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

[Anne Bronte](#)

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### Chapter 30

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On the following morning I received a few lines from him myself, confirming Hargrave's intimations respecting his approaching return. And he did come next week, but in a condition of body and mind even worse than before. I did not, however, intend to pass over his derelictions this time without a remark; I found it would not do. But the first day he was weary with his journey, and I was glad to get him back: I would not upbraid him then; I would wait till to-morrow. Next morning he was weary still: I would wait a little longer. But at dinner, when, after breakfasting at twelve o'clock on a bottle of soda-water and a cup of strong coffee, and lunching at two on another bottle of soda-water mingled with brandy, he was finding fault with everything on the table, and declaring we must change our cook, I thought the time was come.

'It is the same cook as we had before you went, Arthur,' said I. 'You were generally pretty well satisfied with her then.'

'You must have been letting her get into slovenly habits, then, while I was away. It is enough to poison one, eating such a disgusting mess!' And he pettishly pushed away his plate, and leant back despairingly in his chair.

'I think it is you that are changed, not she,' said I, but with the utmost gentleness, for I did not wish to irritate him.

'It may be so,' he replied carelessly, as he seized a tumbler of wine and water, adding, when he had tossed it off, 'for I have an infernal fire in my veins, that all the waters of the ocean cannot quench!'

'What kindled it?' I was about to ask, but at that moment the butler entered and began to take away the things.

'Be quick, Benson; do have done with that infernal clatter!' cried his master. 'And don't bring the cheese, unless you want to make me sick outright!'

Benson, in some surprise, removed the cheese, and did his best to effect a quiet and speedy clearance of the rest; but, unfortunately, there was a rumple in the carpet, caused by the hasty pushing back of his master's chair, at which he tripped and stumbled, causing a rather alarming concussion with the trayful of crockery in his hands, but no positive damage, save the fall and breaking of a sauce tureen; but, to my unspeakable shame and dismay, Arthur turned furiously around upon him, and swore at him with savage coarseness. The poor man turned pale, and visibly trembled as he stooped to pick up the fragments.

'He couldn't help it, Arthur,' said I; 'the carpet caught his foot, and there's no great harm done. Never mind the pieces now, Benson; you can clear them away afterwards.'

Glad to be released, Benson expeditiously set out the dessert and withdrew.

'What could you mean, Helen, by taking the servant's part against me,' said Arthur, as soon as the door was closed, 'when you knew I was distracted?'

'I did not know you were distracted, Arthur; and the poor man was quite frightened and hurt at your sudden explosion.'

'Poor man, indeed! and do you think I could stop to consider the feelings of an insensate brute like that, when my own nerves were racked and torn to pieces by his confounded blunders?'

'I never heard you complain of your nerves before.'

'And why shouldn't I have nerves as well as you?'

'Oh, I don't dispute your claim to their possession, but I never complain of mine.'

'No, how should you, when you never do anything to try them?'

'Then why do you try yours, Arthur?'

'Do you think I have nothing to do but to stay at home and take care of myself like a woman?'

'Is it impossible, then, to take care of yourself like a man when you go abroad? You told me that you could, and would too; and you promised - '

'Come, come, Helen, don't begin with that nonsense now; I can't bear it.'

'Can't bear what? - to be reminded of the promises you have broken?'

'Helen, you are cruel. If you knew how my heart throbbed, and how every nerve thrilled through me while you spoke, you would spare me. You can pity a dolt of a servant for breaking a dish; but you have no compassion for me when my head is split in two and all on fire with this consuming fever.'

He leant his head on his hand, and sighed. I went to him and put my hand on his forehead. It was burning indeed.

'Then come with me into the drawing-room, Arthur; and don't take any more wine: you have taken several glasses since dinner, and eaten next to nothing all the day. How can that make you better?'

With some coaxing and persuasion, I got him to leave the table. When the baby was brought I tried to amuse him with that; but poor little Arthur was cutting his teeth, and his father could not bear his complaints: sentence of immediate banishment was passed upon him on the first indication of fretfulness; and because, in the course of the

evening, I went to share his exile for a little while, I was reproached, on my return, for preferring my child to my husband. I forsook the latter reclining on the sofa just as he had left him.

'Well!' exclaimed the injured man, in a tone of pseudo-resignation. 'I thought I wouldn't send for you; I thought I'd just see how long it would please you to leave me alone.'

'I have not been very long, have I, Arthur? I have not been an hour, I'm sure.'

'Oh, of course, an hour is nothing to you, so pleasantly employed; but to me -'

'It has not been pleasantly employed,' interrupted I. 'I have been nursing our poor little baby, who is very far from well, and I could not leave him till I got him to sleep.'

'Oh, to be sure, you're overflowing with kindness and pity for everything but me.'

'And why should I pity you? What is the matter with you?'

'Well! that passes everything! After all the wear and tear that I've had, when I come home sick and weary, longing for comfort, and expecting to find attention and kindness, at least from my wife, she calmly asks what is the matter with me!'

'There is nothing the matter with you,' returned I, 'except what you have wilfully brought upon yourself, against my earnest exhortation and entreaty.'

'Now, Helen,' said he emphatically, half rising from his recumbent posture, 'if you bother me with another word, I'll ring the bell and order six bottles of wine, and, by heaven, I'll drink them dry before I stir from this place!'

I said no more, but sat down before the table and drew a book towards me.

'Do let me have quietness at least!' continued he, 'if you deny me every other comfort;' and sinking back into his former position, with an impatient expiration between a sigh and a groan, he languidly closed his eyes, as if to sleep.

What the book was that lay open on the table before me, I cannot tell, for I never looked at it. With an elbow on each side of it, and my hands clasped before my eyes, I delivered myself up to silent weeping. But Arthur was not asleep: at the first slight sob, he raised his head and looked round, impatiently exclaiming, 'What are you crying for, Helen? What the deuce is the matter now?'

'I'm crying for you, Arthur,' I replied, speedily drying my tears; and starting up, I threw myself on my knees before him, and clasping his nerveless hand between my own, continued: 'Don't you know that you are a part of myself? And do you think you can injure and degrade yourself, and I not feel it?'

'Degrade myself, Helen?'

'Yes, degrade! What have you been doing all this time?'

'You'd better not ask,' said he, with a faint smile.

'And you had better not tell; but you cannot deny that you have degraded yourself miserably. You have shamefully wronged yourself, body and soul, and me too; and I can't endure it quietly, and I won't!'

'Well, don't squeeze my hand so frantically, and don't agitate me so, for heaven's sake! Oh, Hattersley! you were right: this woman will be the death of me, with her keen feelings and her interesting force of character. There, there, do spare me a little.'

'Arthur, you must repent!' cried I, in a frenzy of desperation, throwing my arms around him and burying my face in his bosom. 'You shall say you are sorry for what you have done!'

'Well, well, I am.'

'You are not! you'll do it again.'

'I shall never live to do it again if you treat me so savagely,' replied he, pushing me from him. 'You've nearly squeezed the breath out of my body.' He pressed his hand to his heart, and looked really agitated and ill.

'Now get me a glass of wine,' said he, 'to remedy what you've done, you she tiger! I'm almost ready to faint.'

I flew to get the required remedy. It seemed to revive him considerably.

'What a shame it is,' said I, as I took the empty glass from his hand, 'for a strong young man like you to reduce yourself to such a state!'

'If you knew all, my girl, you'd say rather, "What a wonder it is you can bear it so well as you do!" I've lived more in these four months, Helen, than you have in the whole course of your existence, or will to the end of your days, if they numbered a hundred years; so I must expect to pay for it in some shape.'

'You will have to pay a higher price than you anticipate, if you don't take care: there will be the total loss of your own health, and of my affection too, if that is of any value to you.'

'What! you're at that game of threatening me with the loss of your affection again, are you? I think it couldn't have been very genuine stuff to begin with, if it's so easily demolished. If you don't mind, my pretty tyrant, you'll make me regret my choice in good earnest, and envy my friend Hattersley his meek little wife: she's quite a pattern to her sex, Helen. He had her with him in London all the season, and she was no trouble at all. He might amuse himself just as he pleased, in regular bachelor style, and she never complained of neglect; he might come home at any hour of the night or morning, or not come home at all; be sullen, sober, or glorious drunk; and play the fool or the madman to his own heart's desire, without any fear or botheration. She never gives him a word of reproach or complaint, do what he will. He says there's not such a jewel in all England, and swears he wouldn't take a kingdom for her.'

'But he makes her life a curse to her.'

'Not he! She has no will but his, and is always contented and happy as long as he is enjoying himself.'

'In that case she is as great a fool as he is; but it is not so. I have several letters from her, expressing the greatest anxiety about his proceedings, and complaining that you incite him to commit those extravagances - one especially, in which she implores me to use my influence with you to get you away from London, and affirms that her husband never did such things before you came, and would certainly discontinue them as soon as you departed and left him to the guidance of his own good sense.'

'The detestable little traitor! Give me the letter, and he shall see it as sure as I'm a living man.'

'No, he shall not see it without her consent; but if he did, there is nothing there to anger him, nor in any of the others. She never speaks a word against him: it is only anxiety for him that she expresses. She only alludes to his conduct in the most delicate terms, and makes every excuse for him that she can possibly think of; and as for her own misery, I rather feel it than see it expressed in her letters.'

'But she abuses me; and no doubt you helped her.'

'No; I told her she over-rated my influence with you, that I would gladly draw you away from the temptations of the town if I could, but had little hope of success, and that I thought she was wrong in supposing that you enticed Mr. Hattersley or any one else into error. I had myself held the contrary opinion at one time, but I now believed that you mutually corrupted each other; and, perhaps, if she used a little gentle but serious remonstrance with her husband, it might be of some service; as, though he was more rough-hewn than mine, I believed he was of a less impenetrable material.'

'And so that is the way you go on - heartening each other up to mutiny, and abusing each other's partners, and throwing out implications against your own, to the mutual gratification of both!'

'According to your own account,' said I, 'my evil counsel has had but little effect upon her. And as to abuse and aspersions, we are both of us far too deeply ashamed of the errors and vices of our other halves, to make them the common subject of our correspondence. Friends as we are, we would willingly keep your failings to ourselves - even from ourselves if we could, unless by knowing them we could deliver you from them.'

'Well, well! don't worry me about them: you'll never effect any good by that. Have patience with me, and bear with my languor and crossness a little while, till I get this cursed low fever out of my veins, and then you'll find me cheerful and kind as ever. Why can't you be gentle and good, as you were last time? - I'm sure I was very grateful for it.'

'And what good did your gratitude do? I deluded myself with the idea that you were ashamed of your transgressions, and hoped you would never repeat them again; but now you have left me nothing to hope!'

'My case is quite desperate, is it? A very blessed consideration, if it will only secure me from the pain and worry of my dear anxious wife's efforts to convert me, and her from the toil and trouble of such exertions, and her sweet face and silver accents from the ruinous effects of the same. A burst of passion is a fine rousing thing upon occasion, Helen, and a flood of tears is marvellously affecting, but, when indulged too often, they are both deuced plaguy things for spoiling one's beauty and tiring out one's friends.'

Thenceforth I restrained my tears and passions as much as I could. I spared him my exhortations and fruitless efforts at conversion too, for I saw it was all in vain: God might awaken that heart, supine and stupefied with self-indulgence, and remove the film of sensual darkness from his eyes, but I could not. His injustice and ill-humour towards his inferiors, who could not defend themselves, I still resented and withstood; but when I alone was their object, as was frequently the case, I endured it with calm forbearance, except at times, when my temper, worn out by repeated annoyances, or stung to distraction by some new instance of irrationality, gave way in spite of myself, and exposed me to the imputations of fierceness, cruelty, and impatience. I attended carefully to his wants and amusements, but not, I own, with the same devoted fondness as before, because I could not feel it; besides, I had now another claimant on my time and care - my ailing infant, for whose sake I frequently braved and suffered the reproaches and complaints of his unreasonably exacting father.

But Arthur is not naturally a peevish or irritable man; so far from it, that there was something almost ludicrous in the incongruity of this adventitious fretfulness and nervous irritability, rather calculated to excite laughter than anger, if it were not for the intensely painful considerations attendant upon those symptoms of a disordered frame, and his temper gradually improved as his bodily health was restored, which was much sooner than would have been the case but for my strenuous exertions; for there was still one thing about him that I did not give up in despair, and one effort for his preservation that I would not remit. His appetite for the stimulus of wine had increased upon him, as I had too well foreseen. It was now something more to him than an accessory to social enjoyment: it was an important source of enjoyment in itself. In this time of weakness and depression he would have made it his medicine and support, his comforter, his recreation, and his friend, and thereby sunk deeper and deeper, and bound himself down for ever in the bathos whereinto he had fallen. But I determined this should never be, as long as I had any influence left; and though I could not prevent him from taking more than was good for him, still, by incessant perseverance, by kindness, and firmness, and vigilance, by coaxing, and daring, and determination, I succeeded in preserving him from absolute bondage to that detestable propensity, so insidious in its advances, so inexorable in its tyranny, so disastrous in its effects.

And here I must not forget that I am not a little indebted to his friend Mr. Hargrave. About that time he frequently called at Grassdale, and often dined with us, on which occasions I fear Arthur would willingly have cast prudence and decorum to the winds, and made 'a night of it,' as often as his friend would have consented to join him in that exalted pastime; and if the latter had chosen to comply, he might, in a night or two, have ruined the labour of weeks, and overthrown with a touch the frail bulwark it had cost me such trouble and toil to construct. I was so fearful of this at first, that I humbled myself to intimate to him, in private, my apprehensions of Arthur's proneness to these excesses, and to express a hope that he would not encourage it. He was pleased with this mark of confidence, and certainly did not betray it. On that and every subsequent occasion his presence served rather as a check upon his host, than an incitement to further acts of intemperance; and he always succeeded in bringing him from the dining-room in good time, and in tolerably good condition; for if Arthur disregarded such intimations as 'Well, I must not detain you from your lady,' or 'We must not forget that Mrs. Huntingdon is alone,' he would insist upon leaving the table himself, to join me, and his host, however unwillingly, was obliged to follow.

Hence I learned to welcome Mr. Hargrave as a real friend to the family, a harmless companion for Arthur, to cheer his spirits and preserve him from the tedium of absolute idleness and a total isolation from all society but mine, and a useful ally to me. I could not but feel grateful to him under such circumstances; and I did not scruple to acknowledge my obligation on the first convenient opportunity; yet, as I did so, my heart whispered all was not right, and brought a glow to my face, which he heightened by his steady, serious gaze, while, by his manner of receiving those acknowledgments, he more than doubled my misgivings. His high delight at being able to serve me was chastened by sympathy for me and commiseration for himself - about, I know not what, for I would not stay to inquire, or suffer him to unburden his sorrows to me. His sighs and intimations of suppressed affliction seemed to come from a full heart; but either he must contrive to retain them within it, or breathe them forth in other ears than mine: there was enough of confidence between us already. It seemed wrong that there should exist a secret understanding between my husband's friend and me, unknown to him, of which he was the object. But my after-thought was, 'If it is wrong, surely Arthur's is the fault, not mine.'

And indeed I know not whether, at the time, it was not for him rather than myself that I blushed; for, since he and I are one, I so identify myself with him, that I feel his degradation, his failings, and transgressions as my own: I blush for him, I fear for him; I repent for him, weep, pray, and feel for him as for myself; but I cannot act for him; and hence I must be, and I am, debased, contaminated by the union, both in my own eyes and in the actual truth. I am so determined to love him, so intensely anxious to excuse his errors, that I am continually dwelling upon them, and labouring to extenuate the looest of his principles and the worst of his practices, till I am familiarised with vice, and almost a partaker in his sins. Things that formerly shocked and disgusted me, now seem only natural. I know them to be wrong, because reason and God's word

declare them to be so; but I am gradually losing that instinctive horror and repulsion which were given me by nature, or instilled into me by the precepts and example of my aunt. Perhaps then I was too severe in my judgments, for I abhorred the sinner as well as the sin; now I flatter myself I am more charitable and considerate; but am I not becoming more indifferent and insensate too? Fool that I was, to dream that I had strength and purity enough to save myself and him! Such vain presumption would be rightly served, if I should perish with him in the gulf from which I sought to save him! Yet, God preserve me from it, and him too! Yes, poor Arthur, I will still hope and pray for you; and though I write as if you were some abandoned wretch, past hope and past reprieve, it is only my anxious fears, my strong desires that make me do so; one who loved you less would be less bitter, less dissatisfied.

His conduct has, of late, been what the world calls irreproachable; but then I know his heart is still unchanged; and I know that spring is approaching, and deeply dread the consequences.

As he began to recover the tone and vigour of his exhausted frame, and with it something of his former impatience of retirement and repose, I suggested a short residence by the sea-side, for his recreation and further restoration, and for the benefit of our little one as well. But no: watering-places were so intolerably dull; besides, he had been invited by one of his friends to spend a month or two in Scotland for the better recreation of grouse- shooting and deer-stalking, and had promise to go.

'Then you will leave me again, Arthur?' said I.

'Yes, dearest, but only to love you the better when I come back, and make up for all past offences and short-comings; and you needn't fear me this time: there are no temptations on the mountains. And during my absence you may pay a visit to Staningley, if you like: your uncle and aunt have long been wanting us to go there, you know; but somehow there's such a repulsion between the good lady and me, that I never could bring myself up to the scratch.'

About the third week in August, Arthur set out for Scotland, and Mr. Hargrave accompanied him thither, to my private satisfaction. Shortly after, I, with little Arthur and Rachel, went to Staningley, my dear old home, which, as well as my dear old friends its inhabitants, I saw again with mingled feelings of pleasure and pain so intimately blended that I could scarcely distinguish the one from the other, or tell to which to attribute the various tears, and smiles, and sighs awakened by those old familiar scenes, and tones, and faces.

Arthur did not come home till several weeks after my return to Grassdale; but I did not feel so anxious about him now; to think of him engaged in active sports among the wild hills of Scotland, was very different from knowing him to be immersed amid the corruptions and temptations of London. His letters now, though neither long nor loverlike, were more regular than ever they had been before; and when he did return, to my great joy, instead of being worse than when he went, he was more cheerful and vigorous, and better in every respect. Since that time I have had little cause to complain. He still has an unfortunate predilection for the pleasures of the table, against which I have to struggle and watch; but he has begun to notice his boy, and that is an increasing source of amusement to him within-doors, while his fox-hunting and coursing are a sufficient occupation for him without, when the ground is not hardened by frost; so that he is not wholly dependent on me for entertainment. But it is now January; spring is approaching; and, I repeat, I dread the consequences of its arrival. That sweet season, I once so joyously welcomed as the time of hope and gladness, awakens now far other anticipations by its return.