



THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL

Anne Brontë

 SCHOLASTIC

CONTENTS

To J. Halford Esq.	3
1. A Discovery	5
2. An Interview	17
3. A Controversy	24
4. The Party	34
5. The Studio	45
6. Progression	50
7. The Excursion	60
8. The Present	74
9. A Snake in the Grass	80
10. A Contract and a Quarrel	94
11. The Vicar Again	100
12. A Tête-à-tête and a Discovery	106
13. A Return to Duty	118
14. An Assault	124
15. An Encounter and its Consequences	133
16. The Warnings of Experience	143
17. Further Warnings	158
18. The Miniature	168
19. An Incident	183
20. Persistence	191
21. Opinions	200
22. Traits of Friendship	206
23. First Weeks of Matrimony	225
24. First Quarrel	232

25.	First Absence	242
26.	The Guests	255
27.	A Misdemeanour	260
28.	Parental Feelings	268
29.	The Neighbour	273
30.	Domestic Scenes	284
31.	Social Virtues	300
32.	Comparisons: Information Rejected	317
33.	Two Evenings	333
34.	Concealment	349
35.	Provocations	355
36.	Dual Solitude	363
37.	The Neighbour Again	369
38.	The Injured Man	382
39.	A Scheme of Escape	395
40.	A Misadventure	412
41.	“Hope Springs Eternal in the Human Breast”	418
42.	A Reformation	427
43.	The Boundary Past	433
44.	The Retreat	441
45.	Reconciliation	451
46.	Friendly Counsels	469
47.	Startling Intelligence	478
48.	Further Intelligence	495
49.	“The Rain Descended”	502
50.	Doubts and Disappointments	515
51.	An Unexpected Occurance	527
52.	Fluctuations	538
53.	Conclusion	547



CHAPTER 1

A Discovery

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 “goodbye,” 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



The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

Reading Questions

The book is constructed as a series of letters from Gilbert Markheim to a friend, and also as a diary written by Helen Huntingdon. Why do you think Anne Bronte decided to write the book in this way? How would the book differ if written in a more straightforward manner?

At the time the book was written, a married woman had no right to sue for divorce or to take custody of her own children. How does this book challenge these ideas?

The book is often considered to be one of the first feminist novels. Is this a fair description?

How important is religion to the story? How does Helen's religion affect the course of action she takes, and the way in which she treats her husband throughout the book?