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[Authors](#)
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[The Tenant of Wildfell Hall](#)

[Anne Bronte](#)

This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 13

'My dear Gilbert, I wish you would try to be a little more amiable,' said my mother one morning after some display of unjustifiable ill-humour on my part. 'You say there is nothing the matter with you, and nothing has happened to grieve you, and yet I never saw anyone so altered as you within these last few days. You haven't a good word for anybody - friends and strangers, equals and inferiors - it's all the same. I do wish you'd try to check it.'

'Check what?'

'Why, your strange temper. You don't know how it spoils you. I'm sure a finer disposition than yours by nature could not be, if you'd let it have fair play: so you've no excuse that way.'

While she thus remonstrated, I took up a book, and laying it open on the table before me, pretended to be deeply absorbed in its perusal, for I was equally unable to justify myself and unwilling to acknowledge my errors; and I wished to have nothing to say on the matter. But my excellent parent went on lecturing, and then came to coaxing, and began to stroke my hair; and I was getting to feel quite a good boy, but my mischievous brother, who was idling about the room, revived my corruption by suddenly calling out, - 'Don't touch him, mother! he'll bite! He's a very tiger in human form. I've given him up for my part - fairly disowned him - cast him off, root and branch. It's as much as my life is worth to come within six yards of him. The other day he nearly fractured my skull for singing a pretty, inoffensive love-song, on purpose to amuse him.'

'Oh, Gilbert! how could you?' exclaimed my mother.

'I told you to hold your noise first, you know, Fergus,' said I.

'Yes, but when I assured you it was no trouble and went on with the next verse, thinking you might like it better, you clutched me by the shoulder and dashed me away, right against the wall there, with such force that I thought I had bitten my tongue in two, and expected to see the place plastered with my brains; and when I put my hand to my head, and found my skull not broken, I thought it was a miracle, and no mistake. But, poor fellow!' added he, with a sentimental sigh - 'his heart's broken - that's the truth of it - and his head's - '

'Will you be silent NOW?' cried I, starting up, and eyeing the fellow so fiercely that my mother, thinking I meant to inflict some grievous bodily injury, laid her hand on my arm, and besought me to let him alone, and he walked leisurely out, with his hands in his pockets, singing provokingly - 'Shall I, because a woman's fair,' &c.

'I'm not going to defile my fingers with him,' said I, in answer to the maternal intercession. 'I wouldn't touch him with the tongs.'

I now recollected that I had business with Robert Wilson, concerning the purchase of a certain field adjoining my farm - a business I had been putting off from day to day; for I had no interest in anything now; and besides, I was misanthropically inclined, and, moreover, had a particular objection to meeting Jane Wilson or her mother; for though I had too good reason, now, to credit their reports concerning Mrs. Graham, I did not like them a bit the better for it - or Eliza Millward either - and the thought of meeting them was the more repugnant to me that I could not, now, defy their seeming calumnies and triumph in my own convictions as before. But to-day I determined to make an effort to return to my duty. Though I found no pleasure in it, it would be less irksome than idleness - at all events it would be more profitable. If life promised no enjoyment within my vocation, at least it offered no allurements out of it; and henceforth I would put my shoulder to the wheel and toil away, like any poor drudge of a cart-horse that was fairly broken in to its labour, and plod through life, not wholly useless if not agreeable, and uncomplaining if not contented with my lot.

Thus resolving, with a kind of sullen resignation, if such a term may be allowed, I wended my way to Ryecote Farm, scarcely expecting to find its owner within at this time of day, but hoping to learn in what part of the premises he was most likely to be found.

Absent he was, but expected home in a few minutes; and I was desired to step into the parlour and wait. Mrs. Wilson was busy in the kitchen, but the room was not empty; and I scarcely checked an involuntary recoil as I entered it; for there sat Miss Wilson chattering with Eliza Millward. However, I determined to be cool and civil. Eliza seemed to have made the same resolution on her part. We had not met since the evening of the tea-party; but there was no visible emotion either of pleasure or pain, no attempt at pathos, no display of injured pride: she was cool in temper, civil in demeanour. There was even an ease and cheerfulness about her air and manner that I made no pretension to; but there was a depth of malice in her too expressive eye that plainly told me I was not forgiven; for, though she no longer hoped to win me to herself, she still hated her rival, and evidently delighted to wreak her spite on me. On the other hand, Miss Wilson was as affable and courteous as heart could wish, and though I was in no very conversable humour myself, the two ladies between them managed to keep up a pretty continuous fire of small talk. But Eliza took advantage of the first convenient pause to ask if I had lately seen Mrs. Graham, in a tone of merely casual inquiry, but with a sidelong glance - intended to be playfully mischievous - really, brimful and running over with malice.

'Not lately,' I replied, in a careless tone, but sternly repelling her odious glances with my eyes; for I was vexed to feel the colour mounting to my forehead, despite my strenuous efforts to appear unmoved.

'What! are you beginning to tire already? I thought so noble a creature would have power to attach you for a year at least!'

'I would rather not speak of her now.'

'Ah! then you are convinced, at last, of your mistake - you have at length discovered that your divinity is not quite the immaculate - '

'I desired you not to speak of her, Miss Eliza.'

'Oh, I beg your pardon! I perceive Cupid's arrows have been too sharp for you: the wounds, being more than skin-deep, are not yet healed, and bleed afresh at every mention of the loved one's name.'

'Say, rather,' interposed Miss Wilson, 'that Mr. Markham feels that name is unworthy to be mentioned in the presence of right-minded females. I wonder, Eliza, you should think of referring to that unfortunate person - you might know the mention of her would be anything but agreeable to any one here present.'

How could this be borne? I rose and was about to clap my hat upon my head and burst away, in wrathful indignation from the house; but recollecting - just in time to save my dignity - the folly of such a proceeding, and how it would only give my fair tormentors a merry laugh at my expense, for the sake of one I acknowledged in my own heart to be unworthy of the slightest sacrifice - though the ghost of my former reverence and love so hung about me still, that I could not bear to hear her name aspersed by others - I merely walked to the window, and having spent a few seconds in vengibly biting my lips and sternly repressing the passionate heavings of my chest, I observed to Miss Wilson, that I could see nothing of her brother, and added that, as my time was precious, it would perhaps be better to call again to-morrow, at some time when I should be sure to find him at home.

'Oh, no!' said she; 'if you wait a minute, he will be sure to come; for he has business at L-' (that was our market-town), 'and will require a little refreshment before he goes.'

I submitted accordingly, with the best grace I could; and, happily, I had not long to wait. Mr. Wilson soon arrived, and, indisposed for business as I was at that moment, and little as I cared for the field or its owner, I forced my attention to the matter in hand, with very creditable determination, and quickly concluded the bargain - perhaps more to the thrifty farmer's satisfaction than he cared to acknowledge. Then, leaving him to the discussion of his substantial 'refreshment,' I gladly quitted the house, and went to look after my reapers.

Leaving them busy at work on the side of the valley, I ascended the hill, intending to visit a corn-field in the more elevated regions, and see when it would be ripe for the sickle. But I did not visit it that day; for, as I approached, I beheld, at no great distance, Mrs. Graham and her son coming down in the opposite direction. They saw me; and Arthur already was running to meet me; but I immediately turned back and walked steadily homeward; for I had fully determined never to encounter his mother again; and regardless of the shrill voice in my ear, calling upon me to 'wait a moment,' I pursued the even tenor of my way; and he soon relinquished the pursuit as hopeless, or was called away by his mother. At all events, when I looked back, five minutes after, not a trace of either was to be seen.

This incident agitated and disturbed me most unaccountably - unless you would account for it by saying that Cupid's arrows not only had been too sharp for me, but they were barbed and deeply rooted, and I had not yet been able to wrench them from my heart. However that be, I was rendered doubly miserable for the remainder of the day.