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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 Bramwell'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.'[0] *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[1]

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 depictingcon 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, Iwill 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.

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 manoeuvring, 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 posturing 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.