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The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

Anne Bronte

Chapter 32

October 5th. - Esther Hargrave is getting a fine girl. She is not out of the school-room yet, but her mother frequently brings her over to call in the mornings when the gentlemen are out, and sometimes she spends an hour or two in company with her sister and me, and the children; and when we go to the Grove, I always contrive to see her, and talk more to her than to any one else, for I am very much attached to my little friend, and so is she to me. I wonder what she can see to like in me though, for I am no longer the happy, lively girl I used to be; but she has no other society, save that of her uncongenial mother, and her governess (as artificial and conventional a person as that prudent mother could procure to rectify the pupil's natural qualities), and, now and then, her subdued, quiet sister. I often wonder what will be her lot in life, and so does she; but her speculations on the future are full of buoyant hope; so were mine once. I shudder to think of her being awakened, like me, to a sense of their delusive vanity. It seems as if I should feel her disappointment, even more deeply than my own. I feel almost as if I were born for such a fate, but she is so joyous and fresh, so light of heart and free of spirit, and so guileless and unsuspecting too. Oh, it would be cruel to make her feel as I feel now, and know what I have known!

Her sister trembles for her too. Yesterday morning, one of October's brightest, loveliest days, Milicent and I were in the garden enjoying a brief half-hour together with our children, while Annabella was lying on the drawing-room sofa, deep in the last new novel. We had been romping with the little creatures, almost as merry and wild as themselves, and now paused in the shade of the tall copper beech, to recover breath and rectify our hair, disordered by the rough play and the frolicsome breeze, while they toddled together along the broad, sunny walk; my Arthur supporting the feebler steps of her little Helen, and sagaciously pointing out to her the brightest beauties of the border as they passed, with semi-articulate prattle, that did as well for her as any other mode of discourse. From laughing at the pretty sight, we began to talk of the children's future life; and that made us thoughtful. We both relapsed into silent musing as we slowly proceeded up the walk; and I suppose Milicent, by a train of associations, was led to think of her sister.

'Helen,' said she, 'you often see Esther, don't you?'

'Not very often.'

'But you have more frequent opportunities of meeting her than I have; and she loves you, I know, and reverences you too: there is nobody's opinion she thinks so much of; and she says you have more sense than mamma.'

'That is because she is self-willed, and my opinions more generally coincide with her own than your mamma's. But what then, Milicent?'

'Well, since you have so much influence with her, I wish you would seriously impress it upon her, never, on any account, or for anybody's persuasion, to marry for the sake of money, or rank, or establishment, or any earthly thing, but true affection and well- grounded esteem.'

'There is no necessity for that,' said I, 'for we have had some discourse on that subject already, and I assure you her ideas of love and matrimony are as romantic as any one could desire.'

'But romantic notions will not do: I want her to have true notions.'

'Very right: but in my judgment, what the world stigmatises as romantic, is often more nearly allied to the truth than is commonly supposed; for, if the generous ideas of youth are too often over- clouded by the sordid views of after-life, that scarcely proves them to be false.'

'Well, but if you think her ideas are what they ought to be, strengthen them, will you? and confirm them, as far as you can; for I had romantic notions once, and - I don't mean to say that I regret my lot, for I am quite sure I don't, but - '

'I understand you,' said I; 'you are contented for yourself, but you would not have your sister to suffer the same as you.'

'No - or worse. She might have far worse to suffer than I, for I am really contented, Helen, though you mayn't think it: I speak the solemn truth in saying that I would not exchange my husband for any man on earth, if I might do it by the plucking of this leaf.'

'Well, I believe you: now that you have him, you would not exchange him for another; but then you would gladly exchange some of his qualities for those of better men.'

'Yes: just as I would gladly exchange some of my own qualities for those of better women; for neither he nor I are perfect, and I desire his improvement as earnestly as my own. And he will improve, don't you think so, Helen? he's only six-and-twenty yet.'

'He may,' I answered,

'He will, he WILL!' repeated she.

'Excuse the faintness of my acquiescence, Milicent, I would not discourage your hopes for the world, but mine have been so often disappointed, that I am become as cold and doubtful in my expectations as the flattest of octogenarians.'

'And yet you do hope, still, even for Mr. Huntingdon?'

'I do, I confess, "even" for him; for it seems as if life and hope must cease together. And is he so much worse, Milicent, than Mr. Hattersley?'

'Well, to give you my candid opinion, I think there is no comparison between them. But you mustn't be offended, Helen, for you know I always speak my mind, and you may speak yours too. I sha'n't care.'

'I am not offended, love; and my opinion is, that if there be a comparison made between the two, the difference, for the most part, is certainly in Hattersley's favour.'

Milicent's own heart told her how much it cost me to make this acknowledgment; and, with a childlike impulse, she expressed her sympathy by suddenly kissing my cheek, without a word of reply, and then turning quickly away, caught up her baby, and hid her face in its frock. How odd it is that we so often weep for each other's distresses, when we shed not a tear for our own! Her heart had been full enough of her own sorrows, but it overflowed at the idea of mine; and I, too, shed tears at the sight of her sympathetic emotion, though I had not wept for myself for many a week.

It was one rainy day last week; most of the company were killing time in the billiard-room, but Milicent and I were with little Arthur and Helen in the library, and between our books, our children, and each other, we expected to make out a very agreeable morning. We had not been thus secluded above two hours, however, when Mr. Hattersley came in, attracted, I suppose, by the voice of his child, as he was crossing the hall, for he is prodigiously fond of her, and she of him.

He was redolent of the stables, where he had been regaling himself with the company of his fellow-creatures the horses ever since breakfast. But that was no matter to my little namesake; as soon as the colossal person of her father darkened the door, she uttered a shrill scream of delight, and, quitting her mother's side, ran crowing towards him, balancing her course with outstretched arms, and embracing his knee, threw back her head and laughed in his face. He might well look smilingly down upon those small, fair features, radiant with innocent mirth, those clear blue shining eyes, and that soft flaxen hair cast back upon the little ivory neck and shoulders. Did he not think how unworthy he was of such a possession? I fear no such idea crossed his mind. He caught her up, and there followed some minutes of very rough play, during which it is difficult to say whether the father or the daughter laughed and shouted the loudest. At length, however, the boisterous pastime terminated, suddenly, as might be expected: the little one was hurt, and began to cry; and the ungentle play-fellow tossed it into its mother's lap, bidding her 'make all straight.' As happy to return to that gentle comforter as it had been to leave her, the child nestled in her arms, and hushed its cries in a moment; and sinking its little weary head on her bosom, soon dropped asleep.

Meantime Mr. Hattersley strode up to the fire, and interposing his height and breadth between us and it, stood with arms akimbo, expanding his chest, and gazing round him as if the house and all its appurtenances and contents were his own undisputed possessions.

'Deuced bad weather this!' he began. 'There'll be no shooting to- day, I guess.' Then, suddenly lifting up his voice, he regaled us with a few bars of a rollicking song, which abruptly ceasing, he finished the tune with a whistle, and then continued:- 'I say, Mrs. Huntingdon, what a fine stud your husband has! not large, but good. I've been looking at them a bit this morning; and upon my word, Black Boss, and Grey Tom, and that young Nimrod are the finest animals I've seen for many a day!' Then followed a particular discussion of their various merits, succeeded by a sketch of the great things he intended to do in the horse-jockey line, when his old governor thought proper to quit the stage. 'Not that I wish him to close his accounts,' added he: 'the old Trojan is welcome to keep his books open as long as he pleases for me.'

'I hope so, indeed, Mr. Hattersley.'

'Oh, yes! It's only my way of talking. The event must come some time, and so I look to the bright side of it: that's the right plan - isn't it, Mrs. H.? What are you two doing here? By-the-by, where's Lady Lowborough?'

'In the billiard-room.'

'What a splendid creature she is!' continued he, fixing his eyes on his wife, who changed colour, and looked more and more disconcerted as he proceeded. 'What a noble figure she has; and what magnificent black eyes; and what a fine spirit of her own; and what a tongue of her own, too, when she likes to use it. I perfectly adore her! But never mind, Milicent: I wouldn't have her for my wife, not if she'd a kingdom for her dowry! I'm better satisfied with the one I have. Now then! what do you look so sulky for? don't you believe me?'

'Yes, I believe you,' murmured she, in a tone of half sad, half sullen resignation, as she turned away to stroke the hair of her sleeping infant, that she had laid on the sofa beside her.

'Well, then, what makes you so cross? Come here, Milly, and tell me why you can't be satisfied with my assurance.'

She went, and putting her little hand within his arm, looked up in his face, and said softly, -

'What does it amount to, Ralph? Only to this, that though you admire Annabella so much, and for qualities that I don't possess, you would still rather have me than her for your wife, which merely proves that you don't think it necessary to love your wife; you are satisfied if she can keep your house, and take care of your child. But I'm not cross; I'm only sorry; for,' added she, in a low, tremulous accent, withdrawing her hand from his arm, and bending her looks on the rug, 'if you don't love me, you don't, and it can't be helped.'

'Very true; but who told you I didn't? Did I say I loved Annabella?'

'You said you adored her.'

'True, but adoration isn't love. I adore Annabella, but I don't love her; and I love thee, Milicent, but I don't adore thee.' In proof of his affection, he clutched a handful of her light brown ringlets, and appeared to twist them unmercifully.

'Do you really, Ralph?' murmured she, with a faint smile beaming through her tears, just putting up her hand to his, in token that he pulled rather too hard.

'To be sure I do,' responded he: 'only you bother me rather, sometimes.'

'I bother you!' cried she, in very natural surprise.

'Yes, you - but only by your exceeding goodness. When a boy has been eating raisins and sugar-plums all day, he longs for a squeeze of sour orange by way of a change. And did you never, Milly, observe the sands on the sea-shore; how nice and smooth they look, and how soft and easy they feel to the foot? But if you plod along, for half an hour, over this soft, easy carpet - giving way at every step, yielding the more the harder you press, - you'll find it rather wearisome work, and be glad enough to come to a bit of good, firm rock, that won't budge an inch whether you stand, walk, or stamp upon it; and, though it be hard as the nether millstone, you'll find it the easier footing after all.'

'I know what you mean, Ralph,' said she, nervously playing with her watchguard and tracing the figure on the rug with the point of her tiny foot - 'I know what you mean: but I thought you always liked to be yielded to, and I can't alter now.'

'I do like it,' replied he, bringing her to him by another tug at her hair. 'You mustn't mind my talk, Milly. A man must have something to grumble about; and if he can't complain that his wife harries him to death with her perversity and ill-humour, he must complain that she wears him out with her kindness and gentleness.'

'But why complain at all, unless because you are tired and dissatisfied?'

'To excuse my own failings, to be sure. Do you think I'll bear all the burden of my sins on my own shoulders, as long as there's another ready to help me, with none of her own to carry?'

'There is no such one on earth,' said she seriously; and then, taking his hand from her head, she kissed it with an air of genuine devotion, and tripped away to the door.

'What now?' said he. 'Where are you going?'

'To tidy my hair,' she answered, smiling through her disordered locks; 'you've made it all come down.'

'Off with you then! - An excellent little woman,' he remarked when she was gone, 'but a thought too soft - she almost melts in one's hands. I positively think I ill-use her sometimes, when I've taken too much - but I can't help it, for she never complains, either at the time or after. I suppose she doesn't mind it.'

'I can enlighten you on that subject, Mr. Hattersley,' said I: 'she does mind it; and some other things she minds still more, which yet you may never hear her complain of.'

'How do you know? - does she complain to you?' demanded he, with a sudden spark of fury ready to burst into a flame if I should answer "yes."

'No,' I replied; 'but I have known her longer and studied her more closely than you have done. - And I can tell you, Mr. Hattersley, that Milicent loves you more than you deserve, and that you have it in your power to make her very happy, instead of which you are her evil genius, and, I will venture to say, there is not a single day passes in which you do not inflict upon her some pang that you might spare her if you would.'

'Well - it's not my fault,' said he, gazing carelessly up at the ceiling and plunging his hands into his pockets: 'if my ongoings don't suit her, she should tell me so.'

'Is she not exactly the wife you wanted? Did you not tell Mr. Huntingdon you must have one that would submit to anything without a murmur, and never blame you, whatever you did?'

'True, but we shouldn't always have what we want: it spoils the best of us, doesn't it? How can I help playing the deuce when I see it's all one to her whether I behave like a Christian or like a scoundrel, such as nature made me? and how can I help teasing her when she's so invitingly meek and mim, when she lies down like a spaniel at my feet and never so much as squeaks to tell me that's enough?'

'If you are a tyrant by nature, the temptation is strong, I allow; but no generous mind delights to oppress the weak, but rather to cherish and protect.'

'I don't oppress her; but it's so confounded flat to be always cherishing and protecting; and then, how can I tell that I am oppressing her when she "melts away and makes no sign"? I sometimes think she has no feeling at all; and then I go on till she cries, and that satisfies me.'

'Then you do delight to oppress her?'

'I don't, I tell you! only when I'm in a bad humour, or a particularly good one, and want to afflict for the pleasure of comforting; or when she looks flat and wants shaking up a bit. And sometimes she provokes me by crying for nothing, and won't tell me what it's for; and then, I allow, it enrages me past bearing, especially when I'm not my own man.'

'As is no doubt generally the case on such occasions,' said I. 'But in future, Mr. Hattersley, when you see her looking flat, or crying for "nothing" (as you call it), ascribe it all to yourself: be assured it is something you have done amiss, or your general misconduct, that distresses her.'

'I don't believe it. If it were, she should tell me so: I don't like that way of moping and fretting in silence, and saying nothing: it's not honest. How can she expect me to mend my ways at that rate?'

'Perhaps she gives you credit for having more sense than you possess, and deludes herself with the hope that you will one day see your own errors and repair them, if left to your own reflection.'

'None of your sneers, Mrs. Huntingdon. I have the sense to see that I'm not always quite correct, but sometimes I think that's no great matter, as long as I injure nobody but myself - '

'It is a great matter,' interrupted I, 'both to yourself (as you will hereafter find to your cost) and to all connected with you, most especially your wife. But, indeed, it is nonsense to talk about injuring no one but yourself: it is impossible to injure yourself, especially by such acts as we allude to, without injuring hundreds, if not thousands, besides, in a greater or less, degree, either by the evil you do or the good you leave undone.'

'And as I was saying,' continued he, 'or would have said if you hadn't taken me up so short, I sometimes think I should do better if I were joined to one that would always remind me when I was wrong, and give me a motive for doing good and eschewing evil, by decidedly showing her approval of the one and disapproval of the other.'

'If you had no higher motive than the approval of your fellow- mortal, it would do you little good.'

'Well, but if I had a mate that would not always be yielding, and always equally kind, but that would have the spirit to stand at bay now and then, and honestly tell me her mind at all times, such a one as yourself for instance. Now, if I went on with you as I do with her when I'm in London, you'd make the house too hot to hold me at times, I'll be sworn.'

'You mistake me: I'm no termagant.'

'Well, all the better for that, for I can't stand contradiction, in a general way, and I'm as fond of my own will as another; only I think too much of it doesn't answer for any man.'

'Well, I would never contradict you without a cause, but certainly I would always let you know what I thought of your conduct; and if you oppressed me, in body, mind, or estate, you should at least have no reason to suppose "I didn't mind it."'

'I know that, my lady; and I think if my little wife were to follow the same plan, it would be better for us both.'

'I'll tell her.'

'No, no, let her be; there's much to be said on both sides, and, now I think upon it, Huntingdon often regrets that you are not more like her, scoundrelly dog that he is, and you see, after all, you can't reform him: he's ten times worse than I. He's afraid of you, to be sure; that is, he's always on his best behaviour in your presence - but - '

'I wonder what his worst behaviour is like, then?' I could not forbear observing.

'Why, to tell you the truth, it's very bad indeed - isn't it, Hargrave?' said he, addressing that gentleman, who had entered the room unperceived by me, for I was now standing near the fire, with my back to the door. 'Isn't Huntingdon,' he continued, 'as great a reprobate as ever was d-d?'

'His lady will not hear him censured with impunity,' replied Mr. Hargrave, coming forward; 'but I must say, I thank God I am not such another.'

'Perhaps it would become you better,' said I, 'to look at what you are, and say, "God be merciful to me a sinner."'

'You are severe,' returned he, bowing slightly and drawing himself up with a proud yet injured air. Hattersley laughed, and clapped him on the shoulder. Moving from under his hand with a gesture of insulted dignity, Mr. Hargrave took himself away to the other end of the rug.

'Isn't it a shame, Mrs. Huntingdon?' cried his brother-in-law; 'I struck Walter Hargrave when I was drunk, the second night after we came, and he's turned a cold shoulder on me ever since; though I asked his pardon the very morning after it was done!'

'Your manner of asking it,' returned the other, 'and the clearness with which you remembered the whole transaction, showed you were not too drunk to be fully conscious of what you were about, and quite responsible for the deed.'

'You wanted to interfere between me and my wife,' grumbled Hattersley, 'and that is enough to provoke any man.'

'You justify it, then?' said his opponent, darting upon him a most vindictive glance.

'No, I tell you I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been under excitement; and if you choose to bear malice for it after all the handsome things I've said, do so and be d-d!'

'I would refrain from such language in a lady's presence, at least,' said Mr. Hargrave, hiding his anger under a mask of disgust.

'What have I said?' returned Hattersley: 'nothing but heaven's truth. He will be damned, won't he, Mrs. Huntingdon, if he doesn't forgive his brother's trespasses?'

'You ought to forgive him, Mr. Hargrave, since he asks you,' said I.

'Do you say so? Then I will!' And, smiling almost frankly, he stepped forward and offered his hand. It was immediately clasped in that of his relative, and the reconciliation was apparently cordial on both sides.

'The affront,' continued Hargrave, turning to me, 'owed half its bitterness to the fact of its being offered in your presence; and since you bid me forgive it, I will, and forget it too.'

'I guess the best return I can make will be to take myself off,' muttered Hattersley, with a broad grin. His companion smiled, and he left the room. This put me on my guard. Mr. Hargrave turned seriously to me, and earnestly began, -

'Dear Mrs. Huntingdon, how I have longed for, yet dreaded, this hour! Do not be alarmed,' he added, for my face was crimson with anger: 'I am not about to offend you with any useless entreaties or complaints. I am not going to presume to trouble you with the mention of my own feelings or your perfections, but I have something to reveal to you which you ought to know, and which, yet, it pains me inexpressibly - '

'Then don't trouble yourself to reveal it!'

'But it is of importance - '

'If so I shall hear it soon enough, especially if it is bad news, as you seem to consider it. At present I am going to take the children to the nursery.'

'But can't you ring and send them?'

'No; I want the exercise of a run to the top of the house. Come, Arthur.'

'But you will return?'

'Not yet; don't wait.'

'Then when may I see you again?'

'At lunch,' said I, departing with little Helen in one arm and leading Arthur by the hand.

He turned away, muttering some sentence of impatient censure or complaint, in which 'heartless' was the only distinguishable word.

'What nonsense is this, Mr. Hargrave?' said I, pausing in the doorway. 'What do you mean?'

'Oh, nothing; I did not intend you should hear my soliloquy. But the fact is, Mrs. Huntingdon, I have a disclosure to make, painful for me to offer as for you to hear; and I want you to give me a few minutes of your attention in private at any time and place you like to appoint. It is from no selfish motive that I ask it, and not for any cause that could alarm your superhuman purity: therefore you need not kill me with that look of cold and pitiless disdain. I know too well the feelings with which the bearers of bad tidings are commonly regarded not to - '

'What is this wonderful piece of intelligence?' said I, impatiently interrupting him. 'If it is anything of real importance, speak it in three words before I go.'

'In three words I cannot. Send those children away and stay with me.'

'No; keep your bad tidings to yourself. I know it is something I don't want to hear, and something you would displease me by telling.'

'You have divined too truly, I fear; but still, since I know it, I feel it my duty to disclose it to you.'

'Oh, spare us both the infliction, and I will exonerate you from the duty. You have offered to tell; I have refused to hear: my ignorance will not be charged on you.'

'Be it so: you shall not hear it from me. But if the blow fall too suddenly upon you when it comes, remember I wished to soften it!'

I left him. I was determined his words should not alarm me. What could he, of all men, have to reveal that was of importance for me to hear? It was no doubt some exaggerated tale about my unfortunate husband that he wished to make the most of to serve his own bad purposes.

6th. - He has not alluded to this momentous mystery since, and I have seen no reason to repent of my unwillingness to hear it. The threatened blow has not been struck yet, and I do not greatly fear it. At present I am pleased with Arthur: he has not positively disgraced himself for upwards of a fortnight, and all this last week has been so very moderate in his indulgence at table that I can perceive a marked difference in his general temper and appearance. Dare I hope this will continue?

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