her had insensibly sharpened my wits, and thrown an interest over all that was done and said by the rest. Even my conversation with Eliza had been enlivened by her presence, though I knew it not; and now that she was gone, Eliza's playful nonsense ceased to amuse me—nay, grew wearisome to my soul, and I grew weary of amusing her: I felt myself drawn by an irresistible attraction to that distant point where the fair artist sat and plied her solitary task—and not long did I attempt to resist it: while my little neighbour was exchanging a few words with Miss Wilson, I rose and cannily slipped away. A few rapid strides, and a little active clambering, soon brought me to the place where she was seated—a narrow ledge of rock at the very verge of the cliff, which descended with a steep, precipitous slant, quite down to the rocky shore.

She did not hear me coming: the falling of my shadow across her paper gave her an electric start; and she looked hastily round—any other lady of my acquaintance would have screamed under such a sudden alarm.

"Oh! I didn't know it was you.—Why did you startle me so?" said she, somewhat testily. "I hate anybody to come upon me so unexpectedly."

"Why, what did you take me for?" said I: "if I had known you were so nervous, I would have been more cautious; but—"

"Well, never mind. What did you come for? are they all coming?"

"No; this little ledge could scarcely contain them all."

"I'm glad, for I'm tired of talking."

"Well, then, I won't talk. I'll only sit and watch your drawing."

"Oh, but you know I don't like that."

"Then I'll content myself with admiring this magnificent prospect."

She made no objection to this; and, for some time, sketched away in silence. But I could not help stealing a glance, now and then, from the splendid view at our feet to the elegant white hand that held the pencil, and the graceful neck and glossy raven curls that drooped over the paper.

“Now,” thought I, “if I had but a pencil and a morsel of paper, I could make a lovelier sketch than hers, admitting I had the power to delineate faithfully what is before me.”

But, though this satisfaction was denied me, I was very well content to sit beside her there, and say nothing.

“Are you there still, Mr. Markham?” said she at length, looking round upon me—for I was seated a little behind on a mossy projection of the cliff.—“Why don’t you go and amuse yourself with your friends?”

“Because I am tired of them, like you; and I shall have enough of them to-morrow—or at any time hence; but you I may not have the pleasure of seeing again for I know not how long.”

“What was Arthur doing when you came away?”

“He was with Miss Millward, where you left him—all right, but hoping mamma would not be long away. You didn’t intrust him to me, by-the-by,” I grumbled, “though I had the honour of a much longer acquaintance; but Miss Millward has the art of conciliating and amusing children,” I carelessly added, “if she is good for nothing else.”

“Miss Millward has many estimable qualities, which such as you cannot be expected to perceive or appreciate. Will you tell Arthur that I shall come in a few minutes?”

“If that be the case, I will wait, with your permission, till those few minutes are past; and then I can assist you to descend this difficult path.”

“Thank you—I always manage best, on such occasions, without assistance.”

“But, at least, I can carry your stool and sketch-book.”

She did not deny me this favour; but I was rather offended at her evident desire to be rid of me, and was beginning to repent of my pertinacity, when she somewhat appeased me by consulting my taste and judgment about some doubtful matter in her drawing. My opinion, happily, met her approbation, and the improvement I suggested was adopted without hesitation.

“I have often wished in vain,” said she, “for another’s judgment to appeal to when I could scarcely trust the direction of my own eye and head, they having been so long occupied with the contemplation of a single object as to become almost incapable of forming a proper idea respecting it.”

“That,” replied I, “is only one of many evils to which a solitary life exposes us.”

“True,” said she; and again we relapsed into silence.

About two minutes after, however, she declared her sketch completed, and closed the book.

On returning to the scene of our repast we found all the company had deserted it, with the exception of three—Mary Millward, Richard Wilson, and Arthur Graham. The younger gentleman lay fast asleep with his head pillowed on the lady’s lap; the other was seated beside her with a pocket edition of some classic author in his hand. He never went anywhere without such a companion wherewith to improve his leisure moments: all time seemed lost that was not devoted to study, or exacted, by his physical nature, for the bare support of life. Even now he could not abandon himself to the enjoyment of that pure air and balmy sunshine—that splendid prospect, and those soothing sounds, the music of the waves and of the soft wind in the sheltering trees above him—not even with a lady by his side (though not a very charming one, I will allow)—he must pull out his book, and make the most of his time while digesting his temperate meal, and reposing his weary limbs, unused to so much exercise.

Perhaps, however, he spared a moment to exchange a word or a glance with his companion now and then—at any rate, she did not appear at all resentful of his conduct; for her homely features wore an expression of unusual cheerfulness and serenity, and she was studying his pale, thoughtful face with great complacency when we arrived.

The journey homeward was by no means so agreeable to me as the former part of the day: for now Mrs. Graham was in the carriage, and Eliza Millward was the companion of my walk. She had observed my preference for the young widow, and evidently felt herself neglected. She did not manifest her chagrin by keen reproaches, bitter sarcasms, or pouting sullen silence—any or all of these I could easily have endured, or lightly laughed away; but she showed it by a kind of gentle melancholy, a mild, reproachful sadness that cut me to the heart. I tried to cheer her up, and apparently succeeded in some degree, before the walk was over; but in the very act my conscience reproved me, knowing, as I did, that, sooner or later, the tie must be broken, and this was only nourishing false hopes and putting off the evil day.

When the pony-carriage had approached as near Wildfell Hall as the road would permit—unless, indeed, it proceeded up the long rough lane, which Mrs. Graham would not allow—the young widow and her son alighted, relinquishing the driver’s seat to Rose; and I persuaded Eliza to take the latter’s place. Having put her comfortably in, bid her take care of the evening air, and wished her a kind good-night, I felt considerably relieved, and hastened to offer my services to Mrs. Graham to carry

her apparatus up the fields, but she had already hung her camp-stool on her arm and taken her sketch-book in her hand, and insisted upon bidding me adieu then and there, with the rest of the company. But this time she declined my proffered aid in so kind and friendly a manner that I almost forgave her.

CHAPTER VIII

Six weeks had passed away. It was a splendid morning about the close of June. Most of the hay was cut, but the last week had been very unfavourable; and now that fine weather was come at last, being determined to make the most of it, I had gathered all hands together into the hay-field, and was working away myself, in the midst of them, in my shirt-sleeves, with a light, shady straw hat on my head, catching up armfuls of moist, reeking grass, and shaking it out to the four winds of heaven, at the head of a goodly file of servants and hirelings—intending so to labour, from morning till night, with as much zeal and assiduity as I could look for from any of them, as well to prosper the work by my own exertion as to animate the workers by my example—when lo! my resolutions were overthrown in a moment, by the simple fact of my brother's running up to me and putting into my hand a small parcel, just arrived from London, which I had been for some time expecting. I tore off the cover, and disclosed an elegant and portable edition of "Marmion."

"I guess I know who that's for," said Fergus, who stood looking on while I complacently examined the volume. "That's for Miss Eliza, now."

He pronounced this with a tone and look so prodigiously knowing, that I was glad to contradict him.

"You're wrong, my lad," said I; and, taking up my coat, I deposited the book in one of its pockets, and then put it on (*i.e.* the coat). "Now come here, you idle dog, and make yourself useful for once," I continued. "Pull off your coat, and take my place in the field till I come back."

"Till you come back?—and where are you going, pray?"

"No matter—*where*—the *when* is all that concerns you;—and I shall be back by dinner, at least."

"Oh—oh! and I'm to labour away till then, am I?—and to keep all these fellows hard at it besides? Well, well! I'll submit—for once in a way.—Come, my lads, you must look sharp: *I*'m come to help you now:—and woe be to that man, or woman either, that pauses for a moment amongst you—whether to stare about him, to scratch his head,

or blow his nose—no pretext will serve—nothing but work, work, work in the sweat of your face," &c., &c.

Leaving him thus haranguing the people, more to their amusement than edification, I returned to the house, and, having made some alteration in my toilet, hastened away to Wildfell Hall, with the book in my pocket; for it was destined for the shelves of Mrs. Graham.

"What! then had she and you got on so well together as to come to the giving and receiving of presents?"—Not precisely, old buck; this was my first experiment in that line; and I was very anxious to see the result of it.

We had met several times since the —— Bay excursion, and I had found she was not averse to my company, provided I confined my conversation to the discussion of abstract matters, or topics of common interest;—the moment I touched upon the sentimental or the complimentary, or made the slightest approach to tenderness in word or look, I was not only punished by an immediate change in her manner at the time, but doomed to find her more cold and distant, if not entirely inaccessible, when next I sought her company. This circumstance did not greatly disconcert me, however, because I attributed it, not so much to any dislike of my person, as to some absolute resolution against a second marriage formed prior to the time of our acquaintance, whether from excess of affection for her late husband, or because she had had enough of him and the matrimonial state together. At first, indeed, she had seemed to take a pleasure in mortifying my vanity and crushing my presumption—relentlessly nipping off bud by bud as they ventured to appear; and then, I confess, I was deeply wounded, though, at the same time, stimulated to seek revenge;—but latterly finding, beyond a doubt, that I was not that empty-headed coxcomb she had first supposed me, she had repulsed my modest advances in quite a different spirit. It was a kind of serious, almost sorrowful displeasure, which I soon learnt carefully to avoid awakening.

"Let me first establish my position as a friend," thought I—"the patron and playfellow of her son, the sober, solid, plain-dealing friend of herself, and then, when I have made myself fairly necessary to her comfort and enjoyment in life (as I believe I can), we'll see what next may be effected."

So we talked about painting, poetry, and music, theology, geology, and philosophy: once or twice I lent her a book, and once she lent me one in return: I met her in her walks as often as I could; I came to her house as often as I dared. My first pretext for invading the sanctum was to bring Arthur a little waddling puppy of which Sancho was the father, and which delighted the child beyond expression, and, consequently, could

not fail to please his mamma. My second was to bring him a book, which, knowing his mother's particularity, I had carefully selected, and which I submitted for her approbation before presenting it to him. Then, I brought her some plants for her garden, in my sister's name—having previously persuaded Rose to send them. Each of these times I inquired after the picture she was painting from the sketch taken on the cliff, and was admitted into the studio, and asked my opinion or advice respecting its progress.

My last visit had been to return the book she had lent me; and then it was that, in casually discussing the poetry of Sir Walter Scott, she had expressed a wish to see "Marmion," and I had conceived the presumptuous idea of making her a present of it, and, on my return home, instantly sent for the smart little volume I had this morning received. But an apology for invading the hermitage was still necessary; so I had furnished myself with a blue morocco collar for Arthur's little dog; and that being given and received, with much more joy and gratitude, on the part of the receiver, than the worth of the gift or the selfish motive of the giver deserved, I ventured to ask Mrs. Graham for one more look at the picture, if it was still there.

"Oh, yes! come in," said she (for I had met them in the garden). "It is finished and framed, all ready for sending away; but give me your last opinion, and if you can suggest any further improvement, it shall be—duly considered, at least."

The picture was strikingly beautiful; it was the very scene itself, transferred as if by magic to the canvas; but I expressed my approbation in guarded terms, and few words, for fear of displeasing her. She, however, attentively watched my looks, and her artist's pride was gratified, no doubt, to read my heartfelt admiration in my eyes. But, while I gazed, I thought upon the book, and wondered how it was to be presented. My heart failed me; but I determined not to be such a fool as to come away without having made the attempt. It was useless waiting for an opportunity, and useless trying to concoct a speech for the occasion. The more plainly and naturally the thing was done, the better, I thought; so I just looked out of the window to screw up my courage, and then pulled out the book, turned round, and put it into her hand, with this short explanation:

"You were wishing to see "Marmion," Mrs. Graham; and here it is, if you will be so kind as to take it."

A momentary blush suffused her face—perhaps, a blush of sympathetic shame for such an awkward style of presentation: she gravely examined the volume on both sides; then silently turned over the leaves, knitting her brows the while, in serious

cogitation; then closed the book, and turning from it to me, quietly asked the price of it—I felt the hot blood rush to my face.

“I’m sorry to offend you, Mr. Markham,” said she, “but unless I pay for the book, I cannot take it.” And she laid it on the table.

“Why cannot you?”

“Because,”—she paused, and looked at the carpet.

“Why cannot you?” I repeated, with a degree of irascibility that roused her to lift her eyes and look me steadily in the face.

“Because I don’t like to put myself under obligations that I can never repay—I *am* obliged to you already for your kindness to my son; but his grateful affection and your own good feelings must reward you for that.”

“Nonsense!” ejaculated I.

She turned her eyes on me again, with a look of quiet, grave surprise, that had the effect of a rebuke, whether intended for such or not.

“Then you won’t take the book?” I asked, more mildly than I had yet spoken.

“I will gladly take it, if you will let me pay for it.” I told her the exact price, and the cost of the carriage besides, in as calm a tone as I could command—for, in fact, I was ready to weep with disappointment and vexation.

She produced her purse, and coolly counted out the money, but hesitated to put it into my hand. Attentively regarding me, in a tone of soothing softness, she observed,—“You think yourself insulted, Mr Markham—I wish I could make you understand that—that I—”

“I do understand you, perfectly,” I said. “You think that if you were to accept that trifle from me now, I should presume upon it hereafter; but you are mistaken:—if you will only oblige me by taking it, believe me, I shall build no hopes upon it, and consider this no precedent for future favours:—and it is nonsense to talk about putting yourself under obligations to me when you must know that in such a case the obligation is entirely on my side,—the favour on yours.”

“Well, then, I’ll take you at your word,” she answered, with a most angelic smile, returning the odious money to her purse—“but *remember!*”

“I will remember—what I have said;—but do not you punish my presumption by withdrawing your friendship entirely from me,—or expect me to atone for it by

being *more* distant than before," said I, extending my hand to take leave, for I was too much excited to remain.

"Well, then! let us be as we were," replied she, frankly placing her hand in mine; and while I held it there, I had much difficulty to refrain from pressing it to my lips;—but that would be suicidal madness: I had been bold enough already, and this premature offering had well-nigh given the death-blow to my hopes.

It was with an agitated, burning heart and brain that I hurried homewards, regardless of that scorching noonday sun—forgetful of everything but her I had just left—regretting nothing but her impenetrability, and my own precipitancy and want of tact—fearing nothing but her hateful resolution, and my inability to overcome it—hoping nothing—but halt,—I will not bore you with my conflicting hopes and fears—my serious cogitations and resolves.

CHAPTER IX

Though my affections might now be said to be fairly weaned from Eliza Millward, I did not yet entirely relinquish my visits to the vicarage, because I wanted, as it were, to let her down easy; without raising much sorrow, or incurring much resentment,—or making myself the talk of the parish; and besides, if I had wholly kept away, the vicar, who looked upon my visits as paid chiefly, if not entirely, to himself, would have felt himself decidedly affronted by the neglect. But when I called there the day after my interview with Mrs. Graham, he happened to be from home—a circumstance by no means so agreeable to me now as it had been on former occasions. Miss Millward was there, it is true, but she, of course, would be little better than a nonentity. However, I resolved to make my visit a short one, and to talk to Eliza in a brotherly, friendly sort of way, such as our long acquaintance might warrant me in assuming, and which, I thought, could neither give offence nor serve to encourage false hopes.

It was never my custom to talk about Mrs. Graham either to her or any one else; but I had not been seated three minutes before she brought that lady on to the carpet herself in a rather remarkable manner.

"Oh, Mr. Markham!" said she, with a shocked expression and voice subdued almost to a whisper, "what do you think of these shocking reports about Mrs. Graham?—can you encourage us to disbelieve them?"

"What reports?"

"Ah, now! *you* know!" she slily smiled and shook her head.

"I know nothing about them. What in the world do you mean, Eliza?"

“Oh, don’t ask *me!*—*I* can’t explain it.” She took up the cambric handkerchief which she had been beautifying with a deep lace border, and began to be very busy.

“What is it, Miss Millward? what does she mean?” said I, appealing to her sister, who seemed to be absorbed in the hemming of a large, coarse sheet.

“I don’t know,” replied she. “Some idle slander somebody has been inventing, I suppose. I never heard it till Eliza told me the other day,—but if all the parish dinned it in my ears, I shouldn’t believe a word of it—I know Mrs. Graham too well!”

“Quite right, Miss Millward!—and so do I—whatever it may be.”

“Well,” observed Eliza, with a gentle sigh, “it’s well to have such a comfortable assurance regarding the worth of those we love. I only wish you may not find your confidence misplaced.”

And she raised her face, and gave me such a look of sorrowful tenderness as might have melted my heart, but within those eyes there lurked a something that I did not like; and I wondered how I ever could have admired them—her sister’s honest face and small grey optics appeared far more agreeable. But I was out of temper with Eliza at that moment for her insinuations against Mrs. Graham, which were false, I was certain, whether she knew it or not.

I said nothing more on the subject, however, at the time, and but little on any other; for, finding I could not well recover my equanimity, I presently rose and took leave, excusing myself under the plea of business at the farm; and to the farm I went, not troubling my mind one whit about the possible truth of these mysterious reports, but only wondering what they were, by whom originated, and on what foundations raised, and how they could the most effectually be silenced or disproved.

A few days after this we had another of our quiet little parties, to which the usual company of friends and neighbours had been invited, and Mrs. Graham among the number. She could not now absent herself under the plea of dark evenings or inclement weather, and, greatly to my relief, she came. Without her I should have found the whole affair an intolerable bore; but the moment of her arrival brought new life to the house, and though I might not neglect the other guests for her, or expect to engross much of her attention and conversation to myself alone, I anticipated an evening of no common enjoyment.

Mr. Lawrence came too. He did not arrive till some time after the rest were assembled. I was curious to see how he would comport himself to Mrs. Graham. A slight bow was all that passed between them on his entrance; and having politely greeted the other

members of the company, he seated himself quite aloof from the young widow, between my mother and Rose.

“Did you ever see such art?” whispered Eliza, who was my nearest neighbour. “Would you not say they were perfect strangers?”

“Almost; but what then?”

“What then; why, you can’t pretend to be ignorant?”

“Ignorant of *what?*” demanded I, so sharply that she started and replied,—

“Oh, hush! don’t speak so loud.”

“Well, tell me then,” I answered in a lower tone, “what is it you mean? I hate enigmas.”

“Well, you know, I don’t vouch for the truth of it—indeed, far from it—but haven’t you heard—?”

“I’ve heard *nothing*, except from you.”

“You must be wilfully deaf then, for anyone will tell you that; but I shall only anger you by repeating it, I see, so I had better hold my tongue.”

She closed her lips and folded her hands before her, with an air of injured meekness.

“If you had wished not to anger me, you should have held your tongue from the beginning, or else spoken out plainly and honestly all you had to say.”

She turned aside her face, pulled out her handkerchief, rose, and went to the window, where she stood for some time, evidently dissolved in tears. I was astounded, provoked, ashamed—not so much of my harshness as for her childish weakness. However, no one seemed to notice her, and shortly after we were summoned to the tea-table: in those parts it was customary to sit to the table at tea-time on all occasions, and make a meal of it, for we dined early. On taking my seat, I had Rose on one side of me and an empty chair on the other.

“May I sit by you?” said a soft voice at my elbow.

“If you like,” was the reply; and Eliza slipped into the vacant chair; then, looking up in my face with a half-sad, half-playful smile, she whispered,—“You’re so stern, Gilbert.”

I handed down her tea with a slightly contemptuous smile, and said nothing, for I had nothing to say.

“What have I done to offend you?” said she, more plaintively. “I wish I knew.”

“Come, take your tea, Eliza, and don’t be foolish,” responded I, handing her the sugar and cream.

Just then there arose a slight commotion on the other side of me, occasioned by Miss Wilson’s coming to negotiate an exchange of seats with Rose.

“Will you be so good as to exchange places with me, Miss Markham?” said she; “for I don’t like to sit by Mrs. Graham. If your mamma thinks proper to invite such persons to her house, she cannot object to her daughter’s keeping company with them.”

This latter clause was added in a sort of soliloquy when Rose was gone; but I was not polite enough to let it pass.

“Will you be so good as to tell me what you mean, Miss Wilson?” said I.

The question startled her a little, but not much.

“Why, Mr. Markham,” replied she, coolly, having quickly recovered her self-possession, “it surprises me rather that Mrs. Markham should invite such a person as Mrs. Graham to her house; but, perhaps, she is not aware that the lady’s character is considered scarcely respectable.”

“She is not, nor am I; and therefore you would oblige me by explaining your meaning a little further.”

“This is scarcely the time or the place for such explanations; but I think you can hardly be so ignorant as you pretend—you must know her as well as I do.”

“I think I do, perhaps a little better; and therefore, if you will inform me what you have heard or imagined against her, I shall, perhaps, be able to set you right.”

“Can you tell me, then, who was her husband, or if she ever had any?”

Indignation kept me silent. At such a time and place I could not trust myself to answer.

“Have you never observed,” said Eliza, “what a striking likeness there is between that child of hers and—”

“And whom?” demanded Miss Wilson, with an air of cold, but keen severity.

Eliza was startled; the timidly spoken suggestion had been intended for my ear alone.

“Oh, I beg your pardon!” pleaded she; “I may be mistaken—perhaps I *was* mistaken.” But she accompanied the words with a sly glance of derision directed to me from the corner of her disingenuous eye.

“There’s no need to ask *my* pardon,” replied her friend, “but I see no one here that at all resembles that child, except his mother, and when you hear ill-natured reports, Miss Eliza, I will thank you, that is, I think you will do well, to refrain from repeating them. I presume the person you allude to is Mr. Lawrence; but I think I can assure you that your suspicions, in that respect, are utterly misplaced; and if he has any particular connection with the lady at all (which no one has a right to assert), at least he has (what cannot be said of some others) sufficient sense of propriety to withhold him from acknowledging anything more than a bowing acquaintance in the presence of respectable persons; he was evidently both surprised and annoyed to find her here.”

“Go it!” cried Fergus, who sat on the other side of Eliza, and was the only individual who shared that side of the table with us. “Go it like bricks! mind you don’t leave her one stone upon another.”

Miss Wilson drew herself up with a look of freezing scorn, but said nothing. Eliza would have replied, but I interrupted her by saying as calmly as I could, though in a tone which betrayed, no doubt, some little of what I felt within,—“We have had enough of this subject; if we can only speak to slander our betters, let us hold our tongues.”

“I think you’d better,” observed Fergus, “and so does our good parson; he has been addressing the company in his richest vein all the while, and eyeing you, from time to time, with looks of stern distaste, while you sat there, irreverently whispering and muttering together; and once he paused in the middle of a story or a sermon, I don’t know which, and fixed his eyes upon you, Gilbert, as much as to say, ‘When Mr. Markham has done flirting with those two ladies I will proceed.’”

What more was said at the tea-table I cannot tell, nor how I found patience to sit till the meal was over. I remember, however, that I swallowed with difficulty the remainder of the tea that was in my cup, and ate nothing; and that the first thing I did was to stare at Arthur Graham, who sat beside his mother on the opposite side of the table, and the second to stare at Mr. Lawrence, who sat below; and, first, it struck me that there *was* a likeness; but, on further contemplation, I concluded it was only in imagination.

Both, it is true, had more delicate features and smaller bones than commonly fall to the lot of individuals of the rougher sex, and Lawrence’s complexion was pale and clear, and Arthur’s delicately fair; but Arthur’s tiny, somewhat snubby nose could never become so long and straight as Mr. Lawrence’s; and the outline of his face, though not full enough to be round, and too finely converging to the small, dimpled

chin to be square, could never be drawn out to the long oval of the other's, while the child's hair was evidently of a lighter, warmer tint than the elder gentleman's had ever been, and his large, clear blue eyes, though prematurely serious at times, were utterly dissimilar to the shy hazel eyes of Mr. Lawrence, whence the sensitive soul looked so distrustfully forth, as ever ready to retire within, from the offences of a too rude, too uncongenial world. Wretch that I was to harbour that detestable idea for a moment! Did I not know Mrs. Graham? Had I not seen her, conversed with her time after time? Was I not certain that she, in intellect, in purity and elevation of soul, was immeasurably superior to any of her detractors; that she was, in fact, the noblest, the most adorable, of her sex I had ever beheld, or even imagined to exist? Yes, and I would say with Mary Millward (sensible girl as she was), that if all the parish, ay, or all the world, should din these horrible lies in my ears, I would not believe them, for I knew her better than they.

Meantime, my brain was on fire with indignation, and my heart seemed ready to burst from its prison with conflicting passions. I regarded my two fair neighbours with a feeling of abhorrence and loathing I scarcely endeavoured to conceal. I was rallied from several quarters for my abstraction and ungallant neglect of the ladies; but I cared little for that: all I cared about, besides that one grand subject of my thoughts, was to see the cups travel up to the tea-tray, and not come down again. I thought Mr. Millward never *would* cease telling us that he was no tea-drinker, and that it was highly injurious to keep loading the stomach with slops to the exclusion of more wholesome sustenance, and so give himself time to finish his fourth cup.

At length it was over; and I rose and left the table and the guests without a word of apology—I could endure their company no longer. I rushed out to cool my brain in the balmy evening air, and to compose my mind or indulge my passionate thoughts in the solitude of the garden.

To avoid being seen from the windows I went down a quiet little avenue that skirted one side of the inclosure, at the bottom of which was a seat embowered in roses and honeysuckles. Here I sat down to think over the virtues and wrongs of the lady of Wildfell Hall; but I had not been so occupied two minutes, before voices and laughter, and glimpses of moving objects through the trees, informed me that the whole company had turned out to take an airing in the garden too. However, I nestled up in a corner of the bower, and hoped to retain possession of it, secure alike from observation and intrusion. But no—confound it—there was some one coming down the avenue! Why couldn't they enjoy the flowers and sunshine of the open garden, and leave that sunless nook to me, and the gnats and midges?

But, peeping through my fragrant screen of the interwoven branches to discover who the intruders were (for a murmur of voices told me it was more than one), my vexation instantly subsided, and far other feelings agitated my still unquiet soul; for there was Mrs. Graham, slowly moving down the walk with Arthur by her side, and no one else. Why were they alone? Had the poison of detracting tongues already spread through all; and had they all turned their backs upon her? I now recollected having seen Mrs. Wilson, in the early part of the evening, edging her chair close up to my mother, and bending forward, evidently in the delivery of some important confidential intelligence; and from the incessant wagging of her head, the frequent distortions of her wrinkled physiognomy, and the winking and malicious twinkle of her little ugly eyes, I judged it was some spicy piece of scandal that engaged her powers; and from the cautious privacy of the communication I supposed some person then present was the luckless object of her calumnies: and from all these tokens, together with my mother's looks and gestures of mingled horror and incredulity, I now concluded that object to have been Mrs. Graham. I did not emerge from my place of concealment till she had nearly reached the bottom of the walk, lest my appearance should drive her away; and when I did step forward she stood still and seemed inclined to turn back as it was.

"Oh, don't let us disturb you, Mr. Markham!" said she. "We came here to seek retirement ourselves, not to intrude on your seclusion."

"I am no hermit, Mrs. Graham—though I own it looks rather like it to absent myself in this uncourteous fashion from my guests."

"I feared you were unwell," said she, with a look of real concern.

"I was rather, but it's over now. Do sit here a little and rest, and tell me how you like this arbour," said I, and, lifting Arthur by the shoulders, I planted him in the middle of the seat by way of securing his mamma, who, acknowledging it to be a tempting place of refuge, threw herself back in one corner, while I took possession of the other.

But that word refuge disturbed me. Had their unkindness then really driven her to seek for peace in solitude?

"Why have they left you alone?" I asked.

"It is I who have left them," was the smiling rejoinder. "I was wearied to death with small talk—nothing wears me out like that. I cannot imagine how they *can* go on as they do."

I could not help smiling at the serious depth of her wonderment.

“Is it that they think it a *duty* to be continually talking,” pursued she: “and so never pause to think, but fill up with aimless trifles and vain repetitions when subjects of real interest fail to present themselves, or do they really take a pleasure in such discourse?”

“Very likely they do,” said I; “their shallow minds can hold no great ideas, and their light heads are carried away by trivialities that would not move a better-furnished skull; and their only alternative to such discourse is to plunge over head and ears into the slough of scandal—which is their chief delight.”

“Not all of them, surely?” cried the lady, astonished at the bitterness of my remark.

“No, certainly; I exonerate my sister from such degraded tastes, and my mother too, if you included *her* in your animadversions.”

“I meant no animadversions against any one, and certainly intended no disrespectful allusions to your mother. I have known some sensible persons great adepts in that style of conversation when circumstances impelled them to it; but it is a gift I cannot boast the possession of. I kept up my attention on this occasion as long as I could, but when my powers were exhausted I stole away to seek a few minutes’ repose in this quiet walk. I hate talking where there is no exchange of ideas or sentiments, and no good given or received.”

“Well,” said I, “if ever I trouble you with my loquacity, tell me so at once, and I promise not to be offended; for I possess the faculty of enjoying the company of those I—of my friends as well in silence as in conversation.”

“I don’t quite believe you; but if it were so you would exactly suit me for a companion.”

“I am all you wish, then, in other respects?”

“No, I don’t mean that. How beautiful those little clusters of foliage look, where the sun comes through behind them!” said she, on purpose to change the subject.

And they did look beautiful, where at intervals the level rays of the sun penetrating the thickness of trees and shrubs on the opposite side of the path before us, relieved their dusky verdure by displaying patches of semi-transparent leaves of resplendent golden green.

“I almost wish I were not a painter,” observed my companion.

“Why so? one would think at such a time you would most exult in your privilege of being able to imitate the various brilliant and delightful touches of nature.”

“No; for instead of delivering myself up to the full enjoyment of them as others do, I am always troubling my head about how I could produce the same effect upon canvas; and as that can never be done, it is mere vanity and vexation of spirit.”

“Perhaps you cannot do it to satisfy yourself, but you may and do succeed in delighting others with the result of your endeavours.”

“Well, after all, I should not complain: perhaps few people gain their livelihood with so much pleasure in their toil as I do. Here is some one coming.”

She seemed vexed at the interruption.

“It is only Mr. Lawrence and Miss Wilson,” said I, “coming to enjoy a quiet stroll. They will not disturb us.”

I could not quite decipher the expression of her face; but I was satisfied there was no jealousy therein. What business had I to look for it?

“What sort of a person is Miss Wilson?” she asked.

“She is elegant and accomplished above the generality of her birth and station; and some say she is ladylike and agreeable.”

“I thought her somewhat frigid and rather supercilious in her manner to-day.”

“Very likely she might be so to you. She has possibly taken a prejudice against you, for I think she regards you in the light of a rival.”

“Me! Impossible, Mr. Markham!” said she, evidently astonished and annoyed.

“Well, I know nothing about it,” returned I, rather doggedly; for I thought her annoyance was chiefly against myself.

The pair had now approached within a few paces of us. Our arbour was set snugly back in a corner, before which the avenue at its termination turned off into the more airy walk along the bottom of the garden. As they approached this, I saw, by the aspect of Jane Wilson, that she was directing her companion’s attention to us; and, as well by her cold, sarcastic smile as by the few isolated words of her discourse that reached me, I knew full well that she was impressing him with the idea, that we were strongly attached to each other. I noticed that he coloured up to the temples, gave us one furtive glance in passing, and walked on, looking grave, but seemingly offering no reply to her remarks.

It was true, then, that he *had* some designs upon Mrs. Graham; and, were they honourable, he would not be so anxious to conceal them. *She* was blameless, of course, but he was detestable beyond all count.

While these thoughts flashed through my mind, my companion abruptly rose, and calling her son, said they would now go in quest of the company, and departed up the avenue. Doubtless she had heard or guessed something of Miss Wilson's remarks, and therefore it was natural enough she should choose to continue the *tête-à-tête* no longer, especially as at that moment my cheeks were burning with indignation against my former friend, the token of which she might mistake for a blush of stupid embarrassment. For this I owed Miss Wilson yet another grudge; and still the more I thought upon her conduct the more I hated her.

It was late in the evening before I joined the company. I found Mrs. Graham already equipped for departure, and taking leave of the rest, who were now returned to the house. I offered, nay, begged to accompany her home. Mr. Lawrence was standing by at the time conversing with some one else. He did not look at us, but, on hearing my earnest request, he paused in the middle of a sentence to listen for her reply, and went on, with a look of quiet satisfaction, the moment he found it was to be a denial.

A denial it was, decided, though not unkind. She could not be persuaded to think there was danger for herself or her child in traversing those lonely lanes and fields without attendance. It was daylight still, and she should meet no one; or if she did, the people were quiet and harmless she was well assured. In fact, she would not hear of any one's putting himself out of the way to accompany her, though Fergus vouchsafed to offer his services in case they should be more acceptable than mine, and my mother begged she might send one of the farming-men to escort her.

When she was gone the rest was all a blank or worse. Lawrence attempted to draw me into conversation, but I snubbed him and went to another part of the room. Shortly after the party broke up and he himself took leave. When he came to me I was blind to his extended hand, and deaf to his good-night till he repeated it a second time; and then, to get rid of him, I muttered an inarticulate reply, accompanied by a sulky nod.

"What is the matter, Markham?" whispered he.

I replied by a wrathful and contemptuous stare.

"Are you angry because Mrs. Graham would not let you go home with her?" he asked, with a faint smile that nearly exasperated me beyond control.

But, swallowing down all fiercer answers, I merely demanded,—"What business is it of yours?"

"Why, none," replied he with provoking quietness; "only,"—and he raised his eyes to my face, and spoke with unusual solemnity,—"only let me tell you, Markham, that if you have any designs in that quarter, they will certainly fail; and it grieves me to see you cherishing false hopes, and wasting your strength in useless efforts, for—"

"Hypocrite!" I exclaimed; and he held his breath, and looked very blank, turned white about the gills, and went away without another word.

I had wounded him to the quick; and I was glad of it.

CHAPTER X

When all were gone, I learnt that the vile slander had indeed been circulated throughout the company, in the very presence of the victim. Rose, however, vowed she did not and would not believe it, and my mother made the same declaration, though not, I fear, with the same amount of real, unwavering incredulity. It seemed to dwell continually on her mind, and she kept irritating me from time to time by such expressions as—"Dear, dear, who would have thought it!—Well! I always thought there was something odd about her.—You see what it is for women to affect to be different to other people." And once it was,—

"I misdoubted that appearance of mystery from the very first—I *thought* there would no good come of it; but this is a sad, sad business, to be sure!"

"Why, mother, you said you didn't believe these tales," said Fergus.

"No more I do, my dear; but then, you know, there must be some foundation."

"The foundation is in the wickedness and falsehood of the world," said I, "and in the fact that Mr. Lawrence has been seen to go that way once or twice of an evening—and the village gossips say he goes to pay his addresses to the strange lady, and the scandal-mongers have greedily seized the rumour, to make it the basis of their own infernal structure."

"Well, but, Gilbert, there must be something in her *manner* to countenance such reports."

"Did *you* see anything in her manner?"

"No, certainly; but then, you know, I always said there was something strange about her."

I believe it was on that very evening that I ventured on another invasion of Wildfell Hall. From the time of our party, which was upwards of a week ago, I had been making daily efforts to meet its mistress in her walks; and always disappointed (she must have managed it so on purpose), had nightly kept revolving in my mind some pretext for another call. At length I concluded that the separation could be endured no longer (by this time, you will see, I was pretty far gone); and, taking from the book-case an old volume that I thought she might be interested in, though, from its unsightly and somewhat dilapidated condition, I had not yet ventured to offer it for perusal, I hastened away,—but not without sundry misgivings as to how she would receive me, or how I could summon courage to present myself with so slight an excuse. But, perhaps, I might see her in the field or the garden, and then there would be no great difficulty: it was the formal knocking at the door, with the prospect of being gravely ushered in by Rachel, to the presence of a surprised, uncordial mistress, that so greatly disturbed me.

My wish, however, was not gratified. Mrs. Graham herself was not to be seen; but there was Arthur playing with his frolicsome little dog in the garden. I looked over the gate and called him to me. He wanted me to come in; but I told him I could not without his mother's leave.

"I'll go and ask her," said the child.

"No, no, Arthur, you mustn't do that; but if she's not engaged, just ask her to come here a minute. Tell her I want to speak to her."

He ran to perform my bidding, and quickly returned with his mother. How lovely she looked with her dark ringlets streaming in the light summer breeze, her fair cheek slightly flushed, and her countenance radiant with smiles. Dear Arthur! what did I not owe to you for this and every other happy meeting? Through him I was at once delivered from all formality, and terror, and constraint. In love affairs, there is no mediator like a merry, simple-hearted child—ever ready to cement divided hearts, to span the unfriendly gulf of custom, to melt the ice of cold reserve, and overthrow the separating walls of dread formality and pride.

"Well, Mr. Markham, what is it?" said the young mother, accosting me with a pleasant smile.

"I want you to look at this book, and, if you please, to take it, and peruse it at your leisure. I make no apology for calling you out on such a lovely evening, though it *be* for a matter of no greater importance."

"Tell him to come in, mamma," said Arthur.

“Would you like to come in?” asked the lady.

“Yes; I should like to see your improvements in the garden.”

“And how your sister’s roots have prospered in my charge,” added she, as she opened the gate.

And we sauntered through the garden, and talked of the flowers, the trees, and the book, and then of other things. The evening was kind and genial, and so was my companion. By degrees I waxed more warm and tender than, perhaps, I had ever been before; but still I said nothing tangible, and she attempted no repulse, until, in passing a moss rose-tree that I had brought her some weeks since, in my sister’s name, she plucked a beautiful half-open bud and bade me give it to Rose.

“May I not keep it myself?” I asked.

“No; but here is another for you.”

Instead of taking it quietly, I likewise took the hand that offered it, and looked into her face. She let me hold it for a moment, and I saw a flash of ecstatic brilliance in her eye, a glow of glad excitement on her face—I thought my hour of victory was come—but instantly a painful recollection seemed to flash upon her; a cloud of anguish darkened her brow, a marble paleness blanched her cheek and lip; there seemed a moment of inward conflict, and, with a sudden effort, she withdrew her hand, and retreated a step or two back.

“Now, Mr. Markham,” said she, with a kind of desperate calmness, “I must tell you plainly that I cannot do with this. I like your company, because I am alone here, and your conversation pleases me more than that of any other person; but if you cannot be content to regard me as a friend—a plain, cold, motherly, or sisterly friend—I must beg you to leave me now, and let me alone hereafter: in fact, we must be strangers for the future.”

“I will, then—be your friend, or brother, or anything you wish, if you will only let me continue to see you; but tell me why I cannot be anything more?”

There was a perplexed and thoughtful pause.

“Is it in consequence of some rash vow?”

“It is something of the kind,” she answered. “Some day I may tell you, but at present you had better leave me; and never, Gilbert, put me to the painful necessity of repeating what I have just now said to you,” she earnestly added, giving me her hand in serious kindness. How sweet, how musical my own name sounded in her mouth!

“I will not,” I replied. “But you pardon *this* offence?”

“On condition that you never repeat it.”

“And may I come to see you now and then?”

“Perhaps—occasionally; provided you never abuse the privilege.”

“I make no empty promises, but you shall see.”

“The moment you do our intimacy is at an end, that’s all.”

“And will you always call me Gilbert? It sounds more sisterly, and it will serve to remind me of our contract.”

She smiled, and once more bid me go; and at length I judged it prudent to obey, and she re-entered the house and I went down the hill. But as I went the tramp of horses’ hoofs fell on my ear, and broke the stillness of the dewy evening; and, looking towards the lane, I saw a solitary equestrian coming up. Inclining to dusk as it was, I knew him at a glance: it was Mr. Lawrence on his grey pony. I flew across the field, leaped the stone fence, and then walked down the lane to meet him. On seeing me, he suddenly drew in his little steed, and seemed inclined to turn back, but on second thought apparently judged it better to continue his course as before. He accosted me with a slight bow, and, edging close to the wall, endeavoured to pass on; but I was not so minded. Seizing his horse by the bridle, I exclaimed,—“Now, Lawrence, I will have this mystery explained! Tell me where you are going, and what you mean to do—at once, and distinctly!”

“Will you take your hand off the bridle?” said he, quietly—“you’re hurting my pony’s mouth.”

“You and your pony be—”

“What makes you so coarse and brutal, Markham? I’m quite ashamed of you.”

“You answer my questions—before you leave this spot! I *will* know what you mean by this perfidious duplicity!”

“I shall answer no questions till you let go the bridle,—if you stand till morning.”

“Now then,” said I, unclosing my hand, but still standing before him.

“Ask me some other time, when you can speak like a gentleman,” returned he, and he made an effort to pass me again; but I quickly re-captured the pony, scarce less astonished than its master at such uncivil usage.

“Really, Mr. Markham, this is *too* much!” said the latter. “Can I not go to see my tenant on matters of business, without being assaulted in this manner by—?”

“This is no time for business, sir!—I’ll tell you, now, what I think of your conduct.”

“You’d better defer your opinion to a more convenient season,” interrupted he in a low tone—“here’s the vicar.” And, in truth, the vicar was just behind me, plodding homeward from some remote corner of his parish. I immediately released the squire; and he went on his way, saluting Mr. Millward as he passed.

“What! quarrelling, Markham?” cried the latter, addressing himself to me,—“and about that young widow, I doubt?” he added, reproachfully shaking his head. “But let me tell you, young man” (here he put his face into mine with an important, confidential air), “she’s not worth it!” and he confirmed the assertion by a solemn nod.

“MR. MILLWARD,” I exclaimed, in a tone of wrathful menace that made the reverend gentleman look round—aghast—astounded at such unwonted insolence, and stare me in the face, with a look that plainly said, “What, this to me!” But I was too indignant to apologise, or to speak another word to him: I turned away, and hastened homewards, descending with rapid strides the steep, rough lane, and leaving him to follow as he pleased.

CHAPTER XI

You must suppose about three weeks passed over. Mrs. Graham and I were now established friends—or brother and sister, as we rather chose to consider ourselves. She called me Gilbert, by my express desire, and I called her Helen, for I had seen that name written in her books. I seldom attempted to see her above twice a week; and still I made our meetings appear the result of accident as often as I could—for I found it necessary to be extremely careful—and, altogether, I behaved with such exceeding propriety that she never had occasion to reprove me once. Yet I could not but perceive that she was at times unhappy and dissatisfied with herself or her position, and truly I myself was not quite contented with the latter: this assumption of brotherly nonchalance was very hard to sustain, and I often felt myself a most confounded hypocrite with it all; I saw too, or rather I felt, that, in spite of herself, “I was not indifferent to her,” as the novel heroes modestly express it, and while I thankfully enjoyed my present good fortune, I could not fail to wish and hope for something better in future; but, of course, I kept such dreams entirely to myself.

“Where are you going, Gilbert?” said Rose, one evening, shortly after tea, when I had been busy with the farm all day.

“To take a walk,” was the reply.

“Do you always brush your hat so carefully, and do your hair so nicely, and put on such smart new gloves when you take a walk?”

“Not always.”

“You’re going to Wildfell Hall, aren’t you?”

“What makes you think so?”

“Because you look as if you were—but I wish you wouldn’t go so often.”

“Nonsense, child! I don’t go once in six weeks—what do you mean?”

“Well, but if I were you, I wouldn’t have so much to do with Mrs. Graham.”

“Why, Rose, are you, too, giving in to the prevailing opinion?”

“No,” returned she, hesitatingly—“but I’ve heard so much about her lately, both at the Wilsons’ and the vicarage;—and besides, mamma says, if she were a proper person she would not be living there by herself—and don’t you remember last winter, Gilbert, all that about the false name to the picture; and how she explained it—saying she had friends or acquaintances from whom she wished her present residence to be concealed, and that she was afraid of their tracing her out;—and then, how suddenly she started up and left the room when that person came—whom she took good care not to let us catch a glimpse of, and who Arthur, with such an air of mystery, told us was his mamma’s friend?”

“Yes, Rose, I remember it all; and I can forgive your uncharitable conclusions; for, perhaps, if I did not know her myself, I should put all these things together, and believe the same as you do; but thank God, I do know her; and I should be unworthy the name of a man, if I could believe anything that was said against her, unless I heard it from her own lips.—I should as soon believe such things of you, Rose.”

“Oh, Gilbert!”

“Well, do you think I *could* believe anything of the kind,—whatever the Wilsons and Millwards dared to whisper?”

“I should hope *not* indeed!”

“And why not?—Because I know you—Well, and I know her just as well.”

“Oh, no! you know nothing of her former life; and last year, at this time, you did not know that such a person existed.”

“No matter. There is such a thing as looking through a person’s eyes into the heart, and learning more of the height, and breadth, and depth of another’s soul in one hour than it might take you a lifetime to discover, if he or she were not disposed to reveal it, or if you had not the sense to understand it.”

“Then you *are* going to see her this evening?”

“To be sure I am!”

“But what would mamma say, Gilbert!”

“Mamma needn’t know.”

“But she must know some time, if you go on.”

“Go on!—there’s no going on in the matter. Mrs. Graham and I are two friends—and will be; and no man breathing shall hinder it,—or has a right to interfere between us.”

“But if you knew how they talk you would be more careful, for her sake as well as for your own. Jane Wilson thinks your visits to the old hall but another proof of her depravity—”

“Confound Jane Wilson!”

“And Eliza Millward is quite grieved about you.”

“I hope she is.”

“But I wouldn’t, if I were you.”

“Wouldn’t what?—How do they know that I go there?”

“There’s nothing hid from them: they spy out everything.”

“Oh, I never thought of this!—And so they dare to turn my friendship into food for further scandal against her!—That proves the falsehood of their other lies, at all events, if any proof were wanting.—Mind you contradict them, Rose, whenever you can.”

“But they don’t speak openly to me about such things: it is only by hints and innuendoes, and by what I hear others say, that I knew what they think.”

“Well, then, I won’t go to-day, as it’s getting latish. But oh, deuce take their cursed, envenomed tongues!” I muttered, in the bitterness of my soul.

And just at that moment the vicar entered the room: we had been too much absorbed in our conversation to observe his knock. After his customary cheerful and fatherly

greeting of Rose, who was rather a favourite with the old gentleman, he turned somewhat sternly to me:—

“Well, sir!” said he, “you’re quite a stranger. It is—let—me—see,” he continued, slowly, as he deposited his ponderous bulk in the arm-chair that Rose officiously brought towards him; “it is just—six-weeks—by my reckoning, since you darkened—my—door!” He spoke it with emphasis, and struck his stick on the floor.

“Is it, sir?” said I.

“Ay! It is so!” He added an affirmatory nod, and continued to gaze upon me with a kind of irate solemnity, holding his substantial stick between his knees, with his hands clasped upon its head.

“I have been busy,” I said, for an apology was evidently demanded.

“Busy!” repeated he, derisively.

“Yes, you know I’ve been getting in my hay; and now the harvest is beginning.”

“Humph!”

Just then my mother came in, and created a diversion in my favour by her loquacious and animated welcome of the reverend guest. She regretted deeply that he had not come a little earlier, in time for tea, but offered to have some immediately prepared, if he would do her the favour to partake of it.

“Not any for me, I thank you,” replied he; “I shall be at home in a few minutes.”

“Oh, but do stay and take a little! it will be ready in five minutes.”

But he rejected the offer with a majestic wave of the hand.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll take, Mrs. Markham,” said he: “I’ll take a glass of your excellent ale.”

“With pleasure!” cried my mother, proceeding with alacrity to pull the bell and order the favoured beverage.

“I thought,” continued he, “I’d just look in upon you as I passed, and taste your home-brewed ale. I’ve been to call on Mrs. Graham.”

“Have you, indeed?”

He nodded gravely, and added with awful emphasis—“I thought it incumbent upon me to do so.”

“Really!” ejaculated my mother.

“Why so, Mr. Millward?” asked I.

He looked at me with some severity, and turning again to my mother, repeated,—“I thought it incumbent upon me!” and struck his stick on the floor again. My mother sat opposite, an awe-struck but admiring auditor.

“‘Mrs. Graham,’ said I,” he continued, shaking his head as he spoke, “‘these are terrible reports!’ ‘What, sir?’ says she, affecting to be ignorant of my meaning. ‘It is my—duty—as—your pastor,’ said I, ‘to tell you both everything that I myself see reprehensible in your conduct, and all I have reason to suspect, and what others tell me concerning you.’—So I told her!”

“You did, sir?” cried I, starting from my seat and striking my fist on the table. He merely glanced towards me, and continued—addressing his hostess:—

“It was a painful duty, Mrs. Markham—but I told her!”

“And how did she take it?” asked my mother.

“Hardened, I fear—hardened!” he replied, with a despondent shake of the head; “and, at the same time, there was a strong display of unchastened, misdirected passions. She turned white in the face, and drew her breath through her teeth in a savage sort of way;—but she offered no extenuation or defence; and with a kind of shameless calmness—shocking indeed to witness in one so young—as good as told me that my remonstrance was unavailing, and my pastoral advice quite thrown away upon her—nay, that my very *presence was* displeasing while I spoke such things. And I withdrew at length, too plainly seeing that nothing could be done—and sadly grieved to find her case so hopeless. But I am fully determined, Mrs. Markham, that *my* daughters—shall—not—consort with her. Do you adopt the same resolution with regard to yours!—As for your sons—as for *you*, young man,” he continued, sternly turning to me—

“As for ME, sir,” I began, but checked by some impediment in my utterance, and finding that my whole frame trembled with fury, I said no more, but took the wiser part of snatching up my hat and bolting from the room, slamming the door behind me, with a bang that shook the house to its foundations, and made my mother scream, and gave a momentary relief to my excited feelings.

The next minute saw me hurrying with rapid strides in the direction of Wildfell Hall—to what intent or purpose I could scarcely tell, but I must be moving somewhere, and no other goal would do—I must see her too, and speak to her—that was certain; but what

to say, or how to act, I had no definite idea. Such stormy thoughts—so many different resolutions crowded in upon me, that my mind was little better than a chaos of conflicting passions.

CHAPTER XII

In little more than twenty minutes the journey was accomplished. I paused at the gate to wipe my streaming forehead, and recover my breath and some degree of composure. Already the rapid walking had somewhat mitigated my excitement; and with a firm and steady tread I paced the garden-walk. In passing the inhabited wing of the building, I caught a sight of Mrs. Graham, through the open window, slowly pacing up and down her lonely room.

She seemed agitated and even dismayed at my arrival, as if she thought I too was coming to accuse her. I had entered her presence intending to condole with her upon the wickedness of the world, and help her to abuse the vicar and his vile informants, but now I felt positively ashamed to mention the subject, and determined not to refer to it, unless she led the way.

"I am come at an unseasonable hour," said I, assuming a cheerfulness I did not feel, in order to reassure her; "but I won't stay many minutes."

She smiled upon me, faintly it is true, but most kindly—I had almost said thankfully, as her apprehensions were removed.

"How dismal you are, Helen! Why have you no fire?" I said, looking round on the gloomy apartment.

"It is summer yet," she replied.

"But *we always* have a fire in the evenings, if we can bear it; and you especially require one in this cold house and dreary room."

"You should have come a little sooner, and I would have had one lighted for you: but it is not worth while now—you won't stay many minutes, you say, and Arthur is gone to bed."

"But I have a fancy for a fire, nevertheless. Will you order one, if I ring?"

"Why, Gilbert, you don't *look* cold!" said she, smilingly regarding my face, which no doubt seemed warm enough.

"No," replied I, "but I want to see you comfortable before I go."

“Me comfortable!” repeated she, with a bitter laugh, as if there were something amusingly absurd in the idea. “It suits me better as it is,” she added, in a tone of mournful resignation.

But determined to have my own way, I pulled the bell.

“There now, Helen!” I said, as the approaching steps of Rachel were heard in answer to the summons. There was nothing for it but to turn round and desire the maid to light the fire.

I owe Rachel a grudge to this day for the look she cast upon me ere she departed on her mission, the sour, suspicious, inquisitorial look that plainly demanded, “What are *you* here for, I wonder?” Her mistress did not fail to notice it, and a shade of uneasiness darkened her brow.

“You must not stay long, Gilbert,” said she, when the door was closed upon us.

“I’m not going to,” said I, somewhat testily, though without a grain of anger in my heart against any one but the meddling old woman. “But, Helen, I’ve something to say to you before I go.”

“What is it?”

“No, not now—I don’t know yet precisely what it is, or how to say it,” replied I, with more truth than wisdom; and then, fearing lest she should turn me out of the house, I began talking about indifferent matters in order to gain time. Meanwhile Rachel came in to kindle the fire, which was soon effected by thrusting a red-hot poker between the bars of the grate, where the fuel was already disposed for ignition. She honoured me with another of her hard, inhospitable looks in departing, but, little moved thereby, I went on talking; and setting a chair for Mrs. Graham on one side of the hearth, and one for myself on the other, I ventured to sit down, though half suspecting she would rather see me go.

In a little while we both relapsed into silence, and continued for several minutes gazing abstractedly into the fire—she intent upon her own sad thoughts, and I reflecting how delightful it would be to be seated thus beside her with no other presence to restrain our intercourse—not even that of Arthur, our mutual friend, without whom we had never met before—if only I could venture to speak my mind, and disburden my full heart of the feelings that had so long oppressed it, and which it now struggled to retain, with an effort that it seemed impossible to continue much longer,—and revolving the pros and cons for opening my heart to her there and then, and imploring a return of affection, the permission to regard her thenceforth as my

own, and the right and the power to defend her from the calumnies of malicious tongues. On the one hand, I felt a new-born confidence in my powers of persuasion—a strong conviction that my own fervour of spirit would grant me eloquence—that my very determination—the absolute necessity for succeeding, that I felt must win me what I sought; while, on the other, I feared to lose the ground I had already gained with so much toil and skill, and destroy all future hope by one rash effort, when time and patience might have won success. It was like setting my life upon the cast of a die; and yet I was ready to resolve upon the attempt. At any rate, I would entreat the explanation she had half promised to give me before; I would demand the reason of this hateful barrier, this mysterious impediment to my happiness, and, as I trusted, to her own.

But while I considered in what manner I could best frame my request, my companion, wakened from her reverie with a scarcely audible sigh, and looking towards the window, where the blood-red harvest moon, just rising over one of the grim, fantastic evergreens, was shining in upon us, said,—"Gilbert, it is getting late."

"I see," said I. "You want me to go, I suppose?"

"I think you ought. If my kind neighbours get to know of this visit—as no doubt they will—they will not turn it much to my advantage." It was with what the vicar would doubtless have called a savage sort of smile that she said this.

"Let them turn it as they will," said I. "What are their thoughts to you or me, so long as we are satisfied with ourselves—and each other. Let them go to the deuce with their vile constructions and their lying inventions!"

This outburst brought a flush of colour to her face.

"You have heard, then, what they say of me?"

"I heard some detestable falsehoods; but none but fools would credit them for a moment, Helen, so don't let them trouble you."

"I did not think Mr. Millward a fool, and he believes it all; but however little you may value the opinions of those about you—however little you may esteem them as individuals, it is not pleasant to be looked upon as a liar and a hypocrite, to be thought to practise what you abhor, and to encourage the vices you would discountenance, to find your good intentions frustrated, and your hands crippled by your supposed unworthiness, and to bring disgrace on the principles you profess."

"True; and if I, by my thoughtlessness and selfish disregard to appearances, have at all assisted to expose you to these evils, let me entreat you not only to pardon me, but to

enable me to make reparation; authorise me to clear your name from every imputation: give me the right to identify your honour with my own, and to defend your reputation as more precious than my life!"

"Are you hero enough to unite yourself to one whom you know to be suspected and despised by all around you, and identify your interests and your honour with hers? Think! it is a serious thing."

"I should be proud to do it, Helen!—most happy—delighted beyond expression!—and if that be all the obstacle to our union, it is demolished, and you must—you shall be mine!"

And starting from my seat in a frenzy of ardour, I seized her hand and would have pressed it to my lips, but she as suddenly caught it away, exclaiming in the bitterness of intense affliction,—"No, no, it is not all!"

"What is it, then? You promised I should know some time, and—"

"You shall know some time—but not now—my head aches terribly," she said, pressing her hand to her forehead, "and I must have some repose—and surely I have had misery enough to-day!" she added, almost wildly.

"But it could not harm you to tell it," I persisted: "it would ease your mind; and I should then know how to comfort you."

She shook her head despondingly. "If you knew all, you, too, would blame me—perhaps even more than I deserve—though I have cruelly wronged you," she added in a low murmur, as if she mused aloud.

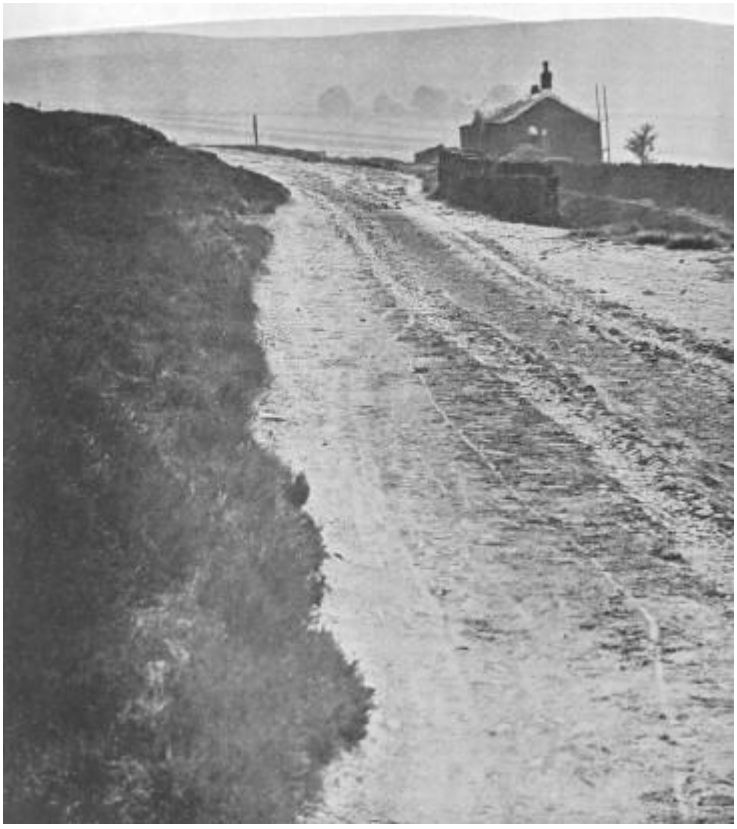
"*You*, Helen? Impossible?"

"Yes, not willingly; for I did not know the strength and depth of your attachment. I thought—at least I endeavoured to think your regard for me was as cold and fraternal as you professed it to be."

"Or as yours?"

"Or as mine—ought to have been—of such a light and selfish, superficial nature, that—"

"*There*, indeed, you wronged me."



“I know I did; and, sometimes, I suspected it then; but I thought, upon the whole, there could be no great harm in leaving your fancies and your hopes to dream themselves to nothing—or flutter away to some more fitting object, while your friendly sympathies remained with me; but if I had known the depth of your regard, the generous, disinterested affection you seem to feel—”

“*Seem*, Helen?”

“That you *do* feel, then, I would have acted differently.”

“How? You *could* not have given me less encouragement, or treated me with greater severity than you did! And if you think you have wronged me by giving me your friendship, and occasionally admitting me to the enjoyment of your company and conversation, when all hopes of closer intimacy were vain—as indeed you always gave me to understand—if you think you have wronged me by this, you are mistaken; for such favours, in themselves alone, are not only delightful to my heart, but purifying, exalting, ennobling to my soul; and I would rather have your friendship than the love of any other woman in the world!”

Little comforted by this, she clasped her hands upon her knee, and glancing upward, seemed, in silent anguish, to implore divine assistance; then, turning to me, she

calmly said,—"To-morrow, if you meet me on the moor about mid-day, I will tell you all you seek to know; and perhaps you will then see the necessity of discontinuing our intimacy—if, indeed, you do not willingly resign me as one no longer worthy of regard."

"I can safely answer no to that: you cannot have such grave confessions to make—you must be trying my faith, Helen."

"No, no, no," she earnestly repeated—"I wish it were so! Thank heaven!" she added, "I have no great crime to confess; but I have more than you will like to hear, or, perhaps, can readily excuse,—and more than I can tell you now; so let me entreat you to leave me!"

"I will; but answer me this one question first;—do you love me?"

"I will not answer it!"

"Then I will conclude you do; and so good-night."

She turned from me to hide the emotion she could not quite control; but I took her hand and fervently kissed it.

"Gilbert, *do* leave me!" she cried, in a tone of such thrilling anguish that I felt it would be cruel to disobey.

But I gave one look back before I closed the door, and saw her leaning forward on the table, with her hands pressed against her eyes, sobbing convulsively; yet I withdrew in silence. I felt that to obtrude my consolations on her then would only serve to aggravate her sufferings.

To tell you all the questionings and conjectures—the fears, and hopes, and wild emotions that jostled and chased each other through my mind as I descended the hill, would almost fill a volume in itself. But before I was half-way down, a sentiment of strong sympathy for her I had left behind me had displaced all other feelings, and seemed imperatively to draw me back: I began to think, "Why am I hurrying so fast in this direction? Can I find comfort or consolation—peace, certainty, contentment, all—or anything that I want at home? and can I leave all perturbation, sorrow, and anxiety behind me there?"

And I turned round to look at the old Hall. There was little besides the chimneys visible above my contracted horizon. I walked back to get a better view of it. When it rose in sight, I stood still a moment to look, and then continued moving towards the gloomy object of attraction. Something called me nearer—nearer still—and why not, pray? Might I not find more benefit in the contemplation of that venerable pile with the full

moon in the cloudless heaven shining so calmly above it—with that warm yellow lustre peculiar to an August night—and the mistress of my soul within, than in returning to my home, where all comparatively was light, and life, and cheerfulness, and therefore inimical to me in my present frame of mind,—and the more so that its inmates all were more or less imbued with that detestable belief, the very *thought* of which made my blood boil in my veins—and how could I endure to hear it openly declared, or cautiously insinuated—which was worse?—I had had trouble enough already, with some babbling fiend that would keep whispering in my ear, "It may be true," till I had shouted aloud, "It is false! I defy you to make me suppose it!"

I could see the red firelight dimly gleaming from her parlour window. I went up to the garden wall, and stood leaning over it, with my eyes fixed upon the lattice, wondering what she was doing, thinking, or suffering now, and wishing I could speak to her but one word, or even catch one glimpse of her, before I went.

I had not thus looked, and wished, and wondered long, before I vaulted over the barrier, unable to resist the temptation of taking one glance through the window, just to see if she were more composed than when we parted;—and if I found her still in deep distress, perhaps I might venture attempt a word of comfort—to utter one of the many things I should have said before, instead of aggravating her sufferings by my stupid impetuosity. I looked. Her chair was vacant: so was the room. But at that moment some one opened the outer door, and a voice—*her* voice—said,—"Come out—I want to see the moon, and breathe the evening air: they will do me good—if anything will."

Here, then, were she and Rachel coming to take a walk in the garden. I wished myself safe back over the wall. I stood, however, in the shadow of the tall holly-bush, which, standing between the window and the porch, at present screened me from observation, but did not prevent me from seeing two figures come forth into the moonlight: Mrs. Graham followed by another—*not* Rachel, but a young man, slender and rather tall. O heavens, how my temples throbbed! Intense anxiety darkened my sight; but I thought—yes, and the voice confirmed it—it was Mr. Lawrence!

"You should not let it worry you so much, Helen," said he; "I will be more cautious in future; and in time—"

I did not hear the rest of the sentence; for he walked close beside her and spoke so gently that I could not catch the words. My heart was splitting with hatred; but I listened intently for her reply. I heard it plainly enough.

“But I must leave this place, Frederick,” she said—“I never can be happy here,—nor anywhere else, indeed,” she added, with a mirthless laugh,—“but I cannot rest here.”

“But where could you find a better place?” replied he, “so secluded—so near me, if you think anything of that.”

“Yes,” interrupted she, “it is all I could wish, if they could only have left me alone.”

“But wherever you go, Helen, there will be the same sources of annoyance. I cannot consent to lose you: I must go with you, or come to you; and there are meddling fools elsewhere, as well as here.”

While thus conversing they had sauntered slowly past me, down the walk, and I heard no more of their discourse; but I saw him put his arm round her waist, while she lovingly rested her hand on his shoulder;—and then, a tremulous darkness obscured my sight, my heart sickened and my head burned like fire: I half rushed, half staggered from the spot, where horror had kept me rooted, and leaped or tumbled over the wall—I hardly know which—but I know that, afterwards, like a passionate child, I dashed myself on the ground and lay there in a paroxysm of anger and despair—how long, I cannot undertake to say; but it must have been a considerable time; for when, having partially relieved myself by a torment of tears, and looked up at the moon, shining so calmly and carelessly on, as little influenced by my misery as I was by its peaceful radiance, and earnestly prayed for death or forgetfulness, I had risen and journeyed homewards—little regarding the way, but carried instinctively by my feet to the door, I found it bolted against me, and every one in bed except my mother, who hastened to answer my impatient knocking, and received me with a shower of questions and rebukes.

“Oh, Gilbert! how *could* you do so? Where *have* you been? Do come in and take your supper. I’ve got it all ready, though you don’t deserve it, for keeping me in such a fright, after the strange manner you left the house this evening. Mr. Millward was quite—Bless the boy! how ill he looks. Oh, gracious! what is the matter?”

“Nothing, nothing—give me a candle.”

“But won’t you take some supper?”

“No; I want to go to bed,” said I, taking a candle and lighting it at the one she held in her hand.

“Oh, Gilbert, how you tremble!” exclaimed my anxious parent. “How white you look! Do tell me what it is? Has anything happened?”

“It’s nothing,” cried I, ready to stamp with vexation because the candle would not light. Then, suppressing my irritation, I added, “I’ve been walking too fast, that’s all. Good-night,” and marched off to bed, regardless of the “Walking too fast! where have you been?” that was called after me from below.

My mother followed me to the very door of my room with her questionings and advice concerning my health and my conduct; but I implored her to let me alone till morning; and she withdrew, and at length I had the satisfaction to hear her close her own door. There was no sleep for me, however, that night as I thought; and instead of attempting to solicit it, I employed myself in rapidly pacing the chamber, having first removed my boots, lest my mother should hear me. But the boards creaked, and she was watchful. I had not walked above a quarter of an hour before she was at the door again.

“Gilbert, why are you not in bed—you said you wanted to go?”

“Confound it! I’m going,” said I.

“But why are you so long about it? You must have something on your mind—”

“For heaven’s sake, let me alone, and get to bed yourself.”

“Can it be that Mrs. Graham that distresses you so?”

“No, no, I tell you—it’s nothing.”

“I wish to goodness it mayn’t,” murmured she, with a sigh, as she returned to her own apartment, while I threw myself on the bed, feeling most undutifully disaffected towards her for having deprived me of what seemed the only shadow of a consolation that remained, and chained me to that wretched couch of thorns.

Never did I endure so long, so miserable a night as that. And yet it was not wholly sleepless. Towards morning my distracting thoughts began to lose all pretensions to coherency, and shape themselves into confused and feverish dreams, and, at length, there followed an interval of unconscious slumber. But then the dawn of bitter recollection that succeeded—the waking to find life a blank, and worse than a blank, teeming with torment and misery—not a mere barren wilderness, but full of thorns and briers—to find myself deceived, duped, hopeless, my affections trampled upon, my angel not an angel, and my friend a fiend incarnate—it was worse than if I had not slept at all.

It was a dull, gloomy morning; the weather had changed like my prospects, and the rain was pattering against the window. I rose, nevertheless, and went out; not to look after the farm, though that would serve as my excuse, but to cool my brain, and regain,

if possible, a sufficient degree of composure to meet the family at the morning meal without exciting inconvenient remarks. If I got a wetting, that, in conjunction with a pretended over-exertion before breakfast, might excuse my sudden loss of appetite; and if a cold ensued, the severer the better—it would help to account for the sullen moods and moping melancholy likely to cloud my brow for long enough.