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

[Anne Bronte](#)

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### Chapter 14

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Next morning, I bethought me, I, too, had business at L-; so I mounted my horse, and set forth on the expedition soon after breakfast. It was a dull, drizzly day; but that was no matter: it was all the more suitable to my frame of mind. It was likely to be a lonely journey; for it was no market-day, and the road I traversed was little frequented at any other time; but that suited me all the better too.

As I trotted along, however, chewing the cud of - bitter fancies, I heard another horse at no great distance behind me; but I never conjectured who the rider might be, or troubled my head about him, till, on slackening my pace to ascend a gentle acclivity, or rather, suffering my horse to slacken his pace into a lazy walk - for, rapt in my own reflections, I was letting it jog on as leisurely as it thought proper - I lost ground, and my fellow- traveller overtook me. He accosted me by name, for it was no stranger - it was Mr. Lawrence! Instinctively the fingers of my whip-hand tingled, and grasped their charge with convulsive energy; but I restrained the impulse, and answering his salutation with a nod, attempted to push on; but he pushed on beside me, and began to talk about the weather and the crops. I gave the briefest possible answers to his queries and observations, and fell back. He fell back too, and asked if my horse was lame. I replied with a look, at which he placidly smiled.

I was as much astonished as exasperated at this singular pertinacity and imperturbable assurance on his part. I had thought the circumstances of our last meeting would have left such an impression on his mind as to render him cold and distant ever after: instead of that, he appeared not only to have forgotten all former offences, but to be impenetrable to all present incivilities. Formerly, the slightest hint, or mere fancied coldness in tone or glance, had sufficed to repulse him: now, positive rudeness could not drive him away. Had he heard of my disappointment; and was he come to witness the result, and triumph in my despair? I grasped my whip with more determined energy than before - but still forbore to raise it, and rode on in silence, waiting for some more tangible cause of offence, before I opened the floodgates of my soul and poured out the dammed-up fury that was foaming and swelling within.

'Markham,' said he, in his usual quiet tone, 'why do you quarrel with your friends, because you have been disappointed in one quarter? You have found your hopes defeated; but how am I to blame for it? I warned you beforehand, you know, but you would not - '

He said no more; for, impelled by some fiend at my elbow, I had seized my whip by the small end, and - swift and sudden as a flash of lightning - brought the other down upon his head. It was not without a feeling of savage satisfaction that I beheld the instant, deadly pallor that overspread his face, and the few red drops that trickled down his forehead, while he reeled a moment in his saddle, and then fell backward to the ground. The pony, surprised to be so strangely relieved of its burden, started and capered, and kicked a little, and then made use of its freedom to go and crop the grass of the hedge-bank: while its master lay as still and silent as a corpse. Had I killed him? - an icy hand seemed to grasp my heart and check its pulsation, as I bent over him, gazing with breathless intensity upon the ghastly, upturned face. But no; he moved his eyelids and uttered a slight groan. I breathed again - he was only stunned by the fall. It served him right - it would teach him better manners in future. Should I help him to his horse? No. For any other combination of offences I would; but his were too unpardonable. He might mount it himself, if he liked - in a while: already he was beginning to stir and look about him - and there it was for him, quietly browsing on the road-side.

So with a muttered execration I left the fellow to his fate, and clapping spurs to my own horse, galloped away, excited by a combination of feelings it would not be easy to analyse; and perhaps, if I did so, the result would not be very creditable to my disposition; for I am not sure that a species of exultation in what I had done was not one principal concomitant.

Shortly, however, the effervescence began to abate, and not many minutes elapsed before I had turned and gone back to look after the fate of my victim. It was no generous impulse - no kind relentings that led me to this - nor even the fear of what might be the consequences to myself, if I finished my assault upon the squire by leaving him thus neglected, and exposed to further injury; it was, simply, the voice of conscience; and I took great credit to myself for attending so promptly to its dictates - and judging the merit of the deed by the sacrifice it cost, I was not far wrong.

Mr. Lawrence and his pony had both altered their positions in some degree. The pony had wandered eight or ten yards further away; and he had managed, somehow, to remove himself from the middle of the road: I found him seated in a recumbent position on the bank, - looking very white and sickly still, and holding his cambric handkerchief (now more red than white) to his head. It must have been a powerful blow; but half the credit - or the blame of it (which you please) must be attributed to the whip, which was garnished with a massive horse's head of plated metal. The grass, being sodden with rain, afforded the young gentleman a rather inhospitable couch; his clothes were considerably bemired; and his hat was rolling in the mud on the other side of the road. But his thoughts seemed chiefly bent upon his pony, on which he was wistfully gazing - half in helpless anxiety, and half in hopeless abandonment to his fate.

I dismounted, however, and having fastened my own animal to the nearest tree, first picked up his hat, intending to clap it on his head; but either he considered his head unfit for a hat, or the hat, in its present condition, unfit for his head; for shrinking away the one, he took the other from my hand, and scornfully cast it aside.

'It's good enough for you,' I muttered.

My next good office was to catch his pony and bring it to him, which was soon accomplished; for the beast was quiet enough in the main, and only winced and flirted a trifle till I got hold of the bridle - but then, I must see him in the saddle.

'Here, you fellow - scoundrel - dog - give me your hand, and I'll help you to mount.'

No; he turned from me in disgust. I attempted to take him by the arm. He shrank away as if there had been contamination in my touch.

'What, you won't! Well! you may sit there till doomsday, for what I care. But I suppose you don't want to lose all the blood in your body - I'll just condescend to bind that up for you.'

'Let me alone, if you please.'

'Humph; with all my heart. You may go to the d-I, if you choose - and say I sent you.'

But before I abandoned him to his fate I flung his pony's bridle over a stake in the hedge, and threw my handkerchief, as his own was now saturated with blood. He took it and cast it back to me in abhorrence and contempt, with all the strength he could muster. It wanted but this to fill the measure of his offences. With execrations not loud but deep I left him to live or die as he could, well satisfied that I had done my duty in attempting to save him - but forgetting how I had erred in bringing him into such a condition, and how insultingly my after-services had been offered - and sullenly prepared to meet the consequences if he should choose to say I had attempted to murder him - which I thought not unlikely, as it seemed probable he was actuated by such spiteful motives in so perseveringly refusing my assistance.

Having remounted my horse, I just looked back to see how he was getting on, before I rode away. He had risen from the ground, and grasping his pony's mane, was attempting to resume his seat in the saddle; but scarcely had he put his foot in the stirrup, when a sickness or dizziness seemed to overpower him: he leant forward a moment, with his head drooped on the animal's back, and then made one more effort, which proving ineffectual, he sank back on the bank, where I left him, reposing his head on the oozy turf, and to all appearance, as calmly reclining as if he had been taking his rest on his sofa at home.

I ought to have helped him in spite of himself - to have bound up the wound he was unable to staunch, and insisted upon getting him on his horse and seeing him safe home; but, besides my bitter indignation against himself, there was the question what to say to his servants - and what to my own family. Either I should have to acknowledge the deed, which would set me down as a madman, unless I acknowledged the motive too - and that seemed impossible - or I must get up a lie, which seemed equally out of the question - especially as Mr. Lawrence would probably reveal the whole truth, and thereby bring me to tenfold disgrace - unless I were villain enough, presuming on the absence of witnesses, to persist in my own version of the case, and make him out a still greater scoundrel than he was. No; he had only received a cut above the temple, and perhaps a few bruises from the fall, or the hoofs of his own pony: that could not kill him if he lay there half the day; and, if he could not help himself, surely some one would be coming by: it would be impossible that a whole day should pass and no one traverse the road but ourselves. As for what he might choose to say hereafter, I would take my chance about it: if he told lies, I would contradict him; if he told the truth, I would bear it as best I could. I was not obliged to enter into explanations further than I thought proper. Perhaps he might choose to be silent on the subject, for fear of raising inquiries as to the cause of the quarrel, and drawing the public attention to his connection with Mrs. Graham, which, whether for her sake or his own, he seemed so very desirous to conceal.

Thus reasoning, I trotted away to the town, where I duly transacted my business, and performed various little commissions for my mother and Rose, with very laudable exactitude, considering the different circumstances of the case. In returning home, I was troubled with sundry misgivings about the unfortunate Lawrence. The question, What if I should find him lying still on the damp earth, fairly dying of cold and exhaustion - or already stark and chill? thrust itself most unpleasantly upon my mind, and the appalling possibility pictured itself with painful vividness to my imagination as I approached the spot where I had left him. But no, thank heaven, both man and horse were gone, and nothing was left to witness against me but two objects - unpleasant enough in themselves to be sure, and presenting a very ugly, not to say murderous appearance - in one place, the hat saturated with rain and coated with mud, indented and broken above the brim by that villainous whip-handle; in another, the crimson handkerchief, soaking in a deeply tintured pool of water - for much rain had fallen in the interim.

Bad news flies fast: it was hardly four o'clock when I got home, but my mother gravely accosted me with - 'Oh, Gilbert! - Such an accident! Rose has been shopping in the village, and she's heard that Mr. Lawrence has been thrown from his horse and brought home dying!'

This shocked me a trifle, as you may suppose; but I was comforted to hear that he had frightfully fractured his skull and broken a leg; for, assured of the falsehood of this, I trusted the rest of the story was equally exaggerated; and when I heard my mother and sister so feelingly deploring his condition, I had considerable difficulty in preventing myself from telling them the real extent of the injuries, as far as I knew them.

'You must go and see him to-morrow,' said my mother.

'Or to-day,' suggested Rose: 'there's plenty of time; and you can have the pony, as your horse is tired. Won't you, Gilbert - as soon as you've had something to eat?'

'No, no - how can we tell that it isn't all a false report? It's highly im-'

'Oh, I'm sure it isn't; for the village is all alive about it; and I saw two people that had seen others that had seen the man that found him. That sounds far-fetched; but it isn't so when you think of it.'

'Well, but Lawrence is a good rider; it is not likely he would fall from his horse at all; and if he did, it is highly improbable he would break his bones in that way. It must be a gross exaggeration at least.'

'No; but the horse kicked him - or something.'

'What, his quiet little pony?'

'How do you know it was that?'

'He seldom rides any other.'

'At any rate,' said my mother, 'you will call to-morrow. Whether it be true or false, exaggerated or otherwise, we shall like to know how he is.'

'Fergus may go.'

'Why not you?'

'He has more time. I am busy just now.'

'Oh! but, Gilbert, how can you be so composed about it? You won't mind business for an hour or two in a case of this sort, when your friend is at the point of death.'

'He is not, I tell you.'

'For anything you know, he may be: you can't tell till you have seen him. At all events, he must have met with some terrible accident, and you ought to see him: he'll take it very unkind if you don't.'

'Confound it! I can't. He and I have not been on good terms of late.'

'Oh, my dear boy! Surely, surely you are not so unforgiving as to carry your little differences to such a length as -'

'Little differences, indeed!' I muttered.

'Well, but only remember the occasion. Think how - '

'Well, well, don't bother me now - I'll see about it,' I replied.

And my seeing about it was to send Fergus next morning, with my mother's compliments, to make the requisite inquiries; for, of course, my going was out of the question - or sending a message either. He brought back intelligence that the young squire was laid up with the complicated evils of a broken head and certain contusions (occasioned by a fall - of which he did not trouble himself to relate the particulars - and the subsequent misconduct of his horse), and a severe cold, the consequence of lying on the wet ground in the rain; but there were no broken bones, and no immediate prospects of dissolution.

It was evident, then, that for Mrs. Graham's sake it was not his intention to criminate me.