



# **The Tenant of Wildfell Hall**

**Abridged**

**Anne Brontë**

Abridged by Emma Laybourn

This abridgement Copyright 2026 Emma Laybourn

This is a free ebook from

<https://englishliteraturebooks.com/>

It may be shared or copied for any non-commercial purpose.

It may not be sold.

## Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Author's Preface](#)

### ***Gilbert's narrative***

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

### ***Helen's Journal***

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

***Gilbert's narrative***

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

***Helen's letters***

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

***Gilbert's narrative***

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

## Introduction

Anne Brontë was the youngest of six children, born in 1820 to Patrick Brontë, an Irish clergyman, and his wife Maria (nee Branwell) at Thornton in West Yorkshire. When she was a few months old her family moved to the parsonage at Haworth, which she would regard as her home for the rest of her life. Anne's mother died when she was one; thereafter her Aunt Branwell took over much of the maternal role. Anne's two oldest sisters died when she was four years old; the remaining four siblings – Charlotte, Branwell, Emily and Anne herself – were to become one of the most famous families in literary history.

The two older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, had fallen ill whilst boarding at the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge, where Charlotte and Emily were also pupils. Life at this school, with its cruel and strict regime, left scars upon Charlotte in particular; Anne was fortunate in not being sent there. Instead, after Charlotte and Emily returned home, she studied with them under their aunt and father. Anne was especially close to Emily, who was only eighteen months her senior, and together they spent much time devising stories of a fantasy world called Gondal. Anne was a gentle and quiet character, beloved by her family, deeply religious and imbued with a strong sense of duty.

At fifteen, Anne left home for the first time to study at Roe Head school. There she worked hard, determined to acquire the means of earning her own living. In April 1839, aged nineteen, she found a post as a governess to a wealthy family at a grand mansion, Blake Hall, near Huddersfield. Her charges, aged five and six, had been uneducated and over-indulged; their tendency to run wild caused Anne a great deal of difficulty. By the end of the year she had been dismissed, mostly likely because of her inability to control her spoiled pupils.

However, in 1840 she found a position in an even grander house: Thorp Green, near York, the home of the Robinson family. Her pupils here were older, and while she still found controlling them difficult, she was more successful in her job (certainly more so than her sister Charlotte was in her own post as a governess). Anne became a valued member of the household, regarded with affection by the Robinsons' daughters; and in 1842 the family accepted her suggestion that her brother Branwell should be employed as a tutor for their son.

This appointment was to end in disaster. In 1845 Branwell was dismissed, having by his own account had an affair with Mrs. Robinson, and Anne resigned from her post. After this, Branwell began drinking heavily, on a trajectory that would eventually lead to his death in 1848. Anne, on the other hand, having received a small legacy on her aunt's death, was able to concentrate on writing.

She had already written a number of poems: some of these were included in a volume of poetry by the three sisters, which they paid to have published under the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. Few copies were sold. But at the same time all three were working on their first novels – in Anne's case, *Agnes Grey*, the story of a governess. Perceptive, sometimes quietly humorous, and more realistic than her sisters' novels, it

was published in 1847, at the same time as Emily's *Wuthering Heights*. It was somewhat overshadowed by her sister's work, receiving only a few mediocre reviews.

However, Anne's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which was published only six months later, gained considerably more attention – much of it uncomplimentary, deploring what critics called its “coarseness” and the depiction of “displeasing or repulsive subjects.” Despite (or perhaps because of) this the book sold well.

Though it has often been seen as a lesser work than those of her sisters, Anne's book is a remarkably acute portrait of a failing marriage, and a unsparing portrayal of the difficulties involved in separation from an alcoholic and vindictive husband. In planning the book, she probably drew on experiences gleaned during her stays at Blake Hall and Thorp Green: and for her depiction of drunken behaviour she had an example much closer to hand, in her brother Branwell.

The novel, like its predecessor *Agnes Grey*, is less dramatic and more true to everyday life than her sisters' works *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. Its realism is made all the more believable because of the human fallibility of its protagonists and their gradual descent into enmity: Arthur Huntingdon is no devil, merely a selfish and shallow man who at first does make some efforts to improve his standing in Helen's eyes, while Helen herself, as she admits in Chapter 31, is no angel. Nor is Gilbert Markham, the narrator who has aspirations to win Helen's hand – he is jealous, impetuous and quick-tempered. But Markham has greater self-awareness than Huntingdon, a more active conscience, and the will to change. This theme of change – of learning to adapt one's beliefs and behaviours – is a constant undercurrent in the novel.

Anne did not have time to build on her success. Both she and Emily, and their brother Branwell, were suffering increasing ill-health from consumption (tuberculosis). In September 1848 Branwell died from a combination of lung disease and alcoholism: his traumatic death was followed three months later by Emily's.

Anne knew that she herself did not have many weeks to live. She longed to go to the seaside town of Scarborough – which she had visited with the Robinsons – and managed to make the journey in the company of Charlotte and their friend Ellen Nussey. She had been there only three days when she died, very calmly, on 28th May, 1849. She was twenty-nine years old.

### **Marriage and the law at the time of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall***

‘Marriage may improve your circumstances for the better, but, in my private opinion, it is far more likely to do the opposite.’

This view expressed by Helen in chapter 41 of the book would have been regarded by many of her readers as shockingly subversive. Others would secretly have sympathised. Marriage at that time removed a woman's independence and was almost impossible to escape from if it turned sour.

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was published in 1848, but the events in the book were set over twenty years previously: Helen Huntingdon fled from her husband in 1827. Both

then and when Anne Brontë was writing – and indeed, until the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 – a married woman had few rights. Any land she owned became the property of her husband upon marriage; any investments, personal money, earnings, jewellery and other items of value fell under her husband's control, so that she could not dispose of them without his consent. For a wife to leave her husband was seen as scandalous and a woman who did so had no rights over her children, until an Act of 1839 which allowed custody of any child under the age of seven years to go to an innocent wife.

Although divorce was possible, prior to the Act of 1857 it was an extremely expensive process requiring a private Act of Parliament. Adultery was the only basis on which divorces were granted, but the grounds for obtaining one were set at a lower bar for men than for women: for a man to initiate a divorce, a wife's adultery on its own was sufficient grounds, but a woman could only seek a divorce if adultery was compounded by life-threatening cruelty. Hence, in the book, Helen does not have sufficient grounds for divorce – even if she could afford it – and her fears of having her son snatched from her have a realistic basis.

**Sources:**

Barker, Juliet, *The Brontës* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994)

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/divorce/>

<https://victoriacity.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/women-and-the-law-in-victorian-england/>

<https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2018/02/marriage-and-divorce-19th-century-style/>

AUTHOR'S PREFACE  
TO THE SECOND EDITION  
(abridged)

While the success of this book has been greater than I anticipated, and the praises of a few kind critics have been greater than it deserved, in some quarters it has been censured with an asperity which is more bitter than just. My object in writing the following pages was not simply to amuse the Reader. I wished to tell the truth. But as that priceless treasure too frequently hides at the bottom of a well, it needs some courage to dive for it – especially as the diver will be likely to incur more scorn for the mud into which he has plunged, than thanks for the jewel he procures. Let it not be imagined that I consider myself competent to reform the errors of society, but only that I would play my small part towards that aim; and I would rather whisper a few wholesome truths than much soft nonsense.

The book 'Agnes Grey' was accused of extravagant over-colouring in those very parts that were carefully copied from life, without any exaggeration; and in the present work, I find myself censured for depicting with 'a morbid love of the coarse' scenes which have been as painful for me to write as for my critics to read. I may have gone too far; but when we have to do with vice and vicious characters, 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 traveller, or to cover them with branches and flowers? If there were less delicate concealment of facts, there would be less sin and misery for the young who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience.

The case in this book is an extreme one; but I know that such characters 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 I beg the pardon of any readers I have pained. Such humble talents as God has given me I will endeavour to put to their greatest use; and when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I will speak it.

One word more, and I have done. Respecting the author's identity, I would have it be distinctly understood that Acton Bell is neither Currer nor Ellis Bell, and therefore his faults should not be attributed to them. As to whether the name be real or fictitious, or whether the writer is a man or a woman, it cannot greatly signify. 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.

July 22nd, 1848.

## The Tenant of Wildfell Hall Abridged

### Chapter 1

You must go back with me to the autumn of 1827.

My father, as you know, was a gentleman farmer; and I, by his desire, succeeded him in the same quiet occupation – not very willingly, for I was ambitious, and believed that I was burying my talent in the earth. My mother had told me that I was capable of great achievements; but my father, who thought ambition was the surest road to ruin, and *change* just another word for destruction, would listen to no scheme for bettering either my own condition, or that of my fellow men. 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, and to transmit the paternal acres to my children in as flourishing a condition as he left them to me.

‘Well! An honest and industrious farmer is a useful member of society; and if I devote my talents to my farm, and the improvement of agriculture, 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 in October.

But the gleam of a bright fire through the parlour window cheered my spirits more than all the wise reflections I had forced myself to frame; for I was young then, only twenty-four. However, the haven of bliss could not be entered till I had exchanged my muddy boots for a clean pair of shoes, and my rough surcoat for a respectable coat, and made myself generally presentable; for my mother, with all her kindness, was very particular on certain points.

In ascending to my room I was met upon the stairs by a smart, pretty girl of nineteen, with a round face, bright, blooming cheeks, glossy curls, and little merry brown eyes. I need not tell you this was my sister Rose. She is doubtless no less lovely in your eyes now than on the happy day you first beheld her. I had no idea that she would become the wife of one unknown to me then, but destined to become a close friend – closer than the unmannerly lad of seventeen, by whom I was collared in the passage, and to whom I gave a whack over the head. My brother, however, was not hurt; for his head, besides being uncommonly thick, was protected by a shock of reddish curls, that my mother called auburn.

On entering the parlour we found our mother seated in her arm-chair at the fireside, working at her knitting. She had made a blazing fire; the servant had just brought in the tea-tray; and Rose was producing the sugar-basin and tea-caddy from 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 without slowing the motion of her needles. ‘Now shut the door, and come to the fire, while Rose gets the tea ready; you must be starved. Tell me what you’ve been doing all day.’

‘I’ve been breaking in the grey colt – no easy business – directing the ploughing of the last wheat stubble, for the ploughboy has not the sense to direct himself; and carrying out a plan for draining the low meadowlands.’

‘That’s my brave boy! And Fergus, what have you been doing?’

‘Badger-baiting.’ And my brother proceeded to give a detailed account of his sport, while my mother pretended to listen with deep attention, and a degree of maternal admiration I thought highly disproportionate.

‘It’s time you were doing something else, Fergus,’ said I, as soon as I could get in a word.

‘What can I do?’ replied he; ‘my mother won’t let me go to sea or enter the army; so I’ll make myself such a nuisance to you all, that you’ll be thankful to get rid of me any way you can.’

Our mother soothingly stroked his curls. He growled, and tried to look sulky; and then Rose summoned us to the table.

‘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 pity you didn’t go with me, Gilbert, for Eliza Millward was there!’

‘Well! what of her?’

‘Oh, nothing! only she’s a nice, amusing little thing, when she is in a merry mood, and I shouldn’t mind calling her—’

‘Hush, my dear! your brother has no such idea!’ whispered my mother earnestly.

‘Well,’ resumed Rose; ‘I was going to tell you an important piece of news I heard there. You know it was reported a month ago that somebody was going to rent Wildfell Hall? And what do you think? It has actually been inhabited a week! and we never knew!’

‘Impossible!’ cried my mother.

‘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 for an old woman for a servant.’

‘Oh, dear! that spoils it – I’d hoped she was a witch,’ observed Fergus, carving his slice of bread.

‘Nonsense, Fergus! But isn’t it strange, mamma?’

‘I can hardly believe it.’

‘Jane Wilson has seen her. She went with her mother, who, of course, when she heard of a stranger in the neighbourhood, would be on pins till she had seen her and got all she could out of her. The lady is called Mrs. Graham, and she is in mourning – and she is quite young, they say, five or six and twenty – but so reserved! They tried to find out who she was and where she came from, but could not get a single satisfactory answer, or even a casual remark that would throw the faintest light upon her history. She was barely civil to them, and happier to say ‘good-bye,’ than ‘how do you do.’ But Eliza Millward says her father intends to call upon her, because she did not appear in church on Sunday; and Eliza will beg to accompany him, and is sure she can wheedle something out of her. 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, mind you bring me word how much sugar she puts in her tea, and what sort of 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 failed, for nobody laughed. However, he was not disconcerted; 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 with laughter 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 discussing the 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 of laughter.

The next day my mother and Rose visited Mrs. Graham. They came back little wiser than they went; though my mother declared she did not regret the journey, for she had given some useful advice, which she hoped would not be wasted. Mrs. Graham had appeared somewhat self-opinionated, but 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 cookery, and such things, that every lady ought to know. I gave her several excellent recipes, although she begged I would not trouble myself, as she lived in such a plain, quiet way that she was sure she should never use them. “No matter, my dear,” said I; “it is what every respectable female ought to know; and you may well marry again.” “You are mistaken, 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 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 to be grieving; and she’s very pretty – handsome rather. You must see her, Gilbert; you will call her a perfect beauty, though she is very different to Eliza Millward.’

‘Well, I can imagine many faces more beautiful than Eliza’s, though not more charming. I admit Eliza is not perfect, but then if she were more perfect, she would be less interesting.’

‘And so you prefer her faults to other people’s perfections?’

‘Just so.’

‘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.

After that Rose gave me more details of Mrs. Graham – her appearance, manners and dress; but I was not a very attentive listener.

On Sunday, everybody wondered whether the unknown lady would come to church. I confess I looked with some interest myself towards the old family pew of Wildfell Hall,

with its faded crimson cushions, and the grim coats of arms with their black borders frowning so sternly from the wall above.

There I beheld a tall, lady-like figure, clad in black. Her face was towards me, and there was something in it which made me look again. Her hair was raven black, in long glossy ringlets, a style rather unusual in those days, but 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 lashes.

The brows were well defined; the forehead was lofty and intellectual; but there was a slight hollowness about the cheeks and eyes, and the lips were a little too thin and too firmly compressed to show a soft amiable temper. I thought, 'I would rather admire you from this distance, fair lady, than be the partner of your home.'

Just then she raised her eyes, and they met mine. I did not withdraw my gaze, and she turned again to her book, but with a momentary 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. I glanced round the church to see if anyone had been observing me; but no, all those who were not attending to their prayer-books were watching the strange lady – my mother and sister among them. Even Eliza Millward was slyly glancing towards her, before she glanced at me, simpered, blushed, and modestly looked at her prayer-book.

Here I was transgressing again; and this time I was made aware of it by a dig in the ribs from my brother's elbow. I pressed my foot upon his toes.

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. I admired her, and she knew it, though I had never courted her, and had no definite intention of so doing – for my mother could not bear the thoughts of my marrying that insignificant little thing, who had not twenty pounds to call her own. Eliza's figure was slight and plump, with a delicate complexion and irregular features; and, altogether, she was charming rather than pretty. The chief attraction of her appearance lay in her eyes; they were long and narrow, dark brown, the expression ever changing, either wicked, or irresistibly bewitching – often both. Her voice was gentle and childish, her tread light as a cat's: her manners more frequently resembled those of a pretty, playful kitten, sometimes pert and roguish, sometimes timid and demure.

Her sister Mary was several years older, several inches taller, and of a larger build – a plain, quiet, sensible girl, who had patiently nursed their mother through her last long illness, and had been the housekeeper, and family drudge, since then. She was trusted and valued by her father, loved and courted by dogs, cats, children, and poor people, and slighted and neglected by everybody else.

Their father the Reverend Michael Millward was a tall, ponderous, elderly gentleman, with a square, massive-featured face. He was a man of fixed principles and strong prejudices, intolerant of dissent. He was convinced that his opinions were always right, and whoever disagreed with them must be either deplorably ignorant, or wilfully blind.

Though he had a fatherly kindness for the well-behaved, he was a strict disciplinarian, and had often sternly reproved us. I once heard my mother 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 great care for his own health – he took a walk before breakfast, was particular about warm, dry clothing, and never preached a sermon without first swallowing a raw egg. He was a great despiser of tea, and a patron of malt liquors, bacon and eggs, ham, hung beef, and other strong meats, which agreed with his digestion, and therefore were maintained by him to be good and wholesome for everybody, and confidently recommended to the most delicate convalescents. If they complained of inconvenient results, they 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 a farmer's widow, a narrow-minded, tattling old gossip. She had two sons, Robert, a rough farmer, and Richard, a studious young man, who was studying the classics with the vicar's assistance, preparing for college with a view to entering the church.

Their sister Jane was a young lady of some talents, and more ambition. She had received a boarding-school education, and had taken the polish well. She had quite lost her provincial accent, and could boast of more accomplishments than the vicar's daughters. She was considered a beauty; but I was never one of her admirers. She was about twenty-six, rather tall and very slender, with clear hazel eyes, which though quick and penetrating, were entirely destitute of feeling. She might have had many suitors, but scornfully repulsed them all; for none but a rich gentleman could please her refined taste, and her ambition.

She had lately received some pointed attentions from one gentleman, upon whom, 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 mansion in the neighbouring parish.

Now, Halford, I bid you adieu for the present. This is the first instalment of my debt. If you like it, tell me so, and I'll send you the rest: if you would rather not receive such ungainly, heavy coinage, tell me still, and I'll willingly keep it to myself.

Yours,  
Gilbert Markham.

## Chapter 2

I perceive with joy, my friend, that you desire the continuation of my story: therefore you shall have it.

I think the day I last mentioned was a Sunday in October 1827. On the following Tuesday I was out with my dog and gun, at Linden-Car; but finding no game, I turned my weapons against the hawks and carrion crows, whom I suspected had deprived me of better prey. So I left the wooded valleys and the corn-fields, and climbed the steep slope of Wildfell, the loftiest hill in our neighbourhood.

As I ascended, the hedges and trees become stunted, the former giving way to rough stone mossy walls, the latter to larches and Scotch fir-trees. The fields, being rough and stony, were mostly used for pasturing sheep and cattle; the soil was thin and poor. Bits of grey rock here and there peeped out from grassy hillocks; bilberry-plants and heather grew under the walls; and ragweeds and rushes reigned over the scanty grass.

Near the top of this hill, about two miles from Linden-Car, stood Wildfell Hall: a mansion of the Elizabethan era, built of dark grey stone, picturesque to look at but doubtless cold and gloomy to inhabit, with its thick stone mullions and little latticed windows, and its lonely and unsheltered situation. It was only shielded from the weather by a group of Scotch firs, themselves blighted with storms. 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) was a garden, once stocked with hardy plants that could survive the soil and climate.

Now, having been left so many years untrimmed, it had a very singular appearance. The close green walls of privet that had bordered the walk were two-thirds withered away, and the rest grown beyond all reasonable bounds: the towers of laurel in the middle of the garden, and the topiary on either side of the gateway – a gigantic warrior on one side, and a lion on the other – were sprouted into fantastic shapes.

When I came within sight of the mansion, I sauntered on to have a look at the old place, and see what changes had been made by its new inhabitant. I paused beside the garden wall, and saw no change – except in one wing, where the broken windows and dilapidated roof had been repaired, and a thin wreath of smoke was curling up from the chimneys.

While I stood leaning on my gun, and looking up at the dark gables, sunk in an idle musing reverie, I heard a slight rustling and scrambling just within the garden; and I saw a tiny hand raised above the wall. It clung to the topmost stone, and then another little hand was raised to take a firmer hold, and then appeared a small white forehead, topped with brown hair, with a pair of deep blue eyes beneath, and the upper part of a small nose.

The eyes did not notice me, but sparkled with glee on beholding Sancho, my beautiful black and white setter, that was running around with its muzzle to the ground. The child called aloud to the dog, who looked up, and wagged his tail.

The child (a little boy, apparently about five years old) scrambled up to the top of the wall, and called again, before attempting to get over. But a crabbed old cherry-tree caught his clothes, and his foot slipped, and down he tumbled – but not to the earth; the tree held

him suspended. There was a shriek; and in an instant, I had dropped my gun on the grass, and caught the little fellow in my arms.

I wiped his eyes, told him he was all right and called Sancho to pacify him. He was just putting his little hand on the dog's neck and beginning to smile through his tears, when I heard behind me a click of the iron gate, and a rustle of garments, and Mrs. Graham darted upon me, her black locks streaming in the wind.

'Give me the child!' she said, in a voice scarce louder than a whisper, but with startling vehemence. Seizing the boy, she snatched him from me, and then stood with one hand firmly clasping his, the other on his shoulder, fixing upon me her luminous dark eyes – pale, breathless, quivering with agitation.

'I was not harming the child, madam,' said I, scarcely knowing whether to be astonished or displeased; 'he was tumbling off the wall, and I was so fortunate as to catch him.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' stammered she; suddenly calming down, and blushing faintly. 'I did not know you; and I thought—' She stooped to kiss the child.

'You thought I was going to kidnap your son, I suppose?'

She stroked his head with a half-embarrassed laugh, and replied, 'I did not know he had tried to climb the wall. I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Markham, I believe?'

I bowed, and asked how she knew me.

'Your sister called here, a few days ago, with Mrs. Markham.'

'Is the resemblance so strong then?' I asked, in some surprise.

'There is a likeness,' replied she, 'and I think I saw you at church on Sunday.'

I smiled. But she suddenly wore again that proud, chilly look that had roused my aversion at church – a look of repellent scorn, so easily assumed that it seemed like the natural expression of her face.

'Good-morning, Mr. Markham,' said she; and without another word or glance, she withdrew with her child into the garden. I returned home, angry and dissatisfied – I could scarcely tell you why.

After putting away my gun, I went to the vicarage to soothe my ruffled temper with Eliza Millward's company. I found her, as usual, busy with some piece of embroidery, while her sister was seated at the chimney-corner with the cat on her knee, mending a heap of stockings.

'Mary! Mary! put them away!' Eliza was hastily saying, as I entered the room.

'No, indeed!' was the phlegmatic reply.

'You're unlucky, Mr. Markham!' observed the younger sister, with one of her arch, sidelong glances. 'Papa's just gone out, and not likely to be back for an hour!'

'Never mind; I'll spend a few minutes with his daughters, if they'll allow me,' said I, bringing a chair to the fire.

'Well, if you'll be very good and amusing, we shall not object.'

So I tried to make my company agreeable; and was apparently pretty successful, for Miss Eliza was never in a better humour. We held a cheerful and animated though not very profound conversation. The elder Miss Millward never opened her lips, except occasionally to correct some random or exaggerated assertion of her sister's, and once to ask her to pick up the ball of cotton that had rolled under the table. I did this.

‘Thank you, Mr. Markham,’ said she. ‘I would have picked it up myself; only I did not want to disturb the cat.’

‘Mary, dear, that won’t excuse you in Mr. Markham’s eyes,’ said Eliza; ‘he hates cats, I daresay, like all gentlemen. Don’t you, Mr. Markham?’

‘I believe it is natural for our unamiable sex to dislike the creatures,’ replied I; ‘for you ladies lavish so many caresses upon them.’

‘Bless them, little darlings!’ cried she, in a sudden burst of enthusiasm, overwhelming her sister’s pet with a shower of kisses.

‘Don’t, Eliza!’ said Miss Millward gruffly. It was time for me to go: but Eliza was unwilling to bid me adieu. I tenderly squeezed her little hand; and she repaid me with one of her softest smiles and most bewitching glances. I went home very happy, with a heart brimful of complacency, and overflowing with love for Eliza.

### Chapter 3

Two days afterwards, Mrs. Graham called at Linden-Car, contrary to Rose's expectation. She thought the mysterious occupant of Wildfell Hall would not return her call, for she had returned neither the Wilsons' nor the Millwards' visits.

Now, however, the cause of that omission was explained. Mrs. Graham had brought her child with her, and said, 'It is a long walk for him; but I had to bring him with me, or give up the visit altogether, for I never leave him alone. And Mrs. Markham, I must beg you to make my excuses to the Millwards and Mrs. Wilson, when you see them, as I fear I cannot have the pleasure of calling upon them till my little Arthur is able to accompany me.'

'But you have a servant,' said Rose; 'could you not leave him with her?'

'She has her own occupations to attend to; and she is too old to run after a child.'

'But you left him to come to church.'

'Yes, once; but I would not have left him for any other purpose; and I think, in future, I must bring him with me, or stay at home.'

'Is he so mischievous?' asked my mother, considerably shocked.

'No,' replied the lady, sadly smiling, as she stroked the wavy locks of her son, who was seated on a stool at her feet; 'but he is my only treasure, and I am his only friend: so we don't like to be separated.'

'But, my dear,' said my plain-spoken parent, 'you should try to suppress such foolish fondness, to save your son from ruin and yourself from ridicule.'

'Ruin! Mrs. Markham!'

'Yes; it is spoiling the child. Even at his age, he ought not to be always tied to his mother's apron-string; he should learn to be ashamed of it.'

'Mrs. Markham, I beg you will not say such things in his presence. I trust my son will never be ashamed to love his mother!' said Mrs. Graham, with a serious energy that startled us.

My mother attempted to appease her; but she abruptly turned the conversation.

'Just as I thought,' said I to myself: 'the lady's temper is none of the mildest, notwithstanding her sweet, pale face and thoughtful, lofty brow.'

All this time I was seated at a table on the other side of the room, with a volume of the Farmer's Magazine, which I had been reading when our visitor arrived. I had merely bowed as she entered, and continued my occupation.

In a little while, however, I was aware that someone was approaching me, with a light but hesitating tread. It was little Arthur, irresistibly attracted by my dog Sancho lying at my feet. He stood about two yards off, with his clear blue eyes wistfully gazing on the dog, transfixed not by fear of the animal, but by timidity of its master.

A little encouragement, however, induced him to come forward. In a minute he was kneeling on the carpet, with his arms round Sancho's neck, and, in a minute or two more, the little fellow was seated on my knee, surveying with eager interest the various specimens of horses, cattle, pigs, and model farms portrayed in the volume before me. I glanced at his mother now and then to see how she liked this; and I saw she was uneasy.

‘Arthur,’ said she at length, ‘come here. You are troublesome to Mr. Markham: he wishes to read.’

‘By no means, Mrs. Graham; let him stay. I am as much amused as he is,’ I pleaded. But she beckoned him.

‘No, mamma,’ said the child; ‘let me look at these pictures first; and then I’ll come, and tell you all about them.’

‘We are going to have a small party on Monday, the fifth of November,’ said my mother; ‘and I hope you will join us, Mrs. Graham. You can bring your little boy, you know. I daresay we shall be able to amuse him; and then you can make your own apologies to the Millwards and Wilsons. They will all be here, I expect.’

‘Thank you, I never go to parties.’

‘Oh! but this will be quite a family gathering, with nobody here but ourselves, and the Millwards and Wilsons, most of whom you already know, and Mr. Lawrence, your landlord, with whom you ought to make acquaintance.’

‘I do know him – but you must excuse me this time; for the evenings now are dark and damp, and Arthur, I fear, is too delicate to risk exposure to them. We must defer the enjoyment of your hospitality till the return of longer days and warmer nights.’

Rose, at a hint from my mother, now produced a decanter of wine, with glasses and cake to offer the guests. They both partook of the cake, but refused the wine, in spite of their hostess’s hospitable attempts to force it upon them. Arthur, especially, shrank from the wine as if in terror and disgust, and was ready to cry when urged to take it.

‘Never mind, Arthur,’ said his mamma; ‘Mrs. Markham thinks it will do you good; but she will not oblige you to take it! He detests the very sight of wine,’ she added, ‘and the smell of it almost makes him sick. I have been accustomed to make him swallow a little wine or weak spirits-and-water, by way of medicine, when he was ill, and, in fact, I have done what I could to make him hate them.’

Everybody laughed.

‘Well, Mrs. Graham,’ said my mother, wiping tears of merriment from her bright eyes, ‘you surprise me! The poor child will be the veriest milksop. Only think what a man you will make of him, if you persist in—’

‘I think it an excellent plan,’ interrupted Mrs. Graham, with gravity. ‘By that means I hope to save him from one degrading vice at least.’

‘But by such means,’ said I, ‘you will never render him virtuous. What is virtue, Mrs. Graham? Is it being able and willing to resist temptation; or is it having no temptations to resist? If you would have your son walk honourably through the world, you must not attempt to clear the stones from his path, but teach him to walk firmly over them – not insist upon leading him by the hand, but let him learn to go alone.’

‘I will lead him by the hand, Mr. Markham, till he has strength to go alone; and I will clear as many stones from his path as I can, and teach him to avoid the rest – or walk firmly over them, as you say; for when I have done my utmost in the way of clearance, there will still be plenty left for him to avoid. It is all very well to talk about noble resistance, and trials of virtue; but for fifty men that have yielded to temptation, show me one that has had the virtue to resist. Why should I think that my son will be different?’

‘You are very complimentary to us all,’ I observed.

‘I know nothing about you – I speak of those I do know. When I see the whole race of mankind (with a few rare exceptions) stumbling along the path of life, sinking into every pitfall, shall I not use all the means in my power to give him a smoother and safer passage?’

‘Yes, but the surest means will be to fortify him against temptation, not to remove it out of his way.’

‘I will do both, Mr. Markham. God knows he will have temptations enough to assail him, when I have done all I can to make vice uninviting to him. I myself have had, indeed, few incentives to what the world calls vice, but I have experienced temptations and trials of another kind, that have required more watchfulness and firmness to resist than I have been able to muster. And this, I believe, is what most people would acknowledge who are accustomed to reflection.’

‘Yes,’ said my mother, ‘but you would not judge a boy by yourself – and my dear Mrs. Graham, let me warn you against the error of taking that boy’s education upon yourself. Because you are clever in some things and well informed, you may fancy yourself equal to the task; but indeed you are not; and if you persist in the attempt, believe me you will bitterly repent it when the mischief is done.’

‘I am to send him to school, I suppose, to learn to despise his mother’s authority and affection!’ said the lady, with rather a bitter smile.

‘Oh, no! But if you would have a boy despise his mother, let her keep him at home, and spend her life in petting him, and indulging him.’

‘I perfectly agree with you, Mrs. Markham; but nothing can be further from my mind than such criminal weakness as that.’

‘Well, but you will treat him like a girl – you’ll spoil his spirit, and make a mere Miss Nancy of him – you will, indeed, Mrs. Graham. But I’ll get Mr. Millward to talk to you about it: he’ll tell you what you ought to do.’

‘No need to trouble the vicar,’ said Mrs. Graham, glancing at me – I suppose I was smiling at my mother’s unbounded confidence in that worthy gentleman. ‘Mr. Markham here thinks his powers of conviction at least equal to Mr. Millward’s. Well, Mr. Markham, you maintain that a boy should not be shielded from evil, but sent out to battle against it, alone and unassisted – not taught to avoid the snares of life, but boldly to rush into them, or over them, as he may—’

‘I beg your pardon, Mrs. Graham, but you go too fast. I have not said that a boy should be taught to rush into the snares of life; I only say that it is better to arm and strengthen your hero, than to disarm the foe. If you were to rear an oak sapling in a hothouse, tending it carefully night and day, and shielding it from every breath of wind, you could not expect it to become a hardy tree, like one which has grown up on the mountain-side.’

‘Granted; but would you use the same argument about a girl?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘No; you would have her be tenderly nurtured, like a hot-house plant – taught to cling to others for direction and support, and guarded from the very knowledge of evil. But why do you make this distinction? Is it that you think she has no virtue?’

‘Assuredly not.’

‘Well, but you say that virtue is only brought forth by temptation; and you think that a woman should not be exposed to temptation, or acquainted with vice. It must be either because you think she is essentially so vicious, or so weak-minded, that she cannot withstand temptation; or because you think men have a natural tendency to goodness, guarded by a superior fortitude, which develops more, the more dangers it meets.’

‘Heaven forbid that I should think so!’ I interrupted her.

‘Well, then, it must be that you think they are both weak and prone to err; and that the slightest shadow of pollution will ruin the girl, while the character of the boy will be strengthened by a little practical acquaintance with forbidden things. You would have us encourage our sons to prove all things by their own experience, while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others. I would wish both to benefit by the experience of others, so that they should know to refuse the evil and choose the good. I would not send a poor girl into the world ignorant of the snares that beset her path; nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power or will to guard herself. As for my son – if I thought he would grow up to be what you call a man of the world – I would rather that he died tomorrow!’ she said earnestly, pressing her darling to her side and kissing his forehead with intense affection. He had been standing for some time beside his mother’s knee, looking up into her face, and listening in silent wonder to her incomprehensible discourse.

‘Well! you ladies must always have the last word, I suppose,’ said I, as she rose to leave.

‘You may have as many words as you please, only I can’t stay to hear them.’

‘No; that is the way: you hear just as much of an argument as you please; and the rest may be spoken to the wind.’

‘If you are anxious to say anything more on the subject,’ replied she, shaking hands with Rose, ‘bring your sister to see me some fine day, and I’ll listen patiently. I would rather be lectured by you than the vicar, because I should have less remorse in telling you that I hold to my own opinion.’

‘Yes, of course,’ replied I, determined to be as provoking as herself; ‘for when a lady does consent to listen to an argument against her own opinions, she is always predetermined to withstand it – to listen only with her bodily ears, keeping her mind resolutely closed.’

‘Good-morning, Mr. Markham,’ said my fair antagonist, with a pitying smile. She bowed, and was about to withdraw; but her son, with childish impertinence, exclaimed, ‘Mamma, you have not shaken hands with Mr. Markham!’

She laughingly turned round and held out her hand. I gave it a spiteful squeeze, for I was annoyed at the injustice she had done me. Without knowing anything about my real disposition and principles, she was evidently prejudiced against me, and seemed bent upon showing me that her opinion of me fell far below my opinion of myself. I was naturally touchy, and perhaps a little bit spoiled by my mother and sister, or it would not have vexed me so much.

## Chapter 4

Our party on the 5th of November went very well, in spite of Mrs. Graham's absence. Indeed, had she been there, there would probably have been less cordiality, freedom, and frolic amongst us.

My mother, as usual, was cheerful and chatty, full of activity and good-nature, and only too anxious to make her guests happy, thereby forcing several of them to eat and drink against their will or talk when they would rather be silent. Nevertheless, they bore it with good humour.

Mr. Millward was full of sententious jokes, pompous anecdotes and speeches for everyone. Mrs. Wilson was more brilliant than ever, with her mixture of fresh news and old scandal, strung together with trivial remarks and oft-repeated observations, uttered apparently for the sole purpose of denying a moment's rest to her inexhaustible tongue. She had brought her knitting with her, and it seemed as if her tongue and fingers vied in swift and ceaseless motion.

Her daughter Jane was, of course, as graceful and elegant, as witty and seductive, as she could manage; for here were all the ladies to outshine, and all the gentlemen to charm – and Mr. Lawrence, especially, to capture and subdue. I thought there was a certain refined affectation of superiority, and a self-consciousness about her, that negated all her advantages. After she was gone, Rose commented on her manner with a mingled acuteness and asperity that made me wonder if she too had an eye to the squire – but never mind, Halford; she had not.

Richard Wilson, Jane's younger brother, sat in a corner, good-tempered, but silent and shy, though willing enough to listen and observe. He would have been happy in his own quiet way, if my mother could only have let him alone; but in her mistaken kindness, she would keep persecuting him with her attentions – pressing food upon him with the idea that he was too bashful to help himself, and obliging him to shout across the room in answer to the numerous questions with which she vainly tried to draw him into conversation.

Rose informed me that he would not have come but for the insistence of his sister Jane, who was anxious to show Mr. Lawrence that she had at a brother more gentlemanly and refined than Robert. She had hoped to keep Robert away; but he said that he saw no reason why he should not enjoy a chat with Markham and the rest; so he talked commonplace matters with my mother and Rose, and discussed parish affairs with the vicar, and farming matters with me.

Mary Millward was another mute. Eliza told me she had only come because her father insisted upon it, having taken it into his head that she devoted herself too exclusively to her household duties, and neglected innocent enjoyments. She seemed to me to be good-humoured enough. Once or twice somebody's wit made her laugh; and then I observed she sought the eye of Richard Wilson, who sat opposite her. As he studied with her father, she had some acquaintance with him, and I suppose there was a kind of fellow-feeling between them.

My Eliza was charming beyond description, coquettish without affectation, and more eager to engage my attention than that of all the room. Her delight in having me near her, whispering in her ear, or pressing her hand in the dance, was shown by her glowing face and heaving bosom, however belied by saucy words and gestures. But I had better hold my tongue: if I boast of these things now, I shall have to blush hereafter.

As for the others – Rose was simple and natural as usual, and full of mirth and vivacity. Fergus was impertinent and absurd; but he at least made others laugh.

And finally Mr. Lawrence was gentlemanly to all, and polite to the vicar and the ladies, especially Miss Wilson – misguided man; he had not the taste to prefer Eliza Millward. Mr. Lawrence and I were on fairly friendly terms. A reserved man, who seldom left his secluded home, where he had lived alone since his father's death, he had neither the opportunity nor the inclination for forming many acquaintances; but found me an agreeable companion. I liked the man well enough, but he was too cold, and shy and self-contained. He admired frankness in others, but he could not acquire it himself. His excessive reserve was provoking and chilly; but I forgave it, feeling that it originated less in pride than in a delicacy and diffidence that he was aware of, but could not overcome. His heart was like a sensitive plant, that opens for a moment in the sunshine, but curls up and shrinks at the slightest touch of the finger, or the lightest breath of wind.

So, upon the whole, our intimacy was more a mutual liking than a deep and solid friendship, such as has since arisen between me and you, Halford. In spite of your occasional crustiness, I can liken you to nothing so well as an old coat, well-made, but easy and loose – one that the wearer may use as he pleases, without fear of spoiling it; whereas Mr. Lawrence was like a new garment, all very neat and trim to look at, but so tight that you would fear to split the seams by raising your arms, and so fine that you would scruple to expose it to a single drop of rain.

My mother mentioned Mrs. Graham to the guests, regretting that she was not there to meet them, and explained to the Millwards and Wilsons the reasons she had given for neglecting to return their calls.

'She is a very singular lady, Mr. Lawrence,' she added; 'we don't know what to make of her – but I daresay you can tell us something about her, for she is your tenant, and she said she knew you a little.'

All eyes were turned to Mr. Lawrence. I thought he looked unnecessarily confused.

'I, Mrs. Markham!' said he; 'you are mistaken – I don't – that is, I've seen her, certainly; but I am the last person you should apply to for information.' He immediately turned to Rose, and asked her to give the company a song or a tune on the piano.

'No,' said she, 'you must ask Miss Wilson: she outshines us all in singing and music.'

Miss Wilson demurred.

'She'll sing readily enough,' said Fergus, 'if you'll promise to stand by her, Mr. Lawrence, and turn the pages for her.'

'I shall be most happy to do so, Miss Wilson; will you allow me?'

She bridled her long neck and smiled, and allowed him to lead her to the instrument, where she played and sang, in her very best style, one piece after another; while he stood patiently beside her, turning the leaves of her music book. Perhaps he was as much

charmed with her performance as she was. It was very fine in its way; but I cannot say that it moved me very deeply. There was plenty of skill, but precious little feeling.

But we had not done with Mrs. Graham yet.

‘I don’t take wine, Mrs. Markham,’ said Mr. Millward, when offered some; ‘but I’ll take a little of your home-brewed ale. I always prefer your home-brewed to anything else.’

Flattered at this compliment, my mother rang the bell, and a jug of our best ale was brought and set before the worthy gentleman.

‘Now this is the thing!’ cried he, pouring out a glass in a long stream without spilling a drop; and, having surveyed it for a moment, he drank, smacked his lips, drew a long breath, and refilled his glass, while my mother looked on with the greatest satisfaction.

‘There’s nothing like this, Mrs. Markham!’ said he. ‘I always maintain that there’s nothing to compare with your home-brewed ale.’

‘I’m glad you like it, sir. I always look after the brewing myself, as well as the cheese and butter – I like to have things well done.’

‘Quite right, Mrs. Markham!’

‘But, Mr. Millward, you don’t think it wrong to take a little wine or spirits now and then!’ said my mother, as she handed a tumbler of gin-and-water to Mrs. Wilson, whose son Robert was at that moment helping himself to a glass of the same.

‘By no means!’ he replied; ‘these things are blessings and mercies, if we only knew how to make use of them.’

‘But Mrs. Graham doesn’t think so. You shall hear what she said the other day – I told her I’d tell you.’

And my mother gave a detailed account of that lady’s mistaken ideas about alcohol, concluding with, ‘Now, don’t you think it is wrong?’

‘Wrong!’ repeated the vicar, with great solemnity. ‘Criminal, I should say – criminal! Not only is it making a fool of the boy, but it is despising the gifts of Providence.’

He then explained the folly and impiety of such a proceeding. My mother heard him with profoundest reverence; and even Mrs. Wilson rested her tongue for a moment, and listened in silence, while she complacently sipped her gin-and-water. Mr. Lawrence sat with his elbow on the table, carelessly playing with his half-empty wine-glass, and smiling to himself.

‘But don’t you think, Mr. Millward,’ suggested he, when at length that gentleman paused, ‘that when a child may be naturally prone to intemperance – by the fault of its parents, for instance – some precautions are advisable?’ (Now it was generally believed that Mr. Lawrence’s father had shortened his days by drinking.)

‘Some precautions, maybe; but temperance, sir, is one thing, and abstinence another.’

‘But I have heard that, with some people, moderation is almost impossible; and if abstinence is an evil (which some have doubted), no one will deny that excess is a greater evil. Some parents have entirely prohibited their children from tasting alcohol; but a parent’s authority cannot last for ever, and children naturally tend to hanker after forbidden things. Such a child would be likely to have a strong curiosity to taste, and try out what was so strictly forbidden; and once the restraint was broken, serious consequences might follow. I don’t pretend to be a judge of such matters, but it seems to

me, that this plan of Mrs. Graham's, extraordinary as it may be, is not without advantages; for here you see the child has no secret curiosity, no hankering desire; he is as well acquainted with the tempting liquors as he ever wishes to be; and is thoroughly disgusted with them, without having suffered from their effects.'

'And is that right, sir? Have I not proven to you how wrong it is – how contrary to Scripture and to reason, to teach a child to look with contempt and disgust upon the blessings of Providence, instead of to use them aright?'

'You may consider laudanum a blessing of Providence, sir,' replied Mr. Lawrence, smiling; 'and yet, you will allow that most of us had better abstain from it, even in moderation. But,' added he, 'I would not wish you to follow my simile too closely – and therefore I finish my glass.'

'And take another, I hope, Mr. Lawrence,' said my mother, pushing the bottle towards him.

He politely declined, and leant back to where I was seated on the sofa beside Eliza Millward. He carelessly asked me if I knew Mrs. Graham.

'I have met her once or twice,' I replied.

'What do you think of her?'

'I can't say that I like her much. She is handsome – or rather, distinguished and interesting in her looks, but not very amiable. A woman liable to take strong prejudices, I should fancy, and stick to them through thick and thin, twisting everything to conform with her own opinions; too hard, too sharp, too bitter for my taste.'

He made no reply, but looked down and bit his lip, and shortly after rose and sauntered up to Miss Wilson. I scarcely noticed it at the time, but afterwards I was recalled this, when – but I must not anticipate.

We wound up the evening with dancing, of which our worthy pastor approved. But Mary Millward obstinately refused to join us; and so did Richard Wilson, though my mother earnestly entreated him to do so.

We managed very well without them, however. With a set of quadrilles, and several country dances, we carried on to a pretty late hour; and I was just about to whirl Eliza round in a delightful waltz, along with Lawrence and Jane Wilson, and Fergus and Rose, when Mr. Millward interposed with: 'No, no; I don't allow that! Come, it's time to be going.'

'Oh, no, papa!' pleaded Eliza.

'High time, my girl! Moderation in all things, remember!'

But in revenge I followed Eliza into the dimly-lit passage, where, under the pretence of helping her on with her shawl, I snatched a kiss behind her father's back. But alas! When I turned round, there was my mother close beside me. As soon as the guests departed, she remonstrated with me very seriously; which made a disagreeable close to the evening.

'My dear Gilbert,' said she, 'I wish you wouldn't do that! You know how I love you and prize you above everything else in the world, and long to see you well settled in life – and how bitterly it would grieve me to see you married to that girl. What you see in her I don't know. It isn't only the lack of money that I think about – but there's neither beauty,

nor cleverness, nor goodness, nor anything else that's desirable. Do wait awhile! If you bind yourself to her, you'll repent it all your life. Take my word for it, you will.'

'Well, mother, do be quiet! I hate to be lectured! I'm not going to marry yet; but, dear me! mayn't I enjoy myself at all?'

'Yes, my dear boy, but not in that way. You would be wronging the girl, if she were what she ought to be; but she's an artful little hussy, and you'll get entangled in her snares before you know where you are. And if you marry her, Gilbert, you'll break my heart.'

'Well, don't cry about it, mother,' said I, and kissed her, for the tears were gushing from her eyes; 'don't abuse her any more, and set your mind at rest; for I'll promise never – that is, I'll promise to think twice before I take any important step you disapprove of.'

So saying, I went to bed, considerably quenched in spirit.

## Chapter 5

At the end of the month, yielding at last to Rose's insistence, I accompanied her on a visit to Wildfell Hall. We were ushered into a room where, to our surprise, the first thing we saw was a painter's easel, with a table beside it covered with rolls of canvas, palette, brushes and paints. Leaning against the wall were several unfinished sketches, and a few finished paintings – mostly of landscapes and figures.

'I must make you welcome to my studio,' said Mrs. Graham; 'there is no fire in the sitting-room today, and it is too cold in there.'

And disengaging a couple of chairs from the artistic lumber, she bid us be seated, and resumed her place beside the easel, now and then glancing at the picture upon it while she talked, and giving it an occasional touch with her brush, as if she found it impossible to remove her attention from it entirely. It was a view of Wildfell Hall in early morning, rising in dark relief against a sky of clear silvery blue, with a few red streaks on the horizon, faithfully drawn, and very elegantly handled.

'I see your heart is in your work, Mrs. Graham,' observed I: 'Please go on with it.'

'Oh, no!' replied she, throwing her brush on to the table, as if startled into politeness. 'I am not so beset with visitors that I cannot spare a few minutes to the few that do come.'

'You have almost completed your painting,' said I, approaching to observe it closely, with more admiration and delight than I cared to express. 'But why have you called it Fernley Manor, Cumberland, instead of Wildfell Hall?' I asked, alluding to the name written at the bottom of the canvas.

Immediately I was aware of being impertinent, for she coloured and hesitated; but after a moment's pause, with a kind of desperate frankness, she replied:

'Because I have friends – acquaintances at least – from whom I wish my present home to be concealed. And in case they see the picture, and recognise the style in spite of the false initials I have put in the corner, I take the precaution to give a false name to the place also, to put them on a wrong scent, if they should attempt to trace me by it.'

'Then you don't intend to keep the picture?' said I, to change the subject.

'No; I cannot afford to paint for my own amusement.'

'Mamma sends all her pictures to London,' said Arthur; 'and somebody sells them for her there, and sends us the money.'

In looking round upon the other pieces, I saw a pretty sketch of Linden-hope from the top of the hill; another view of the old hall basking in the sunny haze of a quiet summer afternoon; and a simple but striking little picture of a child brooding over a handful of withered flowers, with glimpses of autumnal fields behind it, and a dull beclouded sky above.

'You see there is a sad lack of subjects,' observed the artist. 'I painted the old hall once on a moonlight night, and I suppose I must do it again on a snowy winter's day, for I really have nothing else to paint. I have been told that you have a fine view of the sea somewhere in the neighbourhood. Is it true? and is it within walking distance?'

'Yes, if you don't object to walking four miles – eight miles, there and back, and over a somewhat rough road.'

‘In what direction does it lie?’

I described its the situation as well as I could, and was explaining the various lanes, and turnings to reach it, when she said,

‘Oh, stop! don’t tell me now: I shall forget every word of your directions before I need them. I shall not go till next spring. At present we have winter coming, and—’

She suddenly paused, with a suppressed exclamation, started up from her seat, and saying, ‘Excuse me one moment,’ hurried from the room.

Curious to see what had startled her, I looked towards the window – for she had glanced at it the moment before – and glimpsed the edge of a man’s coat vanishing behind a large holly-bush that stood by the porch.

‘It’s mamma’s friend,’ said Arthur.

Rose and I looked at each other.

‘I don’t know what to make of her at all,’ whispered Rose.

The child looked at her in grave surprise. She straightaway began to talk to him, while I looked at the pictures. There was one in a corner that showed a little child, seated on the grass with a lap full of flowers. The tiny features and large blue eyes, smiling through a shock of light brown curls, resembled those of the boy before me enough to proclaim it a portrait of Arthur Graham in his infancy.

In picking it up to hold it to the light, I discovered another behind it, with its face to the wall. I picked that up too. It was the portrait of a gentleman in the prime of youthful manhood – handsome enough, and not badly painted; but if done by the same hand as the others, it was evidently some years before, for there was more careful detail, and less of that freshness and freedom of handling that delighted me in the other works.

Nevertheless, I surveyed it with considerable interest. There was a vivid individuality in the man’s expression: the bright blue eyes regarded the spectator with a kind of lurking drollery – you almost expected to see them wink; the full lips seemed ready to break into a smile; the cheeks were embellished with luxuriant reddish whiskers; while the bright chestnut hair, in abundant curls, seemed to suggest that the owner was prouder of his beauty than his intellect; and yet he looked no fool.

I had the portrait in my hands when the artist returned.

‘Only some one come about the pictures,’ said she, in apology: ‘I told him to wait.’

‘I fear it will be considered an impertinence,’ I said ‘to look at a picture that the artist has turned to the wall; but may I ask—’

‘It is a very great impertinence, sir; and I beg you will ask nothing about it, for your curiosity will not be gratified,’ replied she, attempting to cover the tartness of her rebuke with a smile; but I could see that she was seriously annoyed.

‘I was only going to ask if you had painted it yourself,’ said I sulkily. She took the painting from me; and quickly restoring it to the dark corner, with its face to the wall, turned to me and laughed.

But I was in no mood for jesting. I turned to the window, and stood looking out upon the desolate garden, leaving her to talk to Rose for a minute or two; and then, telling my sister it was time to go, I shook hands with the little gentleman, coolly bowed to the lady, and moved towards the door.

But Mrs. Graham held out her hand to me, saying, with a soft voice, and a smile, 'Let not the sun go down upon your wrath, Mr. Markham. I'm sorry I offended you by my abruptness.'

When a lady apologises, there is no staying angry; so we parted friends; and this time I squeezed her hand with a cordial, not a spiteful pressure.

## Chapter 6

During the next four months I did not enter Mrs. Graham's house, nor she mine; but the ladies continued to talk about her. I paid little attention to their talk, and the only thing I learnt from it was that one fine frosty day she had taken her little boy to the vicarage. Nobody was at home but Miss Millward; but Mary Millward liked children; so Mrs. Graham sat a long time, and, by all accounts, they found a good deal to say to each other, and parted with a mutual desire to meet again.

Sometimes I saw her myself, not only when she came to church, but when she was out on the hills with her son, rambling over the moor or the bleak pasture-lands surrounding the old hall, with a book in her hand, and her son gambolling about her. Whenever I caught sight of her, I generally contrived to meet her, for I rather liked to see Mrs. Graham, and to talk to her.

And I decidedly liked to talk to her little companion, whom I found to be a very amiable, intelligent, and entertaining little fellow; we soon became excellent friends – how much to his mamma's pleasure I cannot say. I suspected at first that she wished to throw cold water on this kindling flame of our friendship – but eventually, discovering that I was perfectly harmless, and even well-intentioned, and that her son derived a great deal of pleasure from meeting my dog and myself, she ceased to object, and even welcomed my coming with a smile.

As for Arthur, he would shout his welcome from afar, and run to meet me. If I was on horseback he was sure to get a canter; or if there was one of the cart-horses close by, he was treated to a steady ride upon that; but his mother would always follow, for she was ever on the watch, and would not allow him to be taken out of her sight. What pleased her best of all was to see him romping and racing with Sancho, while I walked by her side – though she delighted not so much in my company as in seeing her son happily enjoying those activities, for he had no playmates suited to his years.

But sometimes, I believe, she really had some enjoyment in talking with me. One bright February morning, during twenty minutes' stroll along the moor, she laid aside her usual asperity and reserve, and conversed with so much eloquence and depth of thought on subjects happily coinciding with my own ideas, and looked so beautiful besides, that I went home enchanted; and was startled to find myself thinking that, after all, it would, perhaps be better to spend one's days with such a woman than with Eliza Millward. And then I blushed for my inconstancy.

On entering the parlour I found Eliza there with Rose. The surprise was not so agreeable as it ought to have been. We chatted for a long time, but I found her rather frivolous, and even insipid, compared with the more mature and earnest Mrs. Graham.

'I ought not to marry Eliza,' thought I, 'since my mother so strongly objects to it, and I ought not to delude the girl with the idea that I intend to. Now I shall have less difficulty in freeing myself from her sway. I shall not fall seriously in love with Mrs. Graham, nor she with me – that's certain. But if I find a little pleasure in her society, so much the better.'

After that I seldom allowed a fine day to pass without paying a visit to Wildfell at about the time Mrs. Graham usually left her house; but she was so changeable in her times of coming out, and my glimpses of her were so fleeting, that I felt half inclined to think she was avoiding me.

One calm, clear afternoon, however, in March, as I was superintending the rolling of a meadow, I saw Mrs. Graham down by the brook with a sketch-book in her hand, while Arthur was building dams in the shallow, stony stream. Leaving the meadow, I hurried over; but not before Sancho, who ran there at full gallop, and pounced upon his young friend with an impetuous mirth that almost knocked the child into the middle of the beck. Luckily, he was not hurt, but laughed.

Mrs. Graham was studying the winter trees, and drawing them with a spirited, though delicate touch. I stood and watched the progress of her pencil: it was a pleasure to see it so dexterously guided by those graceful fingers. But before long, they began to hesitate, and make false strokes, and then suddenly stopped, while their owner laughingly raised her face to mine, and told me that my gaze did not improve her sketch.

‘Then,’ said I, ‘I’ll talk to Arthur till you’ve done.’

‘I should like to have a ride, Mr. Markham,’ said the child. ‘There’s a horse in that field,’ and he pointed to where the strong black mare was pulling the roller.

‘No, no, Arthur; it’s too far,’ objected his mother.

But I promised to bring him safe back after a turn or two up and down the meadow; and when she looked at his eager face she smiled and let him go. It was the first time she had allowed me to take him so far from her side.

Enthroned upon his giant steed, he rode up and down the field with gleeful satisfaction. But when I took him back to his mother, she had shut her sketch-book, and seemed rather displeased at my keeping him so long.

It was now time to go home, she said; but I accompanied her half-way up the hill. She became more sociable, and I was very happy. On coming within sight of the grim old hall, she stood still, and turned towards me as if expecting me to depart. Indeed, the sun had set, and the moon was brightening in the pale sky; but a feeling of compassion riveted me to the spot. It seemed hard to leave her to such a lonely, comfortless home.

I looked up at it. Silent and grim it frowned before us. A faint red light was gleaming from the lower windows of one wing, but all the other windows were in darkness: black, cavernous gulfs, without glass or frames.

‘Do you not find it a desolate place to live?’ I asked.

‘I do, sometimes,’ she replied. ‘On winter evenings, when I’m sitting there alone, hearing the bleak wind moaning and howling through the ruinous old rooms, no books can repress the dismal thoughts that come crowding in. But it is folly to give way to such weakness, I know. Indeed, I cannot be too thankful for such a shelter.’

The closing sentence was uttered in an under-tone, as if spoken to herself. She bid me good evening and withdrew.

I had not gone far on my way home when I perceived Mr. Lawrence, on his grey pony, coming up the rugged lane that crossed the hill-top. I went over to speak to him; for we had not met for some time.

‘Was that Mrs. Graham you were talking to just now?’ said he.

‘Yes.’

‘Humph! I thought so.’ He looked at his horse’s mane with dissatisfaction.

‘What about it?’

‘Oh, nothing! Only I thought you disliked her,’ he replied, curling his lip with a slightly sarcastic smile.

‘Mayn’t a man change his mind on further acquaintance?’

‘Yes, of course,’ he answered, carefully removing a tangle in the pony’s mane. Then suddenly turning his shy hazel eyes upon me, he added, ‘Then you have changed your mind?’

‘I can’t say that I have exactly. I hold the same opinion of her as before – but slightly better.’

‘Oh!’ He looked round for something else to talk about; and made some remark upon the beauty of the evening.

‘Lawrence,’ said I calmly, ‘are you in love with Mrs. Graham?’

Instead of his being deeply offended at this, his first start of surprise was followed by a tittering laugh.

‘In love with her!’ repeated he. ‘What makes you dream of such a thing?’

‘From the interest you take in my acquaintance with the lady. I thought you might be jealous.’

He laughed again. ‘Jealous! no. But I thought you were going to marry Eliza Millward.’

‘You thought wrong, then; I am not going to marry either of them.’

‘Then you’d better leave them alone.’

‘Are you going to marry Jane Wilson?’

He coloured, and played with the pony’s mane again, but answered, ‘No, I think not.’

‘Then you had better leave her alone.’

He could have said, ‘She won’t leave me alone,’ but he only looked silly and said nothing for half a minute, before he made another attempt to change the subject; and this time I let him.

I was too late for tea; but my mother had kindly kept the teapot and muffin warm, and, though she scolded me a little, accepted my excuses. When I complained of the flavour of the over-brewed tea, she told Rose to make some fresh, which caused Rose to comment.

‘Well! if it had been me, I should have had no tea at all. If it had been Fergus, he would have had to put up with it as it was – but we can’t do too much for you. It’s always that way. If there’s anything particularly nice at table, mamma whispers, “Don’t eat so much of that, Rose; Gilbert will like it for his supper.” I’m nothing at all. In the parlour, it’s “Come, Rose, put away your things, and let’s have the room nice and tidy for when they come in; and keep up a good fire; Gilbert likes a cheerful fire.” In the kitchen: “Make that pie a large one, Rose; I daresay the boys’ll be hungry;” or, “Mind you put plenty of currants in the cake, Fergus likes plenty.” If I say, “Well, mamma, I don’t,” I’m told I ought not to think of myself. “You know, Rose, in all household matters, we must consider only what’s proper, and most agreeable to the gentlemen of the house. Anything will do for the ladies.”’

‘And very good doctrine too,’ said my mother. ‘Gilbert thinks so, I’m sure.’

‘Very convenient doctrine, for us, at all events,’ said I; ‘but if you really want to please me, mother, you must consider your own comfort a little more. As for Rose, I have no doubt she’ll take care of herself; and whenever she does make a sacrifice, she’ll take good care to let me know. But I might sink into self-indulgence if I had all my wants immediately supplied, while left in total ignorance of what is done for me. If Rose did not enlighten me, I should never know how much I owe you.’

‘Ah! and you never will know, Gilbert, till you’re married. Then, when you’ve got some conceited girl like Eliza Millward, or some misguided, obstinate woman, like Mrs. Graham, clever only in what concerns her least – then you’ll find the difference.’

‘When I marry, mother, I shall expect to find more pleasure in making my wife happy and comfortable, than in being made so by her: I would rather give than receive.’

‘Oh! that’s nonsense, my dear. You’ll soon tire of humouring your wife, be she ever so charming. You must fall each into your proper place. You’ll do your business, and she’ll do hers; but it’s your business to please yourself, and hers to please you. I’m sure your poor, dear father was as good a husband as ever lived, but after the first six months I never expected him to put himself out to please me. He always said I was a good wife, and did my duty; and he always did his, bless him! He was steady and punctual, seldom found fault without a reason, and always did justice to my good dinners, and that’s as much as any woman can expect of any man.’

Is it so, Halford? Is that the extent of your domestic virtues; and does your happy wife expect no more?

## Chapter 7

Not many days after this, on a mild sunny morning, the last fall of snow was almost thawed, leaving just a thin ridge here and there, lingering on the grass beneath the hedges; but beside them the young primroses were peeping from their dark foliage, and the lark above was singing of summer, and hope, and love.

I was out on the hillside, enjoying these delights, and looking after my young lambs and their mothers, when I noticed three people ascending from the vale below: Eliza Millward, Fergus, and Rose. I crossed the field to meet them; and, being told they were going to Wildfell Hall, I said I would go with them. Offering my arm to Eliza, who readily accepted it, I told my brother he could go back, for I would accompany the ladies.

‘I beg your pardon!’ exclaimed he. ‘It’s the ladies that are accompanying me. You all had a peep at this amazing stranger except me, so I begged Rose to go with me to the Hall, and introduce me. She swore she would not, unless Miss Eliza went too; so I ran to the vicarage and fetched her; and now you want to deprive me of my walk and my visit besides. Go back to your fields, you lubberly fellow; you’re not fit to associate with ladies and gentlemen like us, who have nothing to do but to snoop about our neighbours’ houses, peeping into their private corners – you don’t understand such refined enjoyments.’

‘Can’t you both go?’ suggested Eliza.

‘Yes, to be sure!’ cried Rose; ‘the more the merrier. We shall want all the cheerfulness we can take to that great, dark, gloomy room, with its dismal old furniture – unless she shows us into her studio again.’

So we all went; and the meagre old maid-servant, who opened the door, ushered us into a spacious, lofty room, but ill-lit by the old-fashioned windows. The ceiling, panels, and carved chimney-piece were of grim black oak, with tables and chairs to match, an old bookcase on one side of the fire-place, and an elderly piano on the other.

The lady was seated in a stiff, high-backed armchair, with a small table containing a work-basket beside her. Her little boy stood leaning on her knee, and reading to her with wonderful fluency from a book in her lap, while she rested her hand on his shoulder, and abstractedly played with his long curls. They moved when we entered, so I could only admire the picture for a few seconds.

I do not think Mrs. Graham was particularly delighted to see us: there was something chilly in her quiet, calm civility; but I did not talk much to her. Sitting near the window, I called Arthur to me, and he and I and Sancho amused ourselves very pleasantly together. Meanwhile the two young ladies baited his mother with small talk, and Fergus sat opposite with his legs crossed and his hands in his pockets, leaning back in his chair, and staring now up at the ceiling, now straight at his hostess in a manner that made me strongly inclined to kick him out of the room. Sometimes he whistled to himself, or interrupted the conversation with some impertinent remark.

For instance – ‘It amazes me, Mrs. Graham, how you could choose such a rickety old place as this to live in. If you couldn’t afford to occupy the whole house, and do it up, why didn’t you take a neat little cottage?’

‘Perhaps I was too proud, Mr. Fergus,’ replied she, smiling; ‘perhaps I took a particular fancy for this romantic, old-fashioned place – but, indeed, it has many advantages over a cottage. The rooms are larger and more airy; the unoccupied ones may serve as store-rooms, if I have anything to put in them; and they are very useful for my little boy to run about in on rainy days. And then there is the garden. You see I have made some little improvements already,’ continued she, turning to the window. ‘There is a bed of vegetables in that corner, and snowdrops and primroses – and there is a yellow crocus just opening in the sunshine.’

‘But how can you bear such a situation, with your nearest neighbours two miles distant? Rose would go stark mad in such a place. She has to see half a dozen fresh gowns and bonnets a day – not to speak of the faces within; but you might sit watching at these windows all day long, and never see a soul.’

‘I believe the loneliness of the place was one of its chief recommendations. I take no pleasure in watching passers-by; and I like to be quiet.’

‘Oh! You mean you wish we would mind our own business, and let you alone.’

‘No – if I have a few friends, of course I am glad to see them occasionally. No one can be happy in eternal solitude. Therefore, Mr. Fergus, if you choose to enter my house as a friend, you are welcome; if not, I must confess, I would rather you kept away.’ She turned to speak to Rose.

‘And, Mrs. Graham,’ said he again, five minutes later, ‘we were disputing, as we came along, a question that you can decide for us, as it was mainly about you – we often hold discussions about you; for some of us have nothing better to do than to talk about our neighbours’ concerns. A stranger coming amongst us makes an invaluable addition to our amusement. Well, the questions you are asked to solve—’

‘Hold your tongue, Fergus!’ cried Rose, in a fever of apprehension and wrath.

‘I won’t. The questions are these. First, about your birth and previous residence. Some say you are a foreigner, and some an Englishwoman; some a native of the north country, and some of the south.’

‘Well, Mr. Fergus, I’m an Englishwoman. I was born in neither the extreme north nor south; and I have chiefly passed my life in the countryside, and now I hope you are satisfied; for I am not disposed to answer any more questions at present.’

‘Except this—’

‘No, not one more!’ laughed she, and, quitting her seat, she sought refuge at the window where I was seated, and, in desperation, to escape my brother’s persecutions, tried to draw me into conversation.

‘Mr. Markham,’ said she, her heightened colour showing her disquiet, ‘have you forgotten the fine sea-view we were speaking of some time ago? I think I must ask you, now, to tell me the nearest way to it; for if this beautiful weather continues, I shall perhaps walk there, and sketch it; I long to see it.’

I was about to reply, but Rose stopped me.

‘Oh, don’t tell her, Gilbert!’ cried she; ‘she shall go with us. It’s — Bay you mean, I suppose, Mrs. Graham? It’s a very long walk, too far for you, and out of the question for Arthur. But we were thinking about making a picnic to see it some fine day; and, if you

will wait till the settled weather comes, I'm sure we shall all be delighted to have you amongst us.'

Poor Mrs. Graham looked dismayed, and attempted to make excuses, but Rose was determined; every objection was overruled. She was told it would only be a small party of friends, and that the best view was from the cliffs, five miles distant.

'Just a nice walk for the gentlemen,' continued Rose; 'but the ladies will drive and walk by turns; for we shall have our pony-carriage, which will be large enough to contain little Arthur and three ladies, together with your sketching apparatus, and our picnic.'

So the proposal was finally agreed to. Soon we rose, and took our leave.

But this was only March. A cold, wet April, and two weeks of May passed before we could venture on our expedition without cold winds or threatening clouds. Then, on a glorious morning, we set forth. The company consisted of Mrs. and Master Graham, Mary and Eliza Millward, Jane and Richard Wilson, and Rose, Fergus, and Gilbert Markham.

I invited Mr. Lawrence to join us. He hesitated, and asked who were going. Upon my naming Miss Wilson, he seemed half inclined to go, but when I mentioned Mrs. Graham, it appeared to have a contrary effect, and he declined. To tell the truth, I was not displeased, though I could scarcely tell you why.

It was about midday when we reached our destination. Mrs. Graham walked all the way to the cliffs; and little Arthur walked most of the way too; for he was now much more hardy and active than at first, and he did not like being in the carriage with strangers.

I have a very pleasant recollection of that walk along the white, sunny road, shaded here and there with bright green trees, and adorned with flowery banks and blossoming hedges; or through pleasant fields and lanes, all glorious in the sweet flowers of delightful May. It was true that Eliza was not beside me; but she was with her friends in the pony-carriage; and even when we pedestrians, having left the highway for a short cut across the fields, beheld the little carriage disappearing amid the trees, I did not hate those trees for snatching Eliza from my sight. To confess the truth, I was too happy in the company of Mrs. Graham to regret the absence of Eliza Millward.

Mrs. Graham, it is true, was provokingly unsociable at first, talking to no one but Mary Millward and Arthur. She and Mary walked together, generally with the child between them; but where the road permitted, I walked on the other side of her, Richard Wilson taking the other side of Miss Millward, and Fergus roving according to his fancy.

After a while, she became more friendly, and at length I succeeded in securing her attention to myself – and then I was happy indeed; for I liked to listen to her. Where her opinions tallied with mine, her extreme good sense and taste delighted me; where they differed, her uncompromising boldness, her earnestness and keenness, piqued my fancy. Even when she angered me by unkind words or looks, it only made me the more dissatisfied with myself, and the more desirous to win her esteem.

At length our walk was ended. On gaining the summit of a steep slope, and looking down, the sea burst upon our sight! – deep violet blue, and covered with glinting breakers – tiny white specks twinkling on its bosom, scarcely to be distinguished from the little seamews that flew above, their white wings glittering in the sunshine.

I looked at my companion to see what she thought of this glorious scene. She said nothing: but she stood still, and fixed her eyes upon it with a gaze that assured me she was not disappointed. She had very fine eyes, by-the-by; soulful, large, clear, and very dark grey. A soft reviving breeze blew from the sea; it gave a livelier colour to her usually too pallid cheek.

There was a look of subdued exhilaration in her face, that kindled into almost a smile of glad intelligence as her eye met mine. Never had she looked so lovely: never had my heart so warmed to her as now. But we were speedily summoned to the feast – a very respectable picnic, which Rose, assisted by Miss Wilson and Eliza, had set out upon an elevated platform overlooking the sea, and sheltered from the hot sun by a rock and overhanging trees.

Mrs. Graham seated herself at a distance from me. Eliza was my nearest neighbour. She exerted herself to be agreeable, in her gentle, unobtrusive way. Soon my heart began to warm towards her once again; and we were all very merry and happy together throughout the meal.

When it was over, Rose summoned Fergus to help her to clear up and pack the baskets. Mrs. Graham took her camp-stool and drawing materials; and having begged Miss Millward to take charge of her precious son, she left us and walked along the steep hill to a loftier point at some distance, whence a still finer view was to be had; even though some of the ladies told her it was a frightful place, and advised her not to attempt it.

When she was gone, I felt as if there was to be no more fun – though it is difficult to say what she had contributed to the hilarity of the party. No jests had escaped her lips; but her smile had animated me; a keen observation or a cheerful word from her had sharpened my wits, and thrown an interest over all that was done and said by the rest. Even my conversation with Eliza had been enlivened by her presence, though I knew it not; and now that she was gone, Eliza's playful nonsense grew wearisome, and I grew weary of amusing her. I felt myself drawn irresistibly to that point where the fair artist sat sketching.

So while my neighbour was talking to Miss Wilson, I rose and slipped away. A little active clambering soon brought me to the place where she was seated: a narrow ledge of rock at the very verge of the cliff, which descended precipitously to the rocky shore.

She did not hear me coming. The falling of my shadow across her paper gave her an electric start; and she looked hastily round.

'Why did you startle me so?' said she, somewhat testily. 'I hate anybody to come upon me unexpectedly.'

'If I had known you were so nervous, I would have been more cautious.'

'Well, never mind. What did you come for? are they all coming?'

'No.'

'I'm glad, for I'm tired of talking.'

'Well, then, I won't talk,' I said. 'I'll only sit and watch you drawing.'

'Oh, but you know I don't like that.'

'Then I'll content myself with admiring this magnificent view.'

She made no objection to this; and sketched away in silence. But I could not help glancing, now and then, at the elegant white hand that held the pencil, and the graceful neck and glossy raven curls that drooped over the paper.

‘Now,’ thought I, ‘if I had a pencil and a scrap of paper, I could make a lovelier sketch than hers.’

‘Are you there still, Mr. Markham?’ said she at length, looking round. ‘Why don’t you go and amuse yourself with your friends?’

‘Because I am tired of them, and I shall have enough of them tomorrow; but I don’t know when I may have the pleasure of seeing you again.’

‘What was Arthur doing when you came away?’

‘He was with Miss Millward – he was all right, but hoping mamma would not be long. You didn’t entrust him to me, by-the-by, though I had the honour of knowing him longer. But Miss Millward has the art of amusing children,’ I added carelessly, ‘if she is good for nothing else.’

‘Miss Millward has many fine qualities, which I do not expect you to perceive or appreciate. Will you tell Arthur that I shall come in a few minutes?’

‘I will wait, with your permission, and then I can help you to descend this difficult path.’

‘Thank you – I can manage without help.’

‘But at least I can carry your stool and sketch-book.’

She did not deny me this favour; but I was rather offended at her evident desire to be rid of me, and was beginning to repent approaching her, when she appeased me by consulting my judgment about some doubtful detail in her drawing. The improvement I suggested was adopted without hesitation.

‘I have often wished,’ said she, ‘for another’s judgment to appeal to when I could scarcely trust my own eyes and head, which have been so long occupied with contemplating a single object that they are almost incapable of forming a proper idea about it.’

‘That is one of many evils to which a solitary life exposes us.’

‘True,’ said she. Then she declared her sketch completed, and closed the book.

On returning to the scene of the picnic we found all the company had deserted it, except three – Mary Millward, Richard Wilson, and Arthur. Arthur lay fast asleep with his head on the lady’s lap; Richard was seated beside her with a pocket edition of some classic author in his hand. He never went anywhere without a book: all time seemed lost that was not devoted to study. Even now he could not abandon himself to the enjoyment of that pure air and balmy sunshine, the music of the waves and of the soft wind in the trees above him – but he must pull out his book, and read. Perhaps he spared a moment to exchange a word or a glance with his companion now and then; at any rate, she did not appear resentful of his conduct, for her homely features looked unusually cheerful when we arrived.

The journey homeward was less agreeable than the former part of the day: for now Mrs. Graham was in the carriage, and Eliza Millward was my companion as I walked. She had observed my preference for the young widow, and evidently felt herself neglected.

There were no keen reproaches, bitter sarcasms, or pouting sullen silence – these I could have easily endured, or laughed away; but she showed her feelings by a reproachful, gentle melancholy that cut me to the heart. I tried to cheer her up, and apparently succeeded in some degree; but my conscience reproved me, knowing that sooner or later the tie must be broken, and that this was only nourishing false hopes and putting off the evil day.

When the pony-carriage had approached as near Wildfell Hall as the road would permit, the young widow and her son alighted, and I persuaded Eliza to take a seat in the carriage. Having put her comfortably in and wished her a kind good-night, I felt relieved, and hastened to offer my services to Mrs. Graham to carry her things. But she insisted upon bidding me adieu then and there – yet in so kind and friendly a manner that I almost forgave her.

## Chapter 8

Six weeks passed; it was the end of June. Most of the hay was cut, and now I was determined to make the most of the fine weather to cut the rest. I had gathered all hands together in the hay-field, and was working away in the midst of them, in my shirt-sleeves, with a shady straw hat on my head, catching up armfuls of moist, reeking grass, and shaking it out – intending to labour from morning till night as assiduously as any of my workmen, both to advance the work, and to set an example.

But lo! my resolutions were overthrown in a moment, when my brother came running up to me. He put into my hand a small parcel, just arrived from London, which I had been expecting. I tore off the cover, to see an elegant edition of Sir Walter Scott's 'Marmion.'

'I can guess who that's for,' said Fergus. 'That's for Miss Eliza.'

'You're wrong, my lad,' said I; and put the book in my coat pocket. 'Now, you idle dog, make yourself useful for once. Take my place in the field till I come back.'

'Why? where are you going?'

'Never mind; it doesn't concern you. I shall be back by dinner.'

'Oh! and I'm to labour away till then, am I? and to keep all these fellows hard at it besides?' said Fergus. 'Well, well! I'll submit, for once. – Come, my lads, look sharp: I'm come to help you now: and woe be to anyone that pauses for a moment to stare around, or scratch his head, or blow his nose – nothing will do but work, work, work.'

Leaving him thus haranguing the men, to their amusement, I hastened away to Wildfell Hall with the book in my pocket; for it was destined for Mrs. Graham.

'What! Then, had she and you got on so well together as to be giving and receiving presents?' Not precisely, old friend; this was my first experiment in that line; and I was very anxious to see the result of it.

We had met several times since the seaside excursion, and I had found she was not averse to my company, provided I confined my conversation to abstract matters, or topics of common interest. The moment I became sentimental or complimentary, or made the slightest approach to tenderness, I was punished by an immediate change in her manner, which became cold and distant.

This did not greatly disconcert me, however; I thought it was not because of any dislike of me, but rather a resolution against a second marriage. At first, indeed, she had seemed to take pleasure in crushing my vanity and presumption – relentlessly nipping off bud by bud as they ventured to appear; and then, I confess, I was deeply wounded. But when she found that I was not an empty-headed coxcomb, she had repulsed my modest advances in quite a different spirit – a kind of serious, almost sorrowful displeasure, which I soon learnt to avoid awakening.

'Let me first become a friend,' thought I – 'the playfellow of her son, the sober, plain-dealing friend of herself, and then, when I have made myself necessary to her comfort (as I believe I can), we'll see what can be done.'

So we talked about painting, poetry, and music, theology, geology, and philosophy: once or twice I lent her a book, and once she lent me one in return: I met her in her walks as often as I could, and came to her house as often as I dared.

My first pretext for visiting was to bring Arthur a little waddling puppy of which Sancho was the father, and which delighted the child, and so could not fail to please his mamma. My second was to bring him a book, which I submitted for her approval before presenting it to him. Thirdly, I brought her some plants for her garden, in my sister's name – having persuaded Rose to send them. Each of these times I inquired after the picture she was painting from the sketch taken on the cliff, and was admitted into the studio, and asked my opinion on its progress.

My last visit had been to return the book she had lent me; it was then that, in discussing the poetry of Sir Walter Scott, she had expressed a wish to read 'Marmion.' So I had instantly ordered the smart little volume. But I still needed an excuse for visiting her; so I had brought a blue collar for Arthur's dog; and once that had been received, with more gratitude than the worth of the gift or the selfish motive of the giver deserved, I ventured to ask Mrs. Graham for one more look at the picture.

'Oh, yes! come in,' said she. 'It is finished and framed, all ready for sending away; but if you can suggest any further improvement, it shall be considered.'

The picture was strikingly beautiful; but I expressed my praise in guarded terms, for fear of displeasing her. No doubt, however, she read my heartfelt admiration in my eyes. But, while I gazed, I thought about the book, and wondered how it was to be presented. I screwed up my courage, pulled out the book and put it into her hand, saying,

'You were wishing to see *Marmion*, Mrs. Graham; and here it is, if you will be so kind as to take it.'

She blushed – perhaps a blush of sympathetic shame for such an awkward presentation. She gravely examined the volume; silently turned the leaves; then closed it, and quietly asked its price. I felt the blood rush to my face.

'I'm sorry to offend you, Mr. Markham,' said she, 'but unless I pay for the book, I cannot take it.' And she laid it on the table.

'Why not?'

'Because...,' she paused, and looked at the carpet, before lifting her eyes to look me steadily in the face. 'Because I don't like to put myself under obligations that I can never repay.'

'Then you won't take the book?'

'I will gladly take it, if you will let me pay for it.' I told her the exact price, as calmly as I could – for, in fact, I was ready to weep with disappointment and vexation.

She produced her purse, and counted out the money, but hesitated to put it into my hand. Attentively regarding me, she observed soothingly, 'You think yourself insulted, Mr Markham. I wish I could make you understand that – that I—'

'I do understand you, perfectly,' I said. 'You think that if you were to accept that trifle from me now, I should presume upon it; but you are mistaken. I shall build no hopes upon it, and consider this no precedent for future favours. And it is nonsense to talk about putting yourself under obligations to me when you must know that the obligation is entirely on my side, the favour on yours.'

'Well, then, I'll take you at your word,' she answered, with a most angelic smile, returning the money to her purse – 'but remember!'

‘I will remember; but do not punish me by withdrawing your friendship and being more distant than before,’ said I, holding out my hand in farewell, for I was too much excited to stay.

‘Well, then! let us be as we were,’ replied she, placing her hand in mine. I had to refrain from pressing it to my lips; that would be suicidal madness. I had been bold enough already.

It was with an agitated, burning heart and brain that I hurried home, regardless of the scorching noonday sun – forgetful of everything but her – regretting nothing but my own haste and lack of tact – fearing nothing but her hateful resolution – hoping nothing but – but stop; I will not bore you with my conflicting hopes and fears.

## Chapter 9

Though my affections were now drawn away from Eliza Millward, I did not yet entirely stop my visits to the vicarage, because I wanted to let her down easy, without incurring sorrow or resentment – or making myself the talk of the parish. Besides, if I had wholly kept away, the vicar, who looked upon my visits as paid chiefly to himself, would have been affronted.

But when I called there the day after my visit to Mrs. Graham, he happened to be out – a circumstance less agreeable to me now than it had been formerly. Mary Millward was there, it is true, but she would be little better than a nonentity. However, I resolved to make my visit a short one, and to talk to Eliza in a brotherly, friendly sort of way, which, I thought, could neither give offence nor encourage false hopes.

It was never my habit to talk about Mrs. Graham to her or anyone else; but I had not been seated three minutes before she brought that lady up in a rather remarkable manner.

‘Oh, Mr. Markham!’ said she, with a shocked expression and voice subdued almost to a whisper, ‘what do you think of these shocking reports about Mrs. Graham?’

‘What reports?’

‘Ah! you know!’ She slyly smiled and shook her head.

‘I know nothing about them. What do you mean, Eliza?’

‘Oh, don’t ask me! I can’t explain it.’ She took up her needlework, and began to be very busy.

‘What is it, Miss Millward? what does she mean?’ said I, appealing to her sister.

‘I don’t know,’ replied she. ‘Some idle slander somebody has been inventing, I suppose. I never heard it till Eliza told me the other day. I don’t believe a word of it – I know Mrs. Graham too well!’

‘Quite right, Miss Millward! And so do I – whatever it may be.’

‘Well,’ observed Eliza, with a gentle sigh, ‘I only wish you may not find your confidence misplaced.’

And she gave me a look of sorrowful tenderness that might have melted my heart, but within those eyes there lurked a something that I did not like; and I wondered how I ever could have admired them. Her sister’s honest face and small grey eyes appeared far more agreeable. Eliza’s insinuations were false, I was certain.

I said nothing more on the subject, however, but soon rose and took my leave, saying I had business at the farm; and to the farm I went, wondering what those mysterious reports were, who started them, and how they could be silenced or disproved.

A few days after this we had another of our quiet little parties, to which the usual friends and neighbours had been invited, including Mrs. Graham. Greatly to my relief, she came. Without her I should have found the whole affair an intolerable bore; but her arrival brought new life to the house, and though I could not neglect the other guests, I anticipated an evening of enjoyment.

Mr. Lawrence came too, some time after the rest. I was curious to see how he would behave to Mrs. Graham. A slight bow was all that passed between them on his entrance; and he seated himself aloof from the young widow, between my mother and Rose.

‘Did you ever see such art?’ whispered Eliza, next to me. ‘Would you not say they were perfect strangers?’

‘Almost; but what about it?’

‘You can’t pretend to be ignorant!’

‘Ignorant of what?’ I demanded sharply.

‘Oh, hush! don’t speak so loud.’

‘Well, tell me then,’ I answered in a lower tone, ‘what do you mean?’

‘Well, you know, I don’t vouch for the truth of it – but haven’t you heard—?’

‘I’ve heard nothing, except from you.’

‘I shall only anger you by repeating it, I see, so I had better hold my tongue.’ She closed her lips and folded her hands, with an air of injured meekness.

‘If you had wished not to anger me, you should have held your tongue from the beginning, or else spoken out plainly and honestly.’

She pulled out her handkerchief, rose, and went to the window, where she stood for some time, evidently dissolved in tears. I was astounded and ashamed – not so much of my harshness as of her childish weakness. However, no one seemed to notice, and soon we were summoned to the tea-table. On taking my seat, I had Rose on one side of me and an empty chair on the other.

‘May I sit by you?’ said a soft voice at my elbow. Eliza slipped into the vacant chair; then, looking up in my face with a half-sad, half-playful smile, she whispered, ‘You’re so stern, Gilbert.’

I handed down her tea with a slightly contemptuous smile, and said nothing.

‘What have I done to offend you?’ said she, plaintively.

‘Come, take your tea, Eliza, and don’t be foolish.’ I handed her the sugar and cream.

Just then there arose a slight commotion on my other side, caused by Miss Wilson’s asking to exchange seats with Rose.

‘Will you be so good as to change places with me, Miss Markham?’ said she; ‘for I don’t like to sit by Mrs. Graham. If your mamma thinks it proper to invite such persons to her house, she cannot object to her daughter’s keeping company with them.’

‘Will you be so good as to tell me what you mean, Miss Wilson?’ said I.

‘Why, Mr. Markham,’ replied she, coolly, ‘it surprises me rather that Mrs. Markham should invite such a person as Mrs. Graham to her house; but perhaps she is not aware that the lady’s character is considered scarcely respectable.’

‘She is not aware of it, nor am I; and therefore please explain your meaning.’

‘This is scarcely the time or place for such explanations; but I think you can hardly be so ignorant as you pretend – you must know her as well as I do.’

‘I think I do; and therefore, if you will inform me what you have heard or imagined against her, I shall, perhaps, be able to set you right.’

‘Can you tell me, then, who was her husband, or if she ever had any?’

Indignation kept me silent. I could not trust myself to answer.

‘Have you never observed,’ said Eliza, ‘what a striking likeness there is between that child of hers and—’

‘And whom?’ demanded Miss Wilson, with an air of keen severity.

Eliza was startled; her suggestion had been intended for my ear alone. 'Oh, I beg your pardon!' pleaded she; 'I may be mistaken.' But she accompanied the words with a sly glance of derision from the corner of her eye.

'There's no need to ask my pardon,' replied her friend, 'but I see no one here that resembles that child, except his mother, and when you hear ill-natured reports, Miss Eliza, I think you will do well to refrain from repeating them. I presume the person you allude to is Mr. Lawrence; but I think I can assure you that your suspicions, in that respect, are utterly misplaced. If he has any connection with the lady at all, at least he has sufficient sense of propriety to keep her at arm's length; he was evidently both surprised and annoyed to find her here.'

'Go it!' cried Fergus, who sat on the other side of Eliza. 'Go it!'

Miss Wilson drew herself up with a look of freezing scorn, but said nothing. I said as calmly as I could, though in a tone which betrayed, no doubt, some of my feelings:

'We have had enough of this subject; if we can only speak to slander our betters, let us hold our tongues.'

What more was said I cannot tell, nor how I found patience to sit till the meal was over. I remember, however, that I ate nothing; and when I stared at Arthur Graham, who sat beside his mother across the table, and then stared at Mr. Lawrence, it struck me that there was a likeness; but, on further contemplation, I concluded it was imaginary.

Both, it is true, had delicate features and small bones, and both had fair complexions; but Arthur's tiny, somewhat snubby nose could never become so long and straight as Mr. Lawrence's; and the outline of his face could never be drawn out to the other's long oval. The child's hair was lighter, and his large, clear blue eyes were utterly dissimilar to the shy hazel eyes of Mr. Lawrence.

Wretch that I was to harbour that detestable idea for a moment! Did I not know Mrs. Graham? Had I not conversed with her time after time? Was I not certain that she, in intellect, in purity and elevation of soul, was immeasurably superior to any of her detractors; that she was, in fact, the noblest, the most adorable, of her sex?

My brain was on fire with indignation, and my heart seemed ready to burst with conflicting passions. I regarded my two fair neighbours with an abhorrence I scarcely endeavoured to conceal. I was neglecting them, but I cared little for that: all I cared about, besides that one grand subject of my thoughts, was to see the tea-time ended. I thought Mr. Millward would never finish his fourth cup.

At length it was over; and I rose and left the table and the guests without a word of apology – I could endure their company no longer. I rushed out to cool my brain in the balmy evening air, and to compose my mind in the solitude of the garden.

To avoid being seen from the windows I went down a quiet little avenue, at the bottom of which was a seat embowered in roses and honeysuckles. Here I sat down to think over the virtues and wrongs of the lady of Wildfell Hall; but two minutes later, voices and laughter, and glimpses of movement through the trees, informed me that the whole company had turned out to take an airing in the garden too. Confound it – there was someone coming down the avenue! Why couldn't they leave the sunless nook to me and the midges?

But, peeping through my screen of interwoven branches to discover who the intruders were, my vexation instantly subsided; for there was Mrs. Graham, slowly moving down the walk with Arthur, and no one else. Why were they alone? Had the others all turned their backs upon her?

I now recollected having seen Mrs. Wilson, earlier in the evening, edging her chair close to my mother; and from the wagging of her head, and the faces she pulled, I judged it was some spicy piece of scandal that engaged her; and from my mother's looks of horror and incredulity, I now concluded its object to have been Mrs. Graham. I did not emerge from my place of concealment till she had nearly reached the bottom of the walk, lest my appearance should drive her away. When I did step forward she stopped and seemed inclined to turn back.

'Oh, don't let us disturb you, Mr. Markham!' said she. 'We came here to seek seclusion ourselves, not to intrude on yours.'

'Sit here a little and rest, and tell me how you like this arbour,' said I, and, lifting Arthur by the shoulders, I planted him in the middle of the seat by way of securing his mamma. She sat back in one corner, while I took the other. Had their unkindness really driven her to seek solitude?

'Why have they left you alone?' I asked.

'It is I who have left them,' was the smiling rejoinder. 'I was wearied to death with small talk. I cannot imagine how they can go on as they do.'

I could not help smiling.

'Is it that they think it a duty to be continually talking,' pursued she: 'and so never pause to think, or do they really take a pleasure in such discourse?'

'Very likely they do,' said I bitterly; 'their shallow minds can hold no great ideas. Their only alternative is to plunge over head and ears into the mire of scandal – which is their chief delight.'

'Not all of them, surely?' cried the lady, astonished at my bitterness.

'No, certainly; I exonerate my sister from such degraded tastes, and my mother too.'

'I intended no disrespect to your mother. I know some sensible people are very adept at small talk when circumstances impel them to it; but it is a gift I cannot boast of. I stole away to seek a few minutes' repose. I hate talking where there is no exchange of ideas or feelings, and no good given or received.'

'Well,' said I, 'if ever I trouble you with my loquacity, tell me so at once, and I promise not to be offended; for I enjoy the company of those I – of my friends just as well in silence as in conversation.'

'I don't quite believe you; but if it were so you would exactly suit me for a companion.'

'I am all you wish, then, in other respects?'

'No, I don't mean that. How beautiful those little clusters of foliage look, where the sun comes through them!' said she.

And they did look beautiful, where the level rays of the sun, penetrating the trees, displayed patches of leaves of resplendent golden green.

‘I almost wish I were not a painter,’ observed she. ‘Instead of full enjoyment of such sights, I am always thinking about how I could produce the same effect on canvas; and as that can never be done, it is mere vanity and vexation of spirit.’

‘Perhaps you cannot do it to satisfy yourself, but you may and do delight others with the result of your endeavours.’

‘Well, after all, I should not complain: few people gain their livelihood with so much pleasure in their toil as I do. Here is someone coming.’

‘It is only Mr. Lawrence and Miss Wilson,’ said I, ‘having a quiet stroll. They will not disturb us.’

‘What sort of a person is Miss Wilson?’ she asked.

‘She is elegant and accomplished; and some say she is ladylike and agreeable.’

‘I thought her somewhat frigid in her manner today.’

‘Very likely she might be so to you. She has possibly taken a prejudice against you, for I think she regards you as a rival.’

‘Me! Impossible, Mr. Markham!’ said she, evidently astonished and annoyed.

‘Well, I know nothing about it,’ returned I, rather doggedly.

The pair had now approached within a few paces of us. Our arbour was set snugly back in a corner, where the avenue turned off into the more airy walk along the bottom of the garden. I saw that Jane Wilson was drawing her companion’s attention to us; and, by both her cold, sarcastic smile and the words that reached me, I knew full well that she was impressing him with the idea that we were strongly attached to each other. I noticed that he flushed, gave us one furtive glance in passing, and walked on, looking grave, but offering no reply to her remarks.

It was true, then, that he had some designs upon Mrs. Graham. If they were honourable, he would not be so anxious to conceal them. She was blameless, of course, but he was detestable beyond all count.

While these thoughts flashed through my mind, my companion abruptly rose, and calling her son, said they would now seek company, and departed up the avenue. Doubtless she had heard Miss Wilson’s remarks, and therefore chose to continue the tête-à-tête no longer. For this I owed Miss Wilson yet another grudge; and the more I thought about her conduct the more I hated her.

It was late in the evening before I joined the others; I found Mrs. Graham ready to depart, and offered to accompany her home. Mr. Lawrence was standing by conversing with someone. He did not look at us, but he paused in the middle of a sentence to listen for her reply, and went on talking with a look of quiet satisfaction, when he heard her refusal.

A decided refusal it was, though not unkind. She did not think there could be any danger for herself or her child in traversing those lonely lanes alone. It was daylight still, and she would meet no one. In fact, she would not hear of anyone’s putting himself out to accompany her, though Fergus also offered his services, and my mother begged she might send one of the farming-men to escort her.

When she was gone, the rest was all a blank or worse. Lawrence attempted to draw me into conversation, but I snubbed him. Shortly afterwards the party broke up and he said his goodbyes. When he came to me I was blind to his extended hand, and deaf to his

good night till he repeated it a second time; and then, to get rid of him, I muttered a sulky, inarticulate reply.

‘What is the matter, Markham?’ whispered he. ‘Are you angry because Mrs. Graham would not let you go home with her?’ His faint smile nearly exasperated me beyond control.

But, swallowing down all fiercer answers, I merely demanded, ‘What business is it of yours?’

‘Why, none,’ replied he with provoking quietness; ‘only,’ and he spoke with unusual solemnity, ‘only let me tell you, Markham, that if you have any designs in that quarter, they will certainly fail. It grieves me to see you cherishing false hopes, and wasting your strength in useless efforts, for—’

‘Hypocrite!’ I exclaimed; and he looked very blank, turned white about the gills, and went away without another word.

I had wounded him to the quick; and I was glad of it.

## Chapter 10

When all were gone, I learnt that the vile slander had indeed been circulated throughout the company. Rose, however, vowed she would not believe it, and my mother said the same, though not with the same unwavering incredulity. It seemed to dwell on her mind, and she kept irritating me by saying, 'Dear, dear, who would have thought it! – Well! I always thought there was something odd about her. – This is a sad, sad business, to be sure!'

'Why, mother, you said you didn't believe these tales,' said Fergus.

'No more I do, my dear; but then, you know, they must have some foundation.'

'The foundation is in the wickedness and falsehood of the world,' said I, 'and in the fact that Mr. Lawrence has been seen to go that way once or twice – and the village gossips say he goes to pay his addresses to the lady, and the scandal-mongers have greedily seized the rumour and expanded it.'

'But, Gilbert, there must be something in her manner to cause such reports.'

'Did you see anything in her manner?'

'No; but I always said there was something strange about her.'

That evening, I ventured on another invasion of Wildfell Hall. Since our party, over a week ago, I had been making daily efforts to meet Mrs. Graham in her walks; and had been always disappointed.

At length I concluded that the separation could be endured no longer (by this time, you will see, I was pretty far gone); and, taking from the bookcase an old volume that I thought she might be interested in, I hastened away; but not without misgivings as to how she would receive me. I hoped I might see her in the field or the garden, for the formal knocking at the door disturbed me.

My wish, however, was not gratified. Mrs. Graham was not to be seen; but Arthur was playing with his little dog in the garden. I looked over the gate and called to him. He wanted me to come in, but I told him I could not without his mother's leave.

'I'll go and ask her,' said the child.

'No, no, Arthur; but if she's not busy, just ask her to come here a minute. Tell her I want to speak to her.'

He ran off, and quickly returned with his mother. How lovely she looked with her dark ringlets streaming in the light summer breeze, her fair cheek slightly flushed, and her face radiant with smiles. Dear Arthur! what did I not owe to you for this and every other happy meeting? Through him I was at once delivered from all formality. In love affairs, there is no mediator like a merry, simple-hearted child.

'Well, Mr. Markham, what is it?' said the young mother, with a pleasant smile.

'Please take this book, to read at your leisure. That is all.'

'Tell him to come in, mamma,' said Arthur.

'Would you like to come in?' asked the lady.

'Yes; I should like to see your improvements in the garden.'

'Your sister's roots have prospered in my charge,' said she, as she opened the gate.

We sauntered through the garden, and talked of the flowers, the trees, the book, and other things. The evening was kind, and so was my companion. By degrees I became more warm and tender than, perhaps, I had ever been before; but still I said nothing tangible, and she attempted no repulse, until, in passing a rose-tree that I had brought her some weeks since, in my sister's name, she plucked a beautiful half-open bud and bade me give it to Rose.

'May I not keep it myself?' I asked.

'No; but here is another for you.'

Instead of taking it quietly, I took the hand that offered it. She let me hold it for a moment, and I saw a flash of ecstasy, a glow of glad excitement on her face. I thought my hour of victory was come – but instantly a painful recollection seemed to check her; a cloud of anguish darkened her brow, a marble paleness blanched her lip; and, with a sudden effort, she withdrew her hand, and retreated a step or two back.

'Now, Mr. Markham,' said she, with a kind of desperate calmness, 'I must tell you plainly that I cannot do with this. I like your company, and your conversation pleases me more than that of any other person; but if you cannot be content to regard me as a friend, I must beg you to leave me alone: in fact, we must be strangers.'

'I will be your friend, or brother, or anything you wish, if you will only let me continue to see you; but why can I not be anything more? Is it because of some rash vow?'

'It is something of the kind,' she answered after a pause. 'Some day I may tell you, but at present you had better leave me. And, Gilbert, never make me have to repeat what I have just said,' she earnestly added, giving me her hand in serious kindness. How sweet, how musical my name sounded in her mouth!

'I will not,' I replied. 'But may I come to see you now and then?'

'Perhaps – occasionally; provided you never abuse the privilege. The moment you do our intimacy is at an end.'

'And will you call me Gilbert? It sounds more sisterly, and it will remind me of our contract.'

She smiled, and once more bid me go; and I judged it prudent to obey, and went down the hill. But the tramp of horses' hoofs fell on my ear, and broke the stillness of the evening. Looking towards the lane, I saw a solitary horseman coming up. I knew him at a glance: it was Mr. Lawrence on his grey pony.

I flew across the field, leaped the wall, and then walked down the lane to meet him. On seeing me, he suddenly drew in his little steed, and seemed inclined to turn back, but on second thought rode on. He accosted me with a slight bow, and, edging close to the wall, endeavoured to pass; but I was not so minded. Seizing his horse by the bridle, I exclaimed, 'Now, Lawrence, I will have this mystery explained! Tell me where you are going, and what you mean to do – at once!'

'Will you take your hand off the bridle?' said he, quietly. 'You're hurting my pony's mouth.'

'You and your pony be—'

'What makes you so coarse and brutal, Markham? I'm quite ashamed of you.'

‘You answer my questions! Before you leave this spot I will know what you mean by this perfidious duplicity!’

‘I shall answer no questions till you let go the bridle.’

‘Now then,’ said I, opening my hand.

‘Ask me some other time, when you can speak like a gentleman,’ returned he, and he made an effort to pass me again; but I quickly re-captured the pony. ‘Really, Mr. Markham, this is too much!’ he said. ‘Can I not go to see my tenant on matters of business, without being assaulted in this manner?’

‘This is no time for business, sir! I’ll tell you, now, what I think of your conduct.’

‘You’d better wait till another time,’ he interrupted in a low tone; ‘here’s the vicar.’ And, in truth, the vicar was just behind me, plodding homeward from some corner of his parish. I immediately released Lawrence, and he went on his way, saluting Mr. Millward as he passed.

‘What! quarrelling, Markham?’ cried the vicar. ‘About that young widow, no doubt?’ he added, reproachfully shaking his head. Let me tell you, young man, she’s not worth it!’

‘Mr. Millward,’ I exclaimed, in a tone of such wrathful menace that he looked round, astounded. But I was too indignant to apologise, or to speak another word: I turned away, and, descending the steep, rough lane with rapid strides, I hastened homewards.

## Chapter 11

About three weeks passed. Mrs. Graham and I were now established friends – or brother and sister, as we rather chose to consider ourselves. She called me Gilbert, and I called her Helen. I seldom attempted to see her more than twice a week; and I made our meetings appear accidental as often as I could. Altogether, I behaved with such propriety that she never had occasion to reprove me once.

Yet I could not help seeing that she was at times unhappy, and truly I myself was not quite contented: this assumption of brotherly nonchalance was very hard to sustain, and I often felt myself a most confounded hypocrite. I knew that I was not indifferent to her, and while I thankfully enjoyed my present good fortune, I hoped for something better in future. But, of course, I kept such dreams entirely to myself.

‘Where are you going, Gilbert?’ said Rose one evening, shortly after tea, when I had been busy with the farm all day.

‘To take a walk.’

‘Do you always brush your hat so carefully, and do your hair so nicely when you take a walk? You’re going to Wildfell Hall, aren’t you? I wish you wouldn’t go so often.’

‘Nonsense, child! I don’t go once in six weeks. What do you mean?’

‘Well, if I were you, I wouldn’t have so much to do with Mrs. Graham.’

‘Why, Rose, are you, too, giving in to the prevailing opinion?’

‘No,’ returned she, hesitatingly; ‘but I’ve heard so much about her lately, both at the Wilsons’ and the vicarage; and besides, mamma says, if she were a proper person she would not be living there by herself. And don’t you remember last winter, Gilbert, all that about the false name to the picture; and how she said she had acquaintances from whom she wished her residence to be concealed? And then, how suddenly she started up and left the room when that person came, whom she took good care not to let us catch a glimpse of, and who Arthur told us was his mamma’s friend?’

‘Yes, Rose, I remember it; and perhaps, if I did not know her, I should believe the same as you do; but thank God, I do know her; and I should be unworthy the name of a man, if I could believe anything that was said against her, unless I heard it from her own lips. I should as soon believe such things of you, Rose.’

‘Oh, Gilbert!’

‘Well, do you think I could believe anything of the kind about you, whatever the Wilsons and Millwards dared to whisper?’

‘I should hope not!’

‘And why not? Because I know you. Well, I know her just as well.’

‘But you know nothing of her former life.’

‘No matter. There is such a thing as looking through a person’s eyes into the heart, and learning more about another’s soul in one hour than it might take you a lifetime to discover.’

‘Then you are going to see her this evening?’

‘To be sure I am!’

‘But what would mamma say, Gilbert?’

‘Mamma needn’t know.’

‘But she must know some time, if you go on.’

‘Go on! There’s no going on in the matter. Mrs. Graham and I are two friends, and no one has a right to interfere between us.’

‘But if you knew how they talk you would be more careful, for her sake as well as for your own. Jane Wilson thinks your visits to the old hall but another proof of her depravity —’

‘Confound Jane Wilson!’

‘And Eliza Millward is quite grieved about you.’

‘I hope she is. How do they know that I go there?’

‘They spy out everything.’

‘And so they dare to turn my friendship into food for further scandal! Mind you contradict them, Rose, whenever you can.’

‘They don’t speak openly to me about such things: it is only hints and innuendoes.’

‘Well, I won’t go today, as it’s getting late. But deuce take their cursed, envenomed tongues!’ I muttered, in bitterness.

Just at that moment the vicar entered the room: we had been too absorbed in our conversation to hear his knock. After his customary cheerful and fatherly greeting of Rose, who was rather a favourite with him, he turned sternly to me.

‘Well, sir!’ said he, as he deposited his ponderous bulk in the arm-chair, ‘you’re quite a stranger. It is just six weeks since you darkened – my – door!’ He spoke it with emphasis, and struck his stick on the floor.

‘Is it, sir?’ said I.

‘Ay! It is so!’ He gazed upon me with irate solemnity.

‘I have been busy,’ I said. ‘I’ve been getting in my hay; now the harvest is beginning.’

‘Humph!’

Just then my mother came in, and created a diversion in my favour by her animated welcome of the reverend guest. She offered to have some tea immediately prepared.

‘Not for me, I thank you,’ replied he; ‘I shall be going home in a few minutes.’

‘Oh, but do stay and take a little!’

He rejected the offer with a majestic wave of the hand. ‘I’ll tell you what I’ll take, Mrs. Markham,’ said he: ‘a glass of your excellent ale.’

‘With pleasure!’ cried my mother, summoning the maid.

‘I thought,’ continued he, ‘I’d just look in upon you as I passed. I’ve been to call on Mrs. Graham.’

‘Have you, indeed?’

He nodded gravely, and added with awful emphasis – ‘I thought it incumbent upon me to do so.’

‘Why so, Mr. Millward?’ I asked.

He looked at me severely, and turning again to my mother, repeated, ‘I thought it incumbent upon me!’ and struck his stick on the floor again. “‘Mrs. Graham,” said I to her,’ he continued, shaking his head, “‘these are terrible reports!” “What, sir?” says she, affecting to be ignorant of my meaning. “It is my duty as your pastor,” said I, “to tell you

everything that I see reprehensible in your conduct, and all I have reason to suspect, and what others tell me concerning you.” So I told her!

‘You did, sir?’ cried I, starting from my seat and striking my fist on the table. He merely glanced towards me, and continued to my mother:

‘It was a painful duty, Mrs. Markham – but I told her!’

‘And how did she take it?’ asked my mother.

‘Hardened, I fear – hardened!’ he replied, with a shake of the head. ‘She turned white in the face, and drew her breath through her teeth in a savage sort of way; but she offered no defence; and with a kind of shameless calmness – shocking indeed to witness in one so young – she as good as told me that my remonstrance was useless, and my pastoral advice quite thrown away upon her – nay, that my very presence was displeasing while I spoke such things. So I withdrew, plainly seeing that nothing could be done, and grieved to find her case so hopeless. But I am fully determined, Mrs. Markham, that my daughters shall not associate with her. Neither should yours. As for your sons – as for you, young man–,’ he continued, sternly turning to me.

‘As for me, sir,’ I began, but could not go on. Finding that my whole frame trembled with fury, I said no more, but snatched up my hat and bolted from the room, slamming the door behind me with a bang that shook the house to its foundations, and gave a momentary relief to my feelings.

I hurried with rapid strides towards Wildfell Hall – with what purpose I could scarcely tell, but I had to be moving somewhere, and no other goal would do. I must see her and speak to her – that was certain; but what to say, I had no definite idea. Such stormy thoughts crowded in upon me, that my mind was a chaos of conflicting passions.

## Chapter 12

In little more than twenty minutes I was there. I paused at the gate to wipe my forehead, and recover my breath and composure. Already the rapid walk had calmed me; and with a firm and steady tread I went down the garden-walk. I caught sight of Mrs. Graham through the open window, slowly pacing up and down her lonely room.

She seemed agitated and even dismayed at my arrival, as if she thought I too was coming to accuse her. I entered the room intending to sympathise with her about the wickedness of the world, and help her to abuse the vicar and his vile informants, but now I felt positively ashamed to mention the subject, and was determined not to refer to it unless she did.

‘I am come at an unseasonable hour,’ said I, assuming a cheerfulness I did not feel; ‘but I won’t stay long.’

She smiled upon me, faintly but kindly – almost thankfully.

‘How gloomy it is, Helen! Why have you no fire?’ I said.

‘It is still summer,’ she replied.

‘But we always have a fire in the evenings; and you need one in this cold and dreary room.’

‘If you had come a little sooner, I would have had one lit for you: but it is not worth while now – you say you won’t stay long, and Arthur is gone to bed.’

‘Will you order one, if I ring?’

‘Why, Gilbert, you don’t look cold!’ said she, smilingly.

‘No, but I want to see you comfortable before I go.’

‘Comfortable!’ repeated she, with a bitter laugh. ‘It suits me better as it is.’

But determined to have my own way, I pulled the bell.

‘There now, Helen!’ I said, as Rachel came in answer to the summons; she had to ask the maid to light the fire. Rachel, before she departed, cast on me a sour, suspicious look that plainly demanded, ‘What are you here for?’

Her mistress noticed it, and looked uneasy.

‘You must not stay long, Gilbert,’ said she, when the door was closed.

‘I’m not going to. But, Helen, I’ve something to say before I go.’

‘What is it?’

‘I don’t know yet precisely what it is, or how to say it,’ replied I, and then, fearing lest she should turn me out, I began talking about indifferent matters in order to gain time. Meanwhile Rachel came in to kindle the fire. She gave me another of her hard, inhospitable looks as she left, but I went on talking; and setting chairs for Mrs. Graham and myself on either side of the hearth, I sat down, though suspecting she would rather see me go.

In a little while we both relapsed into silence, gazing abstractedly into the fire – she intent upon her own sad thoughts, and I reflecting how delightful it would be to be seated thus beside her – if only I could speak my mind, and express my feelings. I revolved the pros and cons for opening my heart to her there and then: imploring her affection and the right to defend her from malicious tongues.

On the one hand, I felt convinced that my own fervour would grant me eloquence – that the absolute necessity for succeeding must win me what I sought; while, on the other hand, I feared to lose the ground I had already gained, and destroy all future hope by one rash effort, when time and patience might have won success. It was like setting my life upon the roll of a dice; and yet I was ready to make the attempt.

But while I considered how I could best begin, my companion, with a low sigh, looked towards the window, where the blood-red harvest moon was shining in upon us, and said, ‘Gilbert, it is getting late.’

‘You want me to go?’

‘I think you ought. If my kind neighbours get to know of this visit – as no doubt they will – they will not turn it to my advantage.’ She said this with what the vicar would doubtless have called a savage sort of smile.

‘Let them,’ said I. ‘What are their thoughts to you or me, so long as we are satisfied with ourselves? Let them go to the deuce with their vile lies!’

This outburst brought a flush of colour to her face.

‘You have heard, then, what they say of me?’

‘I heard some detestable falsehoods; but none but fools would credit them, Helen, so don’t let them trouble you.’

‘I did not think Mr. Millward a fool, and he believes it all; but however little you may value the opinions of others, it is not pleasant to be looked upon as a liar, to be thought vicious and disgraceful, to find your good intentions frustrated, and your hands crippled by your supposed unworthiness.’

‘True; and if I have exposed you to these evils, I entreat you not only to pardon me, but authorise me to clear your name from every imputation. Give me the right to identify your honour with my own, and to defend your reputation as more precious than my life!’

‘Are you hero enough to unite yourself to one whom you know to be suspected and despised by all around you, and link your honour with hers? Think! it is a serious thing.’

‘I should be proud to do it, Helen! Happy and delighted! And if that be all the obstacle to our union, it is demolished, and you must – you shall be mine!’

And jumping from my seat in a frenzy of ardour, I seized her hand and would have pressed it to my lips. But she pulled it away, exclaiming in intense affliction, ‘No, no, it is not all!’

‘What is it, then? You promised I should know some time.’

‘You shall know some time – but not now – my head aches terribly,’ she said, pressing her hand to her forehead, ‘and I must have some rest. Surely I have had misery enough today!’ she added, almost wildly.

‘But it could not harm you to tell your trouble,’ I persisted: ‘it would ease your mind; and I should then know how to comfort you.’

She shook her head despondingly. ‘If you knew all, you too would blame me, perhaps even more than I deserve – though I have cruelly wronged you,’ she added in a low murmur, as if she mused aloud.

‘You, Helen? Impossible?’

‘Yes, but not willingly; for I did not know the strength of your attachment. I thought – at least I tried to think your regard for me was brotherly, as mine ought to have been.’

I thought there could be no great harm in leaving your hopes to dream themselves to nothing – or flutter away to some more fitting object; but if I had known the depth of your regard, the generous affection you seem to feel—’

‘Seem, Helen?’

‘That you do feel, then – I would have acted differently.’

‘How? You could not have treated me with greater severity than you did! If you think you have wronged me by giving me your friendship, and the enjoyment of your company, you are mistaken; for I would rather have your friendship than the love of any other woman in the world!’

Little comforted by this, she clasped her hands upon her knee, and glancing upward, seemed, in silent anguish, to implore divine assistance. Then, turning to me, she calmly said:

‘Tomorrow, if you meet me on the moor about mid-day, I will tell you all you seek to know; and perhaps you will then see the necessity of discontinuing our friendship.’

‘I can safely answer no to that: you cannot have such grave confessions to make. You must be trying my faith, Helen.’

‘I have no great crime to confess; but I have more than you will like to hear, or, perhaps, can readily excuse – and more than I can tell you now; so please leave me!’

‘I will; but answer me one question first; do you love me?’

‘I will not answer it!’

‘Then I will conclude you do; and so good-night.’

She turned from me to hide the emotion she could not control; but I took her hand and fervently kissed it.

‘Gilbert, do leave me!’ she cried, in such an anguished tone that I felt it would be cruel to disobey.

But I gave one look back before I closed the door, and saw her leaning on the table, with her hands pressed against her eyes, sobbing convulsively; yet I withdrew in silence. I felt that to try and console her then would only serve to aggravate her sufferings.

To tell you all the conjectures – the fears, and hopes, and wild emotions that jostled each other through my mind as I descended the hill, would almost fill a volume in itself. But before I was half-way down, my sympathy for her had displaced all other feelings, and seemed to draw me back.

I began to think, ‘Why am I hurrying home so fast? Can I find peace or comfort there? and can I leave all sorrow and anxiety behind me?’

And I turned round to look at the old Hall. Little of it was visible from where I stood, so I walked back to get a better view. Something called me nearer – nearer still – and why not, pray? Might I not benefit more from seeing that venerable house with the full moon shining so calmly above it, than in returning to my cheerful home, whose inmates all held that detestable belief which made my blood boil? I had trouble enough already, with some babbling fiend that would keep whispering in my ear, ‘It may be true!’

I could see the red firelight dimly gleaming from her parlour window. I went up to the garden wall, and stood leaning over it, wondering what she was doing now, and wishing I could speak to her but one word, or even catch one glimpse of her, before I went.

Then I vaulted over the barrier, unable to resist the temptation of taking a glance through the window, just to see if she were more composed than when we parted. If I found her still in deep distress, perhaps I might venture a word of comfort.

I looked. Her chair was vacant: so was the room. But at that moment someone opened the outer door, and her voice said, 'Come out – I want to see the moon, and breathe the evening air: they will do me good, if anything will.'

So she and Rachel must be coming to take a walk in the garden. I wished myself safely back over the wall; but stood in the shadow of the tall holly-bush, which screened me from observation. It did not prevent me from seeing two figures come forth into the moonlight: Mrs. Graham followed by another – not Rachel, but a young man. O heavens, how my head throbbed! It was Mr. Lawrence!

'You should not let it worry you so much, Helen,' said he; 'I will be more cautious in future; and in time—'

I did not hear the rest of the sentence; for he spoke so gently that I could not catch the words. My heart was splitting with hatred; but I listened intently for her reply. I heard it plainly enough.

'But I must leave this place, Frederick,' she said. 'I never can be happy here – nor anywhere else, indeed,' she added, with a mirthless laugh; 'but I cannot rest here.'

'But where could you find a better place?' replied he, 'so secluded – so near me, if you think anything of that.'

'Yes. It is all I could wish, if they could only have left me alone.'

'Wherever you go, Helen, there will be the same sources of annoyance. I cannot consent to lose you: I must go with you, or come to you; and there are meddling fools everywhere.'

While thus conversing they had sauntered slowly past me, down the walk, and I heard no more of their talk; but I saw him put his arm round her waist, while she lovingly rested her hand on his shoulder.

Then a tremulous darkness obscured my sight, my heart sickened and my head burned like fire. I half rushed, half staggered from the spot, and leaped or tumbled over the wall – I hardly know which – and, like a passionate child, threw myself on the ground and lay there in a paroxysm of anger and despair.

It must have been a considerable time later, when, after a torment of tears, I looked up at the moon, shining so calmly on, and earnestly prayed for death or forgetfulness. Then I rose and walked home, carried instinctively by my feet to the door. I found it bolted against me, and everyone in bed except my mother, who hastened to answer my impatient knocking, and received me with a shower of questions and rebukes.

'Oh, Gilbert! Where have you been? Do come in and take your supper. I've got it ready, though you don't deserve it, for keeping me in such a fright, after the strange way you left the house. Mr. Millward was quite— Bless the boy! how ill he looks. What is the matter?'

'Nothing, nothing – give me a candle. I want to go to bed.'

'Oh, Gilbert, how you tremble! Has anything happened?'

‘It’s nothing,’ cried I. Then, suppressing my irritation, I added, ‘I’ve been walking too fast, that’s all. Good-night,’ and I marched off to bed, regardless of the ‘Where have you been?’ that was called after me.

My mother followed me to the door of my room with her questionings; but I implored her to let me alone till morning. At last I heard her close her own door.

There would be no sleep for me that night, I thought; and instead of trying to sleep, I rapidly paced the chamber – having first removed my boots, lest my mother should hear me.

But the boards creaked, and she was watchful. Soon she was at the door again.

‘Gilbert, why are you not in bed? you said you wanted to go.’

‘Confound it! I’m going,’ said I.

‘But why are you taking so long? You must have something on your mind—’

‘For heaven’s sake, let me alone, and get to bed yourself.’

‘Is it that Mrs. Graham that distresses you so?’

‘No, I tell you – it’s nothing.’

With a sigh, she returned to her own room, while I threw myself on the bed.

Never did I endure so long, so miserable a night as that. And yet it was not wholly sleepless. Towards morning my distracting thoughts began to lose coherency, and shape themselves into confused and feverish dreams, and, at length, I fell into slumber.

But the dawn of bitter recollection that followed – the waking to find life a blank, and worse than a blank, teeming with torment and misery – to find myself deceived, duped, hopeless, my affections trampled upon, my angel not an angel, and my friend a fiend – it was worse than if I had not slept at all.

It was a dull, gloomy morning; the rain was pattering against the window. I rose, nevertheless, and went out; not to look after the farm, but to cool my brain, and regain enough composure to meet the family at breakfast. If I got a wetting, that might excuse my sudden loss of appetite; and if a cold ensued, the severer the better – it would help to account for my moping melancholy.

## Chapter 13

‘My dear Gilbert, I wish you would try to be a little more amiable,’ said my mother one morning, after some display of ill-humour on my part. ‘You say there is nothing the matter, and yet these last few days you haven’t a good word for anybody. I do wish you’d try to stop it. You don’t know how it spoils you.’

While she remonstrated, I took up a book, and pretended to be absorbed in it; for I was equally unable to justify myself and unwilling to acknowledge my errors. But my mother went on lecturing, and then began to coax me, and to stroke my hair; and I was getting to feel quite a good boy, until my mischievous brother suddenly called out:

‘Don’t touch him, mother! he’ll bite! He’s a tiger in human form. I’ve disowned him – I won’t come within six yards of him. The other day he nearly fractured my skull for singing a pretty love-song, just to amuse him.’

‘Oh, Gilbert! how could you?’ exclaimed my mother.

‘I told you to be quiet first, Fergus,’ said I.

‘Yes, but when I assured you it was no trouble and went on with the next verse, you pushed me right against the wall so hard that I thought I had bitten my tongue in two, and expected to see the place plastered with my brains. But, poor fellow!’ added he, with a sentimental sigh, ‘his heart’s broken – that’s the truth.’

‘Will you be silent?’ cried I, starting up, and eyeing him so fiercely that my mother laid her hand on my arm, and begged me to let him alone. He walked out with his hands in his pockets, singing provokingly.

‘Don’t worry – I wouldn’t touch him with the tongs,’ I told my mother.

I had business with Robert Wilson about the purchase of a field – a business I had been putting off, for I had no interest in anything now; and besides, I had a particular objection to meeting Jane Wilson or her mother. Even though I now had too good reason to believe their reports about Mrs. Graham, I did not like them any the better for it, and the thought of meeting them was repugnant to me.

But today I determined to return to my duty. Though I found no pleasure in it, it would be less irksome than idleness. Henceforth I would put my shoulder to the wheel and toil away, like any poor drudge of a cart-horse, and plod through life, not wholly useless if not agreeable, and uncomplaining if not contented with my lot.

Thus resolving, with sullen resignation, I went to Ryecote Farm, not expecting to find its owner in, but hoping to learn where he might be found.

He was out, but expected home in a few minutes; and I was invited into the parlour to wait. I just managed to check an involuntary recoil as I entered, for there sat Miss Wilson chattering with Eliza Millward.

However, I determined to be cool and civil. Eliza seemed to have made the same resolution. We had not met since the tea-party; but there was no display of pleasure or pain, or injured pride: she was cool in temper, civil in demeanour. There was even an ease and cheerfulness about her air; but a depth of malice in her plainly told me I was not forgiven, for, though she no longer hoped to win me, she still hated her rival, and delighted to wreak her spite on me.

On the other hand, Miss Wilson was affable and courteous, and the two ladies between them managed to keep up the small talk. But Eliza took advantage of the first pause to ask if I had lately seen Mrs. Graham, in a casual tone, but with a sidelong glance full of malice.

‘Not lately,’ I replied, in a careless manner, but vexed to feel the colour mounting to my forehead.

‘What! are you beginning to tire already? I thought so noble a creature would have power to attach you for a year at least!’

‘I would rather not speak of her just now.’

‘Ah! then you are convinced, at last, of your mistake – you have discovered that—’

‘I asked you not to speak of her, Miss Eliza.’

‘Oh, I beg your pardon! I perceive Cupid’s arrows have been too sharp for you: the wounds bleed afresh at every mention of the loved one’s name.’

‘Say, rather,’ interposed Miss Wilson, ‘that Mr. Markham feels that name is unworthy to be mentioned in the presence of right-minded females. I wonder, Eliza, that you should speak of that unfortunate person.’

How could this be borne? I rose to leave; but recollecting – just in time to save my dignity – how that would only give my tormentors a merry laugh at my expense, I merely walked to the window, and having spent a few seconds in sternly repressing my passion, I observed to Miss Wilson that I could no see no sign of her brother, and that it would perhaps be better to call again tomorrow.

‘Oh, no!’ said she; ‘if you wait a minute, he will be sure to come.’

So I submitted, and, luckily, I had not long to wait. Mr. Wilson soon arrived, and I forced my attention to the matter of the field, and quickly concluded the bargain. Then I gladly left the house, and went to look after my reapers.

Leaving them busy at work in the valley, I ascended the hill, intending to visit a corn-field and see when it would be ripe for the sickle. But as I approached, I beheld Mrs. Graham and her son coming down in the opposite direction.

They saw me; and Arthur already was running to meet me; but I immediately turned back and walked steadily homeward, for I had fully determined never to encounter his mother again. Regardless of the shrill voice in my ear, calling ‘wait a moment,’ I kept walking; and he soon gave up the pursuit, or was called away by his mother. At all events, when I looked back, five minutes after, not a trace of either was to be seen.

This incident agitated me most unaccountably; and I was rendered doubly miserable for the remainder of the day.

## Chapter 14

Next morning I had business at L—; so I mounted my horse, and set out soon after breakfast. It was a dull, drizzly day, but that suited my frame of mind. It was likely to be a lonely journey, for it was not market-day, and the road was quiet; but that suited me all the better too.

As I trotted along, however, I heard another horse not far behind me; but I never thought about who the rider might be, till, on my slowing to ascend a gentle slope, my fellow-traveller overtook me. He accosted me by name, for it was no stranger. It was Mr. Lawrence!

Instinctively the fingers of my whip-hand tingled with convulsive energy; but I restrained the impulse, and answering his salutation with a nod, attempted to push on. But he rode beside me, and began to talk about the weather and the crops. I gave the briefest possible answers to his observations, and fell back. He fell back too, and asked if my horse was lame. I replied with a look, at which he placidly smiled.

I was as much astonished as exasperated at this singular assurance on his part. I had thought the circumstances of our last meeting would have caused him to be cold and distant: instead, he appeared not only to have forgotten it, but to ignore my present incivilities. Formerly, the slightest hint had been enough to repulse him: now, positive rudeness could not drive him away. Had he heard of my disappointment; and was he come to triumph in my despair?

I grasped my whip with more determined energy than before – but still forbore to raise it, and rode on in silence, waiting for some more tangible cause of offence, before I opened the floodgates of my soul and poured out the dammed-up fury that was swelling within.

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

He said no more; for I had seized my whip by the small end, and – swift and sudden as a flash of lightning – brought the other down upon his head. With savage satisfaction I beheld the instant, deadly pallor that overspread his face, and the red drops that trickled down his forehead, while he reeled a moment in his saddle, and then fell backward to the ground.

The pony, surprised to be so strangely relieved of its burden, capered and kicked a little, and then went to crop the grass of the hedge-bank: while its master lay as still and silent as a corpse.

Had I killed him? An icy hand seemed to grasp my heart, as I bent over him, gazing at the ghastly, upturned face. But no; he moved his eyelids and uttered a slight groan.

I breathed again: he was only stunned by the fall. It served him right. Should I help him to his horse? No. He could mount it himself, if he liked: already he was beginning to stir and look about him.

So with a muttered curse I left the fellow, and galloped away, with a combination of feelings it would not be easy to analyse; but which were not very creditable to me, for a kind exaltation was foremost in my mind.

Shortly, however, it abated, and a few minutes later I had turned and gone back to look for my victim. It was no generous impulse that led me to this; it was simply the voice of conscience; and I took great credit to myself for attending so promptly to its dictates.

Mr. Lawrence and his pony had both moved in some degree. The pony had wandered eight or ten yards further away; and he had managed, somehow, to move himself from the middle of the road. I found him sitting slumped on the bank, looking very white and sickly, and holding his handkerchief to his head. The grass he sat on was sodden; his clothes were muddied; and his hat was on the far side of the road. But his thoughts seemed chiefly bent upon his pony, on which he was gazing in helpless anxiety.

I dismounted, and having tethered my own animal to the nearest tree, picked up his hat, intending to clap it on his head; but he shrank away, took it from my hand, and scornfully cast it aside.

My next good deed was to catch his pony and bring it to him. The beast was quiet enough, and only flirted a trifle till I got hold of the bridle; but then I needed to get him in the saddle.

‘Here, you fellow – scoundrel – dog – give me your hand, and I’ll help you mount.’

No; he turned from me in disgust.

‘What, you won’t! Well! you may sit there till doomsday, for all I care. But I’ll just bind that wound up for you.’

‘Let me alone, please.’

‘Humph; with all my heart. You may go to the d—l, if you choose – and say I sent you.’

I flung his pony’s bridle over a stake in the hedge, and threw him my handkerchief, as his own was now saturated with blood. He cast it back to me with all the strength he could muster.

So I left him to live or die as he could, well satisfied that I had done my duty in attempting to save him – but forgetting how I had erred in bringing him into such a condition, and how insultingly I had offered my services. I was sullenly prepared to meet the consequences if he should choose to say I had attempted to murder him – which I thought quite likely.

Having remounted my horse, I looked back to see how he was getting on, before I rode away. He had risen from the ground, and grasping his pony’s mane, was attempting to resume his seat in the saddle; but scarcely had he put his foot in the stirrup, when dizziness seemed to overpower him. He leant forward a moment, with his head drooped on the animal’s back, and then sank back on the grass, where I left him, to all appearance, reclining as calmly as if he had been resting on his sofa.

I ought to have helped him – to have bound up the wound, and insisted upon getting him on his horse and seeing him safe home; but, besides my bitter indignation, there was the question what to say to his servants, and to my own family. Either I should have to acknowledge the deed, or I must tell a lie, which seemed equally out of the question –

especially as Mr. Lawrence would probably reveal the whole truth, and thereby bring me to tenfold disgrace.

But he had only received a cut on the head, and perhaps a few bruises: that could not kill him. And surely someone would be coming by: it was impossible that a whole day should pass without him being found. As for what he might choose to say, I would take my chance about it. If he told lies, I would contradict him; if he told the truth, I would bear it as best I could. Perhaps he might choose to be silent, for fear of drawing public attention to his connection with Mrs. Graham, which he seemed so very desirous to conceal.

Thus reasoning, I trotted away to the town, where I duly transacted my business, and did some shopping for my mother and Rose, with very laudable exactitude in the circumstances. In returning home, I was troubled with misgivings about Lawrence. What if I should find him lying still on the damp earth, fairly dying of cold and exhaustion – or already stark and chill? The appalling possibility pictured itself with painful vividness to my imagination as I approached the spot where I had left him.

But no, thank heaven, both man and horse were gone, and nothing was left as witness against me but two objects – the hat saturated with rain and broken by that villainous whip-handle; and the crimson handkerchief, soaking in a pool of water.

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

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

'You must go and see him tomorrow,' said my mother.

'Or today,' suggested Rose: 'there's plenty of time. Won't you, Gilbert, as soon as you've had something to eat?'

'No, no – how can we tell that it isn't a false report?'

'Oh, I'm sure it isn't; for I saw two people that had seen others that had seen the man that found him.'

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

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

'What, his quiet little pony?'

'How do you know it was that?'

'He seldom rides any other.'

'At any rate,' said my mother, 'call on him tomorrow. Whether it is exaggerated or not, we shall like to know how he is.'

'Fergus may go. I am busy just now.'

'Oh! but, Gilbert, how can you be so composed about it? Your friend is at the point of death.'

‘He is not, I tell you.’

‘For anything you know, he may be: you can’t tell till you have seen him.’

‘Confound it! I can’t. He and I have not been on good terms lately.’

‘Oh, my dear boy! Surely you are not so unforgiving as to carry your little differences to such a length—’

‘Little differences, indeed!’ I muttered. ‘Well, I’ll see.’

I sent Fergus next morning, with my mother’s compliments, to make inquiries; for, of course, my going was out of the question. He brought back news that the young squire was laid up with a broken head and bruises caused by a fall and the subsequent misconduct of his horse; and a severe cold, from lying on the wet ground in the rain; but there were no broken bones, and no danger.

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

## Chapter 15

That day was rainy; but towards evening it began to clear up a little, and the next morning was fair and promising. I was out on the hill with the reapers. A light wind swept over the corn, and all nature laughed in the sunshine. The lark was rejoicing among the silvery floating clouds, and the rain had sweetly freshened the air, and washed the sky.

But no ray of sunshine could reach my heart, no breeze could freshen it; nothing could fill the void my faith, and hope, and joy in Helen Graham had left, or drive away the keen regrets and bitter dregs of lingering love that still oppressed it.

While I stood with folded arms, abstractedly gazing on the undulating swell of the corn, something gently pulled my skirts, and a small voice aroused me, saying, 'Mr. Markham, mamma wants you.'

'Wants me, Arthur?'

'Yes. Why do you look so strange?' said he, half laughing, half frightened, 'and why have you kept so long away? Won't you come?'

'I'm busy just now,' I replied.

He looked up in childish bewilderment; but before I could speak again the lady herself was at my side.

'Gilbert, I must speak with you!' said she, in a tone of suppressed vehemence. 'Only for a moment. Just step aside into this other field.' She glanced at the reapers, some of whom were directing curious looks at her. 'I won't keep you a minute.'

I accompanied her through the gap.

'Arthur, darling, run and gather those bluebells,' said she, pointing to the hedge. The child hesitated, and then obeyed.

'Well, Mrs. Graham?' said I, calmly and coldly; for, though I saw she was miserable, I felt glad to have it in my power to torment her.

She fixed her eyes upon me with a look that pierced me to the heart; and yet it made me smile.

'I don't ask the reason of this change, Gilbert,' said she, with bitter calmness: 'I know it too well; but though I could see myself suspected and condemned by every one else, and bear it with calmness, I cannot endure it from you. Why did you not come to hear my explanation?'

'Because I happened to learn all you would have told me – and more.'

'Impossible, for I would have told you all!' cried she, passionately; 'but I won't now, for I see you are not worthy of it!'

'Why not, may I ask?'

She repelled my mocking smile with a glance of scornful indignation.

'Because you never understood me, or you would not have listened to my traducers. You are not the man I thought you. Go! I won't care what you think of me.'

She turned away, and I went; for I thought that would torment her; and I believe I was right; for, looking back a minute after, I saw her turn half round, as if hoping to find me still beside her. Then she stood still, and cast one look behind her in bitter anguish and despair.

I immediately pretended to be gazing carelessly elsewhere, and I suppose she went on; for when I ventured one more glance, I saw her a good way off, moving rapidly up the field, with little Arthur running by her side and apparently talking as he went; but she kept her face averted from him, as if to hide some uncontrollable emotion.

But I began to regret leaving her so soon. It was evident she loved me – probably she was tired of Mr. Lawrence, and wished to exchange him for me; and if I had loved her less to begin with, the preference might have gratified me; but now the contrast between my former and my present opinion of her was so harrowing – so distressing – that it swallowed up every lighter consideration.

But still I was curious to know what sort of an explanation she would have given me – how much she would confess, and how she would endeavour to excuse herself. I longed to know how much to pity her, and how much to hate. I would see her once more, and find out, before we parted.

Lost to me she was, for ever, of course; but I could not bear to think that we had parted for the last time with so much unkindness and misery on both sides. That last look of hers had sunk into my heart. But what a fool I was! Had she not deceived me, and blighted my happiness for life?

‘Well, I’ll see her,’ was my resolve, ‘but not today: tomorrow.’

I did go the next day, after my business was concluded, between six and seven in the evening. The westering sun was gleaming redly on the old Hall, and flaming in the latticed windows, as I reached it, giving the place a cheerfulness not its own. I need not describe the feelings with which I approached that spot teeming with a thousand delightful memories and glorious dreams – all darkened now by one disastrous truth.

Rachel admitted me into the parlour, and went to call her mistress: but a book lay upon the little round table. I picked it up. It was Sir Humphry Davy’s ‘Last Days of a Philosopher,’ and on the first leaf was written, ‘Frederick Lawrence.’ I closed the book, but kept it in my hand, and stood facing the door, calmly waiting her arrival. Soon I heard her step in the hall. My heart was beginning to throb, but I maintained my composure – outwardly at least. She entered, calm, pale, collected.

‘To what am I indebted for this favour, Mr. Markham?’ said she, with such severe but quiet dignity as almost disconcerted me.

‘Well, I am come to hear your explanation.’

‘I told you I would not give it,’ said she. ‘I said you were unworthy of my confidence.’

‘Very well,’ I replied, moving to the door.

‘Stay a moment,’ said she. ‘This is the last time I shall see you. Tell me why you believe these things against me; who told you; and what did they say?’

I paused a moment. She met my eye as unflinchingly as if she were innocent. ‘I can crush that bold spirit,’ thought I, disposed to dally with my victim like a cat. Showing her the book that I still held, and pointing to the name on the fly-leaf, I asked, ‘Do you know that gentleman?’

‘Of course I do,’ replied she, flushing – whether with shame or anger I could not tell.

‘How long is it since you saw him?’

‘Who gave you the right to question me on this or any other subject?’

‘Oh, no one! It’s up to you whether to answer or not. And let me ask – have you heard what has lately befallen this friend of yours? Because, if you have not—’

‘I will not be insulted, Mr. Markham!’ cried she, almost infuriated at my manner. ‘Leave the house at once, if you came only for that.’

‘I did not come to insult you: I came to hear your explanation.’

‘And I tell you I won’t give it!’ retorted she, pacing the room in a state of strong excitement, with her hands clasped tightly together. ‘I will not condescend to explain myself to one that can make a jest of such horrible suspicions, and be so easily led to believe them.’

‘I do not make a jest of them, Mrs. Graham,’ returned I, dropping my tone of taunting sarcasm. ‘I wish I could find them a jesting matter. And as to being easily led, God only knows what a blind, incredulous fool I have hitherto been, perseveringly shutting my eyes and stopping my ears against everything that threatened to shake my confidence in you, till I proof itself confounded me!’

‘What proof, sir?’

‘You remember that evening when I was here last? Even then you dropped some hints that might have opened the eyes of a wiser man; but I went on trusting and believing, hoping against hope, and adoring where I could not comprehend. It so happened, however, that after I left you I turned back – hoping to catch one glimpse of you through the window, just to see how you were: for I had left you in great affliction, and I partly blamed myself. If I did wrong, love alone was my incentive, and the punishment was severe; for it was just then that you came into the garden with your friend. I stood still, in the shadow, till you had both passed by.’

‘And how much of our conversation did you hear?’

‘I heard quite enough, Helen. And it was well for me that I did hear it; for nothing less could have cured my infatuation. I always said and thought, that I would never believe a word against you, unless I heard it from your own lips.’

Mrs. Graham had ceased her walk. She leant against one end of the chimney-piece, with her chin resting on her closed hand, her eye gleaming with restless excitement while I spoke.

‘You should have come to me after all,’ said she, ‘and heard what I had to say. It was ungenerous and wrong to withdraw yourself so secretly and suddenly, without ever giving me a reason. You should have told me all – no matter how bitterly. It would have been better than this silence.’

‘Why? You could not have made me disbelieve my senses. I wanted our intimacy to stop at once; but I did not wish to upbraid you, though you had deeply wronged me. Yes, you have done me an injury you can never repair – you have made my life a wilderness! I might live a hundred years, but I could never recover from the effects of this withering blow – and never forget it! You smile, Mrs. Graham,’ said I, suddenly stopping short.

‘Did I?’ replied she, looking up seriously; ‘I was not aware of it. If I did, it was not for pleasure at the thoughts of the harm I had done you. Rather, it was for joy to find that you had some depth of feeling after all, and that I had not been utterly mistaken in your worth.’

She looked at me again, but I continued silent.

‘Would you be very glad,’ resumed she, ‘to find that you were mistaken in your conclusions?’

‘How can you ask it, Helen?’

‘I don’t say I can clear myself altogether,’ said she, speaking low and fast, ‘but would you be glad to discover I was better than you think me?’

‘Anything that could in the least degree restore my former opinion of you, would be only too gladly, too eagerly received!’

Her cheeks burned, and her whole frame trembled, now, in agitation. She flew to her desk, and snatching from it what seemed a thick manuscript volume, hastily tore away a few leaves from the end, and thrust the rest into my hand, saying, ‘You needn’t read it all; but take it home with you.’ She hurried from the room.

But when I had left the house, and was proceeding down the walk, she opened the window and called me. ‘Bring it back when you have read it; and don’t breathe a word of what it tells you to any living being. I trust to your honour.’

Before I could answer she had closed the window and turned away. I saw her slump into the old oak chair, and cover her face with her hands.

Struggling to suppress my hopes, I hurried home, and rushed upstairs to my room, then bolted the door, determined to tolerate no interruption. Sitting down, I opened out my prize – first hastily turning over the leaves and snatching a sentence here and there, and then setting myself steadily to read it through.

I have it now before me; and though you could not, of course, read it with half the interest that I did, you shall have the whole, save, perhaps, a few passages that would encumber the story rather than elucidate it. It begins somewhat abruptly, in this way – but we will save its beginning for another chapter.

## Chapter 16

### Helen's Journal

June 1st, 1821.

We left town sooner than intended, because of my uncle's poor health, and returned to Staningley some days ago. I am not yet settled, and feel as if I never should be.

I am quite ashamed of my new-sprung distaste for country life. All my former occupations seem tedious and dull. I cannot enjoy my music, because there is no one to hear it. I cannot enjoy my walks, because there is no one to meet. I cannot enjoy my books, because my head is so haunted with the recollections of the last few weeks that I cannot attend to them.

My drawing suits me best, for I can draw and think at the same time. But there is one face I am always trying to sketch, and always without success; and that vexes me. As for the owner of that face, I cannot get him out of my mind – and, indeed, I never try. I wonder whether he ever thinks of me; and whether I shall ever see him again. And then might follow a train of other wonderments... amongst them, if he were to ask, and were I to say yes, whether I should repent it. My aunt would tell me that I should, if she knew what I was thinking about.

How distinctly I remember our conversation that evening before our departure for town, when we were sitting together over the fire.

'Helen,' said she, after a thoughtful silence, 'do you ever think about marriage?'

'Yes, aunt, often.'

'And do you ever contemplate the possibility of being married yourself, or engaged, before the season is over?'

'Sometimes; but I don't think it likely.'

'Why so?'

'Because, I imagine, there must be only a very few men in the world that I should like to marry; and of those few, it is ten to one I may never meet one. Or if I should, he may not be single, or take a fancy to me.'

'That is no argument at all. I hope it is true that there are very few men whom you would choose to marry. Indeed, you should not wish to marry anyone till you were asked: a girl's affections should never be won unsought. But when they are sought – when the citadel of the heart is fairly besieged – it is apt to surrender sooner than the owner is aware of, and often against her better judgment, and in opposition to all her preconceived ideas of who she could have loved, unless she is extremely careful. Now, I want to warn you, Helen, not to let your heart be stolen by the first foolish or unprincipled person that wants it. You know, my dear, you are only just eighteen; there is plenty of time, and neither your uncle nor I are in any hurry to get you off our hands. I think you will have no lack of suitors; for you have a pretty considerable fortune, and a fair share of beauty besides – and I hope you may never have cause to regret it!'

'I hope not, aunt; but why should you fear it?'

‘Because, my dear, beauty, next to money, generally attracts the worst kinds of men. I know many women that have been troubled in that way; and some, through carelessness, have been the wretched victims of deceit; and some, through weakness, have fallen into terrible snares.’

‘Well, I shall be neither careless nor weak.’

‘Keep a guard, Helen! Receive every attention dispassionately, till you have learnt and duly considered the man’s worth; and let your affections depend upon approval. First study; then approve; then love. Let your eyes be blind to all external attractions, your ears deaf to all flattery. These are snares of the tempter, to lure the thoughtless to their own destruction. Principle is the most important thing, and next to that, good sense, respectability, and moderate wealth. If you should marry the handsomest and most superficially agreeable man in the world, misery would overwhelm you if, after all, you should find him to be a worthless reprobate, or a fool.’

‘But what are all the poor fools and reprobates to do, aunt?’

‘Never fear, my dear! They will never lack partners, while there are so many females to match them; but this is no subject for jesting, Helen. Matrimony is a serious thing.’

I answered, ‘I know there is truth and sense in what you say; but you need not fear, for I should never be tempted to marry a man that was deficient in sense or principle. I could not like him, were he ever so charming; I should despise him – pity him – anything but love him. Without approving, I cannot love. I ought to be able to respect and honour the man I marry, for I cannot love him otherwise. So set your mind at rest.’

‘I hope it may be so. You have not been tried yet, Helen,’ said she in her cold, cautious way.

I fear I have found it much easier to remember her advice than to profit by it; for there are some things she has overlooked in her calculations. I wonder if she was ever in love.

I commenced my career – or my first campaign, as my uncle calls it – full of confidence in my own discretion. At first, I was delighted with the novelty and excitement of London life; but soon I began to weary of its turbulence and constraint, and sigh for the freshness and freedom of home. My new acquaintances vexed and depressed me by turns; for I soon grew tired of laughing at their foibles – particularly as I was obliged to keep my criticisms to myself – for the ladies especially appeared so provokingly mindless, heartless, and artificial.

The gentlemen seemed better, perhaps because I knew them less, perhaps because they flattered me; but I did not fall in love with any of them. Indeed, if they pleased me one moment, they provoked me the next, because they put me out of humour with myself by revealing my vanity and making me fear I was becoming like the ladies I so heartily despised.

There was one elderly gentleman that annoyed me very much; a rich old friend of my uncle’s; but, besides being old, he was ugly and disagreeable. And there was another, less hateful, but still more tiresome, because my aunt was always sounding his praises in my ears – Mr. Boarham by name, or Bore’em, as I prefer spelling it, for a terrible bore he was. I shudder still at the remembrance of his voice – drone, drone, drone, in my ear – while he sat beside me, prosing away. Yet he was a decent man enough, I daresay; and if

he had kept his distance, I never would have hated him. As it was, he prevented me from enjoying more agreeable society.

One night, at a ball, he had been more than usually tormenting, and my patience was quite exhausted. I had just had one dance with an empty-headed coxcomb, and then Mr. Boarham had come upon me and seemed determined to cling to me for the rest of the night. He never danced himself, and there he sat, poking his head in my face, and impressing all beholders with the idea that he was an acknowledged lover; my aunt looking complacently on. In vain I attempted to drive him away; even positive rudeness could not convince him that his presence was disagreeable. Sullen silence was taken for rapt attention; sharp answers were received as girlish vivacity; and flat contradictions were as oil to the flames, calling forth endless floods of reasoning to overwhelm me.

But there was one present who seemed to understand my frame of mind. A gentleman stood by, who had been watching our conversation, evidently much amused, and laughing to himself at the asperity of my replies. At length he withdrew, and went to the lady of the house to ask for an introduction to me; for shortly afterwards, they both came up, and she introduced him as Mr. Huntingdon, the son of a late friend of my uncle's.

He asked me to dance. I gladly consented, of course; and he was my companion during the remainder of the evening – which was not long, for my aunt insisted upon departing early.

I was sorry to go, for I had found my new acquaintance a very lively and entertaining companion. There was a certain graceful ease and freedom about all he said and did, that gave me a sense of repose after the constraint and formality I had been suffering. There might be, it is true, a little too much careless boldness in his manner, but I was so grateful for my deliverance from Mr. Boarham that it did not anger me.

'Well, Helen, how do you like Mr. Boarham now?' said my aunt, as we took our seats in the carriage and drove away.

'Worse than ever,' I replied.

She looked displeased. 'Who was the gentleman you danced with last,' she asked, 'that was so officious in helping you on with your shawl?'

'He was not officious at all, aunt: he never attempted to help me till he saw Mr. Boarham coming to do so; and then he stepped laughingly forward and said, "Come, I'll preserve you from that infliction."'

'Who was it, I ask?' said she, with frigid gravity.

'It was Mr. Huntingdon, the son of uncle's old friend.'

'I have heard your uncle speak of him. I've heard him say, "He's a fine lad, that young Huntingdon, but a bit wildish, I fancy." So beware.'

'What does "a bit wildish" mean?' I inquired.

'It means destitute of principle, and prone to every youthful vice.'

'But I've heard uncle say he was a sad wild fellow himself, when he was young. And I cannot believe there is any harm in those laughing blue eyes.'

'False reasoning, Helen!' said she, with a sigh.

'Well, we ought to be charitable, you know, aunt. Besides, I don't think it is false: I always judge of people's characters by their looks – not by whether they are handsome or ugly, but by their general expression. For instance, I should know by your countenance

that you were not of a cheerful disposition; and I should know by Mr. Wilmot's that he was a worthless old reprobate; and by Mr. Boarham's face that he was not an agreeable companion; and by Mr. Huntingdon's that he was neither a fool nor a knave, though, possibly, neither a sage nor a saint – but that is no matter to me, as I am not likely to meet him again.'

However, I met him again next morning. He came to call upon my uncle, apologising for not having done so before, but he was only lately returned from the Continent. After that, I often met him; sometimes in public, sometimes at home; for he was very assiduous in paying his respects to my uncle, who did not appreciate the attention.

'I wonder what the deuce the lad means by coming so often,' he would say, 'can you tell, Helen?– Hey? He wants none o' my company, nor I his.'

'I wish you'd tell him so, then,' said my aunt.

'Why? He's a pretty tidy fortune, Peggy, you know – not such a catch as Wilmot; but then Helen won't hear of that match. I'll bet anything she'd rather have this young fellow without a penny, than Wilmot with his house full of gold. Wouldn't you, Nell?'

'Yes, uncle; but that's not saying much for Mr. Huntingdon; for I'd rather be a poor old maid than Mrs. Wilmot.'

'And what would you rather be than Mrs. Huntingdon, eh?'

'I'll tell you when I've considered the matter.' And I left the room immediately, to escape further questions.

But five minutes later, from my window, I saw Mr. Boarham arriving. I waited nearly half-an-hour in uncomfortable suspense, longing to hear him go. Then footsteps were heard on the stairs, and my aunt entered the room with a solemn face.

'Mr. Boarham is here, Helen,' said she. 'He wishes to see you.'

'Oh, aunt! Can't you tell him I'm indisposed?'

'Nonsense, my dear! He is come on a very important errand – to ask your uncle and me for your hand in marriage.'

'I hope you told him it was not in your power to give it. What right had he to ask anyone before me?'

'Helen!'

'What did my uncle say?'

'He said he would not interfere in the matter; if you liked to take him you might; and if not, you might please yourself.'

'He said right. And what did you say?'

'It is no matter what I said. What will you say? That is the question. He is waiting for you; but consider well before you go; and if you intend to refuse him, give me your reasons.'

'I shall refuse him, of course; but you must tell me how, for I want to be civil. When I've got rid of him, I'll give you my reasons afterwards.'

'But stay, Helen; sit down a little and compose yourself. Mr. Boarham is in no particular hurry. Tell me, my dear, what are your objections to him? Do you deny that he is an upright, honourable man?'

'No.'

'Do you deny that he is sensible, sober, respectable?'

‘No; he may be all this, but—’

‘But, Helen! How many such men do you expect to meet with in the world? Upright, honourable, sensible, sober, respectable! It is in your power to secure this inestimable blessing for life – a worthy and excellent husband, who loves you tenderly, but not so fondly as to blind him to your faults, and who will be your guide throughout life’s pilgrimage, and your partner in eternal bliss. Think how—’

‘But I hate him, aunt,’ said I, interrupting this flow of eloquence.

‘Hate him, Helen! Is this a Christian spirit? and he so good a man!’

‘I don’t hate him as a man, but as a husband. As a man, I love him so much that I wish him a better wife than I could be, provided she could like him; but I never could.’

‘But why not?’

‘First, he is at least forty, and I am but eighteen; secondly, he is narrow-minded and bigoted in the extreme; thirdly, his tastes and feelings are wholly dissimilar to mine; fourthly, his looks, voice, and manner are displeasing to me; and, finally, I have an aversion to his whole person that I never can surmount.’

‘Then you ought to surmount it. Compare him for a moment with Mr. Huntingdon, and, good looks apart (which you have professed to hold in light esteem), tell me which is the better man.’

‘I have no doubt Mr. Huntingdon is a much better man than you think him; but we are talking about Mr. Boarham; and as I would rather live and die in single blessedness than be his wife, it is only right that I should tell him so at once.’

‘But it would offend him greatly: say you have no thoughts of matrimony at present.’

‘But I have thoughts of it.’ And without waiting for further admonitions I left the room and went to seek Mr. Boarham. He was walking up and down the drawing-room, humming and nibbling the end of his cane.

‘My dear young lady,’ said he, bowing and smirking with great complacency, ‘I have your kind guardian’s permission—’

‘I know, sir,’ said I, wishing to shorten the scene as much as possible, ‘and I am greatly obliged, but must beg to decline the honour you wish to confer, for I think we were not made for each other.’

It was quite evident he had not expected a denial. He was amazed at such an answer, but too incredulous to be offended; and after a little humming and hawing, he returned to the attack.

‘I know, my dear, that there exists a considerable disparity between us in years, in temperament, and perhaps some other things; but let me assure you, I shall not be severe with the faults of a young and ardent nature such as yours, and while I may rebuke them with a father’s care, believe me, no youthful lover could be more tenderly indulgent than I will be to you. Come, now! What do you say? Let us have no young lady’s affectations, but speak out at once.’

‘I repeat what I said before, that I am certain we were not made for each other.’

‘You really think so?’

‘I do.’

‘But you don’t know me – you wish for a further acquaintance – a longer time to—’

‘No, I don’t. I know you as well as I ever shall, and better than you know me, or you would never dream of uniting yourself to one so utterly unsuitable to you.’

‘But, my dear young lady, I don’t look for perfection—’

‘Thank you, Mr. Boarham, but save your indulgence and consideration for some more worthy object.’

‘But let me beg you to consult your aunt—’

‘I have consulted her; and I know her wishes coincide with yours; but in such important matters, I take the liberty of judging for myself; and I wonder that a man of your experience and discretion should think of choosing such a wife.’

‘Ah, well!’ said he, ‘I have sometimes wondered at that myself. I have sometimes said to myself, “Now Boarham, what is this you’re after? Take care, man, look before you leap! This is a sweet, bewitching creature, but remember, the brightest attractions often prove the husband’s greatest torments!” I assure you the imprudence of the match has cost me many an anxious thought by day, and many a sleepless hour by night; I saw my sweet girl was not without her faults, but I presumed that her little defects of temper and errors of judgment might easily be removed or mitigated by the patient efforts of a watchful and judicious adviser. Therefore, my dearest girl, since I am satisfied, why should you object?’

‘Mr. Boarham, let us drop the subject.’

‘But why so?’

I shall not write down all that passed between us. Suffice it to say, that I found him very troublesome, and very hard to convince that I really meant what I said. Indeed, I am not sure that I succeeded after all; even though I at length turned short and sharp upon him, and my last words were, ‘I tell you plainly, that it cannot be. No consideration can induce me to marry against my inclinations. I respect you – at least, I would respect you, if you would behave like a sensible man – but I cannot love you, and never could; so pray don’t say any more about it.’

Whereupon he wished me a good-morning, and withdrew, disconcerted and offended, no doubt; but surely it was not my fault.

## Chapter 17

The next day I accompanied my uncle and aunt to a dinner-party at Mr. Wilmot's. He had two ladies staying with him: his niece Annabella, a fine dashing young woman of twenty-five, too great a flirt to be married, according to her own assertion, but greatly admired by the gentlemen, who pronounced her a splendid woman; and her gentle cousin, Milicent Hargrave, who had taken a fancy to me, thinking I was vastly better than I really was. And I, in return, was very fond of her.

Another of Mr. Wilmot's guests was Mr. Huntingdon. I have good reason to remember his presence there, for this was the last time I saw him.

He did not lead me in to dinner, or sit near me, but had to accompany an old lady. I was led into the dining-room by Mr. Grimsby, a friend of his, but a man I greatly disliked: he had a mixture of lurking ferocity and insincerity in his manner.

I am not sure, however, that Mr. Huntingdon would have taken me, if he had been at liberty to make his own selection. He might have chosen Annabella Wilmot; for she seemed bent upon engrossing his attention, and he was willing to respond. I thought so, at least, when I saw how they talked and laughed across the table, to the neglect and umbrage of their neighbours.

And afterwards, as the gentlemen joined us in the drawing-room, she loudly called upon him to judge a dispute between herself and another lady. He answered with alacrity, and decided the question in her favour – though, to my thinking, she was obviously in the wrong.

Then he stood chatting familiarly with her and a group of other ladies; while I sat with Milicent Hargrave at the opposite end of the room, looking over Milicent's drawings. But my attention wandered to the merry group, and doubtless I was frowning; for Milicent, observing that I must be tired of her daubs, begged I would join the company. While I was assuring her that I had no wish to join them, Mr. Huntingdon himself came up to the little round table at which we sat.

'Are these yours?' said he, carelessly taking up one of the drawings.

'No, they are Miss Hargrave's.'

'Oh! well, let's have a look at them.'

And, regardless of Miss Hargrave's protestations that they were not worth looking at, he drew a chair to my side, and receiving the drawings one by one from my hand, scanned them over, and threw them on the table, but said not a word about them, though he was talking all the time. I don't know what Milicent thought of such conduct, but I found his conversation extremely interesting; though when I came to analyse it afterwards, it was chiefly confined to clever and sometimes droll remarks about different members of the company. I do not think they would sound remarkable if written down; but his tone and indefinable charm cast a halo over all he said.

My aunt put a stop to this enjoyment, by coming forward under pretence of wishing to see the drawings, and while pretending to examine them, addressed Mr. Huntingdon in her coldest and most repellent manner, with a series of the most common-place and formal questions, to wrest his attention from me – on purpose to vex me, as I thought. I

left them and seated myself on a sofa, apart from the company, to enjoy my private thoughts.

But I was not left long alone, for Mr. Wilmot took advantage of my isolated position to come and plant himself beside me. I had flattered myself that I had effectually repulsed his advances previously, and had nothing more to fear from him; I was mistaken. So great was his confidence, either in his wealth or his powers of attraction, and so firm his conviction of feminine weakness, that he returned to the siege with new ardour, enkindled by the quantity of wine he had drunk – which made him even more disgusting to me.

Yet I did not like to treat him with rudeness, as I was his guest. In consequence he waxed more fulsomely tender, and more repulsively warm, and I was driven to the very verge of desperation when I felt my hand, that hung over the arm of the sofa, suddenly taken by another and gently but fervently pressed.

On looking up, I was delighted to see Mr. Huntingdon smiling upon me. He seemed like some angel of light, come to announce that the season of torment was past.

‘Helen,’ said he, ‘I want you to look at this picture. Mr. Wilmot will excuse you a moment, I’m sure.’

I rose with alacrity. He drew my arm within his, and led me across the room to a splendid painting of Vandyke’s. I was beginning to comment on its beauties, when, playfully pressing the hand he still retained within his arm, he interrupted me with, ‘Never mind the picture: it was not for that I brought you here; it was to get you away from that scoundrelly old fellow, who is looking so offended.’

‘I am very much obliged to you,’ said I. ‘This is twice you have delivered me from such unpleasant companionship.’

‘Don’t be too thankful,’ he answered: ‘it is not all kindness to you. It is partly from a feeling of spite to your tormentors, though I don’t think I have any great reason to dread them as rivals. Have I, Helen?’

‘You know I detest them both.’

‘And me?’

‘I have no reason to detest you.’

‘But what are your sentiments towards me? Helen – Speak! How do you regard me?’

And again he pressed my hand; but I feared with more consciousness of power than tenderness, and I felt he had no right to extort a confession of attachment from me when he had made no such confession himself. At last I said, ‘How do you regard me?’

‘Sweet angel, I adore you! I—’

‘Helen, I want you a moment,’ said my aunt’s voice, close beside us. And I left him muttering curses against her.

‘Well, aunt, what do you want?’ said I, following her to the window.

‘I want you to join the company, once you are fit to be seen,’ returned she severely; ‘but wait till that shocking colour is abated, and your eyes have recovered their natural expression. I should be ashamed for anyone to see you in your present state.’

Of course, such a remark had no effect in reducing the ‘shocking colour’; on the contrary, I felt my face glow with redoubled fires kindled by a complication of emotions, chiefly indignant anger. I made no reply, however, but gazed out of the window.

‘Was Mr. Huntingdon proposing to you, Helen?’

‘No.’

‘What was he saying then? I heard something very like it.’

‘I don’t know what he would have said, if you hadn’t interrupted him.’

‘And would you have accepted him, Helen, if he had proposed?’

‘Of course not – not without consulting uncle and you.’

‘Oh! I’m glad, my dear, you have some prudence left. Well, you have made yourself conspicuous enough for one evening. The ladies are looking at us: I shall join them.’

‘I shall too.’

‘Speak gently then, and don’t look so malicious,’ said my aunt. ‘We shall go home shortly, and then,’ she added with solemn significance, ‘I have much to say to you.’

So I was prepared for a formidable lecture. Little was said in the carriage during our journey home; but when I had entered my room and thrown myself into an easy-chair, my aunt followed me in. Having dismissed Rachel, who was carefully stowing away my jewellery, she closed the door and sat down.

‘Do you remember, Helen, our conversation before we left Staningley?’

‘Yes, aunt.’

‘And do you remember how I warned you against letting your heart be stolen from you by those unworthy of its possession, and fixing your affections where reason and judgment did not approve?’

‘Yes; but my reason—’

‘Pardon me – and do you remember assuring me that you should never be tempted to marry a man who was deficient in sense or principle, however handsome or charming he might be, for you could not love him; were not those your words?’

‘Yes, but—’

‘And did you not say that unless you could approve and honour and respect, you could not love?’

‘Yes; but I do approve, and honour, and respect—’

‘How so, my dear? Is Mr. Huntingdon a good man?’

‘He is a much better man than you think him.’

‘But is he a good man?’

‘Yes – in some respects. He has a good disposition.’

‘Is he a man of principle?’

‘Perhaps not, exactly; but it is only for lack of thought. If he had someone to advise him, and remind him of what is right—’

‘He would soon learn, you think – and you would willingly undertake to be his teacher? But, my dear, he is, I believe, full ten years older than you. How is it that you are so much more advanced in moral acquirements?’

‘Thanks to you, aunt, I have been well brought up, and had good examples always before me, which he, most likely, has not; and, besides, he is of a merry, thoughtless temper, and I am naturally inclined to reflection.’

‘Well, now you have made him out to be deficient in both sense and principle—’

‘Then my sense and my principle are at his service.’

‘That sounds presumptuous, Helen. Do you imagine your merry, thoughtless profligate would allow himself to be guided by a young girl like you?’

‘No; but I think I might have enough influence to save him from some errors, and I should think my life well spent in the effort. He always listens attentively now when I speak seriously to him (and I often venture to reprove his random way of talking), and sometimes he says that if he had me always by his side he should never do or say a wicked thing, and would be quite a saint. It may be partly jest and partly flattery, but still —’

‘But still you think it may be truth?’

‘If I do think there is any truth in it, it is because of his natural goodness. And you have no right to call him a profligate, aunt; he is nothing of the kind.’

‘Who told you so, my dear? What was that story about his intrigue with a married lady that Miss Wilmot herself was telling you the other day?’

‘It was false!’ I cried. ‘I don’t believe a word of it.’

‘You think, then, that he is a virtuous young man?’

‘I know nothing positive respecting his character. I only know that I have heard nothing definite against it – nothing that could be proved, at least; and till people can prove their slanderous accusations, I will not believe them. And I know this, that if he has committed errors, nobody thinks anything about them; for I see that everybody likes him, and all the mammas smile upon him, and their daughters – and Miss Wilmot herself – are glad to attract his attention.’

‘Helen, a few unprincipled mothers may be anxious to catch a young man of fortune regardless of his character; and thoughtless girls may be glad to win the smiles of so handsome a gentleman, without seeking to see beyond the surface; but you, I trusted, were better than that. I did not think you would call such sins venial errors!’

‘Nor do I, aunt; but if I hate the sins, I love the sinner, and would do much for his salvation, even supposing your suspicions to be true, which I do not believe.’

‘Well, my dear, ask your uncle what sort of company he keeps. A set of loose, profligate young men are his companions, whose chief delight is to wallow in vice, and vie with each other who can run fastest down the headlong road towards the place prepared for the devil.’

‘Then I will save him.’

‘Oh, Helen, Helen! you little know the misery of uniting your fortunes to such a man!’

‘I have such confidence in him, aunt, that I would willingly risk my happiness for the chance of securing his. If he has done amiss, I shall consider my life well spent in saving him from the consequences of his errors, and striving to recall him to the path of virtue. God grant me success!’

Here the conversation ended, for my uncle’s voice was heard loudly calling my aunt to come to bed. He was in a bad humour that night; for his gout was worse. It had been gradually worsening ever since we came to town, and the next morning my aunt persuaded him to return to the country immediately. She so hurried the preparations for removal (as much for my sake as my uncle’s, I think), that in a very few days we departed; and I saw no more of Mr. Huntingdon. My aunt thinks I shall soon forget him – perhaps she thinks I have forgotten him already, for I never mention his name. I wonder if we will ever meet again?

## Chapter 18

August 25th.

I am now quite settled down to my usual routine of steady occupations and quiet amusements – fairly cheerful, but still looking forward to spring with the hope of returning to town, not for its gaieties, but for the chance of meeting Mr. Huntingdon again; for he is always in my thoughts and in my dreams. Whatever I do, or see, or hear, makes me think of him; whatever knowledge I acquire is some day to be turned to his advantage or amusement; whatever new beauties in nature or art I discover are to be drawn to meet his eye, or stored in my memory to be told him at some future period.

This, at least, is the hope that lights me on my lonely way. It may be a false hope, but it can do no harm to rejoice in its glow, as long as it does not lure me from the path I ought to keep. I think it will not, for I have thought deeply on my aunt's advice, and I see clearly the folly of throwing myself away on one that is unworthy, and incapable of responding to the deepest feelings of my inmost heart. Even if I should see him again, and if he should love me still (which, alas! is not probable), and if he should ask me to marry him – I am determined not to consent until I know for certain whether my aunt's opinion of him or mine is nearest the truth. If mine is altogether wrong, it is not him that I love, but a creature of my imagination.

But an instinct assures me I am right. There is essential goodness in him; and what delight to unfold it! If he has wandered, what bliss to recall him! If he is exposed to the corrupting influence of wicked companions, what glory to deliver him! Oh! if only I could believe that Heaven has designed me for this!

\* \* \*

Today is the first of September; but my uncle has ordered the gamekeeper to spare the partridges till the gentlemen come.

'What gentlemen?' I asked.

He had invited a small party to shoot: his friend Mr. Wilmot was one, and my aunt's friend, Mr. Boarham. This struck me as terrible news; but all apprehension vanished like a dream when I heard that Mr. Huntingdon was actually to be a third!

My aunt is greatly against his coming, of course. She earnestly tried to persuade my uncle not to ask him; but he, laughing at her objections, told her it was already done: he had invited Huntingdon and his friend Lord Lowborough before we left London.

So I am sure of seeing him. I cannot express my joy. I find it very difficult to conceal it from my aunt; but I don't wish to trouble her with my feelings till I know whether I ought to indulge them or not. If I find it my duty to suppress them, they shall trouble no one but myself; and if I can really feel justified in indulging this attachment, I can dare anything, even the anger and grief of my best friend.

We are to have two lady visitors also: Mr. Wilmot is to bring his niece Annabella and her cousin Milicent. I suppose my aunt thinks the latter will benefit me by her society, with her gentle, tractable spirit; and the former I suspect she intends as a counter-

attraction to win Mr. Huntingdon's attention from me. I don't thank her for this; but I shall be glad of Milicent's company: she is a sweet, good girl, and I wish I were more like her.

19th. September.

They came the day before yesterday. The gentlemen are all gone out to shoot, and the ladies are with my aunt in the drawing-room. I have retired to the library, for I am very unhappy, and I want to be alone. Books cannot divert me; so I will write instead. This paper will serve instead of a friend into whose ear I might pour forth my heart. It will not sympathise with my distresses, but it will not laugh at them, and, if I keep it close, it will not tell them; so it is, perhaps, the best friend I could have for the purpose.

I sat at my window, and watched for nearly two hours, and was deeply disappointed at every arrival, because it was not his. First came Mr. Wilmot and the ladies, and I quitted my post to have a little private conversation with Milicent, for she was now my intimate friend, and we had exchanged several long letters since our parting.

On returning to my window, I beheld another carriage arriving. Was it his? No; it was Mr. Boarham's; and there stood he, carefully superintending the moving of his vast collection of baggage. Then Lord Lowborough came in his barouche. Is he one of the profligate friends, I wonder? I should think not; for no one could call him a jolly companion, I'm sure. He is a tall, thin, gloomy-looking man, between thirty and forty, and of a careworn aspect.

At last, Mr. Huntingdon's light phaeton came bowling merrily up the lawn. I had only a fleeting glimpse of him: for the moment it stopped, he sprang out, and disappeared into the house.

I dressed for dinner and went down to the drawing-room, where I found Mr. and Miss Wilmot and Milicent already assembled. Lord Lowborough entered, and then Mr. Boarham, who seemed quite willing to forget and forgive my former conduct, and to hope that a little steady perseverance on his part might yet bring me to reason. While I stood at the window, conversing with Milicent, he came up to me, and was beginning to talk when Mr. Huntingdon entered the room.

'How will he greet me, I wonder?' said my bounding heart. I turned to the window to hide my emotion. But having saluted his host and hostess and the rest of the company, he came over to me, ardently squeezed my hand, and murmured he was glad to see me once again.

At that moment dinner was announced: my aunt asked him to take Miss Hargrave into the dining-room, and odious Mr. Wilmot offered his arm to me; I was condemned to sit between him and Mr. Boarham. But afterwards, when we were all again assembled in the drawing-room, I had a few delightful minutes of conversation with Mr. Huntingdon.

During the evening, Miss Wilmot was called upon to sing and play for the amusement of the company, and I to exhibit my drawings; and, though he likes music, and she is an accomplished musician, I think he paid more attention to my drawings than to her music.

So far so good; but hearing him murmur, about one of the drawings, 'This is better than all!'

I looked up, curious to see which it was, and, to my horror, beheld him complacently gazing at the back of the picture. It was his own face that I had sketched there and forgotten to rub out! To make matters worse, when I tried to snatch it from his hand, he prevented me. Exclaiming, 'No, by George, I'll keep it!' he placed it in his waistcoat with a delighted chuckle.

Then he gathered all the drawings, and muttering, 'I must look at both sides now,' he eagerly began to examine them. At first I was confident that his vanity would not be gratified by any further discoveries; for, though I had often tried to draw him, I was sure that in all the other cases I had carefully rubbed the drawing out.

But the pencil frequently leaves an impression that no amount of rubbing can efface. I confess, I trembled when I saw him holding the pages so close to the candle, and poring so intently over the seeming blanks; but still, I trusted, he would not be able to make out these dim traces. I was mistaken, however, for he quietly remarked:

'I see the backs of young ladies' drawings, like the postscripts of their letters, are the most interesting part.'

Then, leaning back in his chair, he reflected a few minutes in silence, complacently smiling, and while I was concocting some cutting speech, he rose, and going to sit beside Annabella Wilmot, he attached himself to her for the rest of the evening.

'So then,' thought I, 'he despises me, because he knows I love him.'

I was so miserable that I knew not what to do. Milicent came over to admire my drawings; but I could not talk to her – I could talk to no one, and when tea was brought in, I took advantage of the open door to slip out and take refuge in the library. My aunt sent Thomas after me, to ask if I were coming to tea; but I told him to say I should not take any tonight, and, happily, she was too busy with her guests to make any further inquiries at the time.

As most of the company had travelled far that day, they retired early to rest. When I thought I had heard them all go upstairs, I ventured out to get my candlestick from the drawing-room. But Mr. Huntingdon had lingered behind the rest. He was at the foot of the stairs when I opened the door.

'Helen, is that you?' said he. 'Why did you run away from us?'

'Good-night, Mr. Huntingdon,' said I, coldly, and I turned away to enter the drawing-room.

'But you'll shake hands, won't you?' said he, placing himself in the doorway before me. And he seized my hand and held it, much against my will.

'Let me go, Mr. Huntingdon,' said I. 'I want to get a candle.'

'The candle will keep. Why are you in such a hurry to leave me, Helen?' he said, with a provoking smile. 'You don't hate me, you know.'

'Yes, I do – at this moment.' I made a desperate effort to free my hand from his grasp.

'It is Annabella Wilmot you hate, not me.'

'I have nothing to do with Annabella Wilmot,' said I, burning with indignation.

'But I have, you know,' returned he, with peculiar emphasis.

‘That is nothing to me, sir,’ I retorted.

‘Is it nothing to you, Helen? Will you swear it?’

‘No I won’t, Mr. Huntingdon! and I will go,’ I did not know whether to laugh or cry, or to break out into a tempest of fury.

‘Go, then, you vixen!’ he said; but the instant he released my hand he had the audacity to put his arm around my neck, and kiss me.

Trembling with anger and agitation, and I don’t know what else, I broke away, and got my candle, and rushed upstairs to my room. He would not have kissed me but for that hateful picture. And he had it still in his possession, an eternal monument to his pride and my humiliation.

I got little sleep that night, and in the morning I rose troubled with the thoughts of meeting him at breakfast. I could hardly assume a dignified indifference, after what he knew of my devotion. Yet something must be done to check his presumption. I would not be tyrannised over by those bright, laughing eyes.

Accordingly, I received his cheerful morning greeting as calmly and coldly as my aunt could have wished, and gave only brief answers to his attempts to draw me into conversation, while I behaved with unusual cheerfulness towards every other member of the party, especially Annabella Wilmot. Even her uncle and Mr. Boarham were treated with extra civility, just to show Mr. Huntingdon that my coolness to him arose from no general ill-humour.

He was not repelled, however. He did not talk much to me, but when he did speak it was with a degree of freedom and openness, and kindness too, that seemed to show he knew his words were music to my ears; and when his looks met mine it was with a smile – presumptuous, maybe – but oh! so sweet, so bright, that I could not stay angry. My displeasure soon melted away like morning clouds before the summer sun.

Soon after breakfast all the gentlemen save one set out eagerly on their expedition against the hapless partridges; my uncle and Mr. Wilmot on ponies, Mr. Huntingdon and Lord Lowborough on foot. The exception was Mr. Boarham, who thought it prudent to remain behind and join them later when the sun had dried the grass. He gave us a long speech on the dangers of damp feet, delivered with great gravity; Mr. Huntingdon and my uncle laughed and set out with their guns.

Not wishing to share Mr. Boarham’s company, I took myself to the library with my easel and began to paint. I wanted to finish the picture, which was one I had taken great pains with, and I intended it to be my masterpiece, though it was somewhat ambitious.

The scene I had painted was an open glade in a wood. A group of dark Scotch firs stood in the middle distance; but in the foreground was part of the gnarled trunk and spreading boughs of a large forest-tree, with foliage of a brilliant golden green – the gold of spring leaves in the sunshine.

Upon a bough, against the sombre firs, were seated an amorous pair of turtle doves, whose soft sad-coloured plumage afforded a contrast; and beneath it a young girl was kneeling on the daisy-spangled turf, with head thrown back and fair hair falling on her shoulders, intently gazing upward at those feathered lovers – which were too deeply absorbed in each other to notice her.

I had scarcely begun to work, however, when the sportsmen passed the window. It was partly open, and Mr. Huntingdon must have seen me as he went by, for in half a minute he came back, and setting his gun against the wall, he threw up the sash window, sprang in, and stood before my picture.

‘Very pretty,’ said he, after attentively regarding it for a few seconds; ‘and a very fitting study for a young lady. Spring just opening into summer – morning just approaching noon – girlhood just ripening into womanhood, and hope just verging on fruition. She’s a sweet creature! but why didn’t you make her hair black?’

‘I thought light hair would suit her better. You see I have made her blue-eyed and rosy.’

‘Upon my word! I should fall in love with her if I hadn’t the artist before me. Sweet innocent! She’s thinking there will come a time when she’ll be wooed and won like that pretty hen-dove; and she’s thinking how pleasant it will be, and how tender and faithful he will find her.’

‘And perhaps,’ suggested I, ‘how tender and faithful she shall find him.’

‘Perhaps, for there is no limit to the wild extravagance of Hope’s imaginings at such an age.’

‘Do you call that, then, a wild, extravagant delusion?’

‘No; my heart tells me it is not. I might have thought so once, but now, I say, give me the girl I love, and I will swear eternal constancy to her and her alone, through summer and winter, through youth and age, and life and death!’

He spoke this so seriously that my heart bounded with delight; but next minute he changed his tone, and asked, with a significant smile, if I had ‘any more portraits.’

‘No,’ replied I, reddening with confusion. But my portfolio was on the table: he took it up, and coolly sat down to examine its contents.

‘Mr. Huntingdon, those are my unfinished sketches,’ cried I, ‘and I never let anyone see them.’ I placed my hand on the portfolio, but he kept hold of it, assuring me that he liked unfinished sketches.

‘But I hate them to be seen,’ returned I, wrenching the portfolio from his hand. As I did so, he deftly abstracted most its contents, and after turning them over a moment he cried out, ‘Bless my stars, here’s another!’ and slipped a small oval of paper into his waistcoat pocket – a miniature portrait that I had sketched and coloured with great care. I was determined he should not keep it.

‘Mr. Huntingdon,’ cried I, ‘I insist upon having that back! You have no right to take it. Give it me now – I’ll never forgive you if you don’t!’

But the more vehemently I insisted, the more he increased my distress with his insulting, gleeful laugh. At length, however, he gave it back to me, saying, ‘Well, well, since you value it so much, here it is.’

To show him how I valued it, I tore it in two and threw it into the fire. He was not prepared for this. His merriment suddenly ceasing, he stared in mute amazement at the flames; and then, with a careless ‘Humph! I’ll go and shoot now,’ he turned on his heel and left by the window as he came. Taking up his gun, he walked away, whistling as he went. I was glad to think that I had vexed him.

When I returned to the drawing-room, I found Mr. Boarham had followed his comrades to the field; and after lunch, I volunteered to accompany the ladies in a walk, and show Annabella and Milicent the beauties of the countryside. We took a long ramble, and re-entered the park just as the travel-stained sportsmen were returning from their expedition.

Most of them crossed the grass to avoid us, but Mr. Huntingdon, all spattered and splashed as he was, and stained with the blood of his prey – to my aunt’s displeasure – came out of his way to meet us, with cheerful smiles and words for all but me. Walking between Annabella Wilmot and myself, he began to relate the various exploits of the day, in a manner that would have made me laugh if I had been on good terms with him; but he addressed himself entirely to Annabella.

So I left all the laughter to her, and pretending the utmost indifference to them, walked a few paces apart, while my aunt and Milicent went before us, gravely talking together.

At length Mr. Huntingdon turned to me, and whispered, ‘Helen, why did you burn my picture?’

‘Because I wished to destroy it,’ I answered, with an asperity it is useless now to lament.

‘Oh, very good!’ was the reply; ‘if you don’t value me, I must turn to somebody that will.’

I thought it was partly in jest: but immediately he resumed his place beside Miss Wilmot, and from that hour to this – through all the last three days – he has never given me one kind word or pleasant look. He has never spoken to me, except from pure necessity – never glanced towards me but with a cold, unfriendly look I thought him quite incapable of assuming.

My aunt observes the change, and though she has not made any remark about it, I see it gives her pleasure. Miss Wilmot observes it, too, and triumphantly ascribes it to her own superior charms; but I am truly miserable. Pride refuses to aid me. It has brought me into the scrape, and will not help me out of it.

He meant no harm – it was only his joyous, playful spirit; and I, by my acrimonious resentment – so serious, so disproportionate – have so deeply wounded his feelings, that I fear he will never forgive me – and all for a mere jest! He thinks I dislike him, and he must continue to think so. I must lose him for ever, and Annabella will triumph.

But it is not my loss nor her triumph that I deplore so greatly as the wreck of my fond hopes for his betterment. She is unworthy of him, and he will injure himself by trusting his happiness to her. She does not love him: she thinks only of herself. She cannot appreciate the good in him: she will neither see it, nor value it, nor cherish it. She will not deplore his faults, but will rather aggravate them by her own.

And I suspect she will deceive him after all; for I see she is playing double between him and Lord Lowborough, and while she amuses herself with the lively Huntingdon, she tries her utmost to enslave his moody friend. If Mr. Huntingdon observes her artful by-play, it gives him no uneasiness, but rather adds new zest to his diversion.

Messrs. Wilmot and Boarham have each renewed their advances to me; and if I were like Annabella I would have encouraged them, in order to pique him; but, justice and

honesty apart, I could not bear to do it. I am annoyed enough by their present persecutions without wishing for more; and it would have precious little effect upon him. He sees me suffering under the condescending attentions of the one, and the repulsive obtrusions of the other, without a shadow of pity for me, or resentment against my tormentors. He never could have loved me, or he would not have resigned me so willingly, and he would not go on talking to everybody else so cheerfully as he does.

Oh! why can't I hate him? But I must rally all my powers, and try to tear him from my heart. There goes the dinner-bell, and here comes my aunt to scold me for sitting here at my desk all day, instead of staying with the company: I wish the company were gone.

## Chapter 19

22nd: Night.

What have I done? and what will be the end of it? I cannot calmly reflect upon it; I cannot sleep. I will write it down tonight, and see what I think of it tomorrow.

I went down to dinner resolving to be cheerful, and kept my resolution very creditably, considering how my head ached and how wretched I felt. I don't know what has come over me of late; my mental and physical energy must be strangely impaired, or I should not have acted so weakly as I have done; but I have not been well this last day or two. I suppose it is with sleeping and eating so little, and thinking so much.

But to return. I was exerting myself to sing and play at the request of my aunt and Milicent, before the gentlemen came into the drawing-room (Miss Wilmot never likes to waste her musical efforts on ladies' ears alone). Milicent had asked for a Scotch song, and I was in the middle of it when they entered. The first thing Mr. Huntingdon did was to walk up to Annabella.

'Now, Miss Wilmot, won't you give us some music tonight?' said he. 'Do now! I have been hungering and thirsting all day for the sound of your voice. Come! the piano's vacant.'

It was, for I had quitted it immediately upon hearing his request. I should have turned to the lady myself, and cheerfully joined my entreaties to his, thereby disappointing his expectations of offending me. But I felt it too deeply to do anything but rise from the music-stool, and throw myself back on the sofa, suppressing a bitter remark. I knew Annabella's musical talents were superior to mine, but that was no reason why I should be treated as a perfect nonentity. I could have wept with pure vexation.

Meantime, she exultingly seated herself at the piano, and favoured him with two of his favourite songs, in such superior style that I soon lost my anger in admiration, and listened with a sort of gloomy pleasure to her full-toned voice and spirited touch on the keys. While my ears drank in the sound, my eyes rested on his face, and derived an equal delight from watching him – that eye and brow lit up with keen enthusiasm, and that sweet smile appearing like gleams of sunshine on an April day. No wonder he should hunger and thirst to hear her sing. I forgave him his reckless slight of me, and felt ashamed at my pettish resentment – ashamed too of those envious pangs that gnawed my heart, in spite of all this admiration.

'There now,' said she, playfully running her fingers over the keys when she had concluded the second song. 'What shall I give you next?'

But in saying this she looked back at Lord Lowborough, who was standing a little behind her and wore an expression of mingled pleasure and sadness – much like my own feelings.

The look she gave him plainly said, 'You choose for me now: I have done enough for him, and will gladly try to gratify you.' His lordship came forward, and turning over the music, set before her a little song that I had previously read through with interest.

Now, with my nerves already half unstrung, I could not hear those words so sweetly sung and suppress my emotion. Tears rose unbidden to my eyes, and I buried my face in

the sofa-pillow so that they might flow unseen while I listened. The air was simple, sweet, and sad. It is still running in my head:

Farewell to thee! but not farewell  
To all my fondest thoughts of thee:  
Within my heart they still shall dwell;  
And they shall cheer and comfort me.

O beautiful, and full of grace!  
If thou hadst never met mine eye,  
I had not dreamed a living face  
Could fancied charms so far outvie.

That voice, the magic of whose tone  
Can wake an echo in my breast,  
Creating feelings that, alone,  
Can make my tranced spirit blest.

Adieu! but let me cherish, still,  
The hope with which I cannot part.  
Contempt may wound, and coldness chill,  
But still it lingers in my heart.

And who can tell but Heaven, at last,  
May answer all my thousand prayers,  
And bid the future pay the past  
With joy for anguish, smiles for tears.

When it ceased, I longed to be out of the room. The sofa was not far from the door, but I did not dare to raise my head, for I knew Mr. Huntingdon was standing near me, and I knew by the sound of his voice, as he answered some remark, that his face was turned towards me. Perhaps a half-suppressed sob had caught his ear – heaven forbid! But with a violent effort, I checked all further signs of weakness, dried my tears, and, when I thought he had turned away again, rose and left the room, taking refuge in my favourite place, the library.

There was no light there but the faint red glow of the neglected fire; but I did not want a light; I only wanted to think, undisturbed; and sitting down on a low stool before the easy-chair, I sunk my head upon its cushioned seat, and thought, and thought, until the tears gushed again, and I wept like any child.

Presently, the door was gently opened and someone entered the room. I trusted it was only a servant, and did not stir. The door was closed again – but I was not alone; a hand gently touched my shoulder, and a voice said, softly,

‘Helen, what is the matter?’  
I could not answer.

‘You must, and shall tell me,’ was added, more vehemently, and the speaker knelt beside me on the rug, and took my hand. But I hastily pulled it away, and replied,

‘It is nothing to you, Mr. Huntingdon.’

‘Are you sure it is nothing to me? Can you swear that you were not thinking of me while you wept?’ This was unendurable. I tried to rise, but he was kneeling on my dress.

‘Tell me,’ continued he. ‘I want to know, because if you were, I have something to say to you. If not, I’ll go.’

‘Go then!’ I cried; but, fearing he would obey, and never come back, I hastily added, ‘Or say what you have to say, and have done with it!’

‘But which? For I shall only say it if you really were thinking of me. So tell me, Helen.’

‘You’re excessively impertinent, Mr. Huntingdon!’

‘So you won’t tell me? Well, I’ll spare your woman’s pride, and take your silence to mean “Yes.” I’ll assume that I was the subject of your thoughts, and the cause of your affliction—’

‘Indeed, sir—’

‘If you deny it, I won’t tell you my secret,’ threatened he; and I did not interrupt him again. Though he had taken my hand once more, and half embraced me with his other arm, I was scarcely conscious of it.

‘It is this,’ resumed he: ‘Annabella Wilmot, in comparison with you, is like a flaunting peony compared with a sweet, wild rosebud – and I love you to distraction! Now, tell me if that gives you any pleasure. Silence again? That means yes. Then let me add, that I cannot live without you, and if you answer No to this last question, you will drive me mad. Will you marry me? – You will!’ he cried, nearly squeezing me to death in his arms.

‘No, no!’ I exclaimed, struggling to free myself. ‘You must ask my uncle and aunt.’

‘They won’t refuse me, if you don’t.’

‘My aunt dislikes you.’

‘But you don’t, Helen. Say you love me, and I’ll go.’

‘I wish you would go!’ I replied.

‘I will, this instant – if you’ll only say you love me.’

‘You know I do,’ I answered. And again he caught me in his arms, and smothered me with kisses.

At that moment my aunt opened wide the door, and stood before us, candle in hand, in shocked and horrified amazement. We both jumped up, and stood apart. But his confusion was only for a moment. Rallying in an instant, he began,

‘I beg ten thousand pardons, Mrs. Maxwell! Don’t be too severe upon me. I’ve been asking your sweet niece to take me for better or for worse; and she, like a good girl, informs me she cannot think of it without her uncle’s and aunt’s consent. So let me implore you not to condemn me to eternal wretchedness, but to favour my cause.’

‘We will talk of this tomorrow, sir,’ said my aunt, coldly. ‘The consideration of my niece’s happiness demands serious deliberation. You had better return to the drawing-room.’

‘Ah! I know she is an angel, and I am a presumptuous dog to dream of possessing such a treasure; but, nevertheless, I would sooner die than relinquish her – and as for her happiness, I would sacrifice my body and soul—’

‘Sacrifice your soul, Mr. Huntingdon?’

‘Well, I would lay down my life—’

‘You would not be required to lay it down.’

‘I would devote it to the preservation—’

‘We will talk of this another time, sir. Meanwhile the company are inquiring for you in the other room.’

‘You must plead for me, Helen,’ said he, and withdrew.

‘You had better go to your room, Helen,’ said my aunt, gravely. ‘I will discuss this matter with you too, tomorrow.’

‘Don’t be angry, aunt,’ said I.

‘My dear, I am not angry,’ she replied: ‘I am surprised. If it is true that you told him you could not accept his offer without our consent—’

‘It is true.’

‘Then how could you permit his embrace?’

‘I couldn’t help it, aunt,’ I cried, bursting into tears. They were not altogether tears of sorrow, but rather the outbreak of the general tumult of my feelings.

But my good aunt was touched. In a softer tone, she bade me good-night, and, gently kissing my forehead, put her candle in my hand; and I went; but my brain worked so, I could not think of sleeping. I feel calmer now that I have written all this; and I will go to bed.

## Chapter 20

September 24<sup>th</sup>.

In the morning I rose, light and cheerful – nay, intensely happy. The cloud cast over me by the fear of not obtaining my aunt’s consent was lost in the brightness of my own hopes, and the delightful consciousness of being loved. It was a splendid morning; and I went out to enjoy it, in a quiet ramble, in company with my own blissful thoughts. The dew was on the grass, and ten thousand gossamer webs were waving in the breeze; the robin was pouring out its little soul in song, and my heart overflowed with silent hymns of gratitude to heaven.

But I had not wandered far before Mr. Huntingdon came suddenly upon me. So unexpected was the sight, that I might have thought it the creation of an over-excited imagination, had I not immediately felt his strong arm round my waist and his warm kiss on my cheek.

‘My own Helen!’

‘Not yours yet!’ said I, hastily swerving aside. ‘Remember my guardians. You will not easily obtain my aunt’s consent, for she is prejudiced against you.’

‘I know, dearest; and you must tell me why, so that I may know how to combat her objections. I suppose she thinks I am a prodigal, with few worldly goods. You must tell her that my property is mostly entailed, and I cannot get rid of it. There may be a few mortgages on the rest – a few trifling debts here and there, but nothing to speak of; and though I am not so rich as I might be, still, I think, we could manage pretty comfortably on what’s left. My father was something of a miser, and saw no pleasure in life but to amass riches; and so it is no wonder that his son should delight in spending them – which was the case, until my acquaintance with you, dear Helen, taught me other, nobler views. And the very idea of having you to care for would make me moderate my expenses and live like a Christian – not to speak of all the prudence and virtue you would instil into my mind by your wise counsels and sweet goodness.’

‘But it is not money my aunt thinks about.’

‘What is it, then?’

‘She wishes me to – to marry none but a really good man.’

‘What, a man of “decided piety”? Well, come, I’ll manage that too! It’s Sunday today, isn’t it? I’ll go to church morning, afternoon, and evening, until she shall regard me with admiration. I’ll come home sighing like a furnace, and full of dear Mr. Blatant’s sermon—’

‘Mr. Leighton,’ said I, dryly. ‘And he is a good man, Mr. Huntingdon. I wish I could say half as much for you.’

‘Oh, I forgot, you are a saint, too. I crave your pardon, dearest – but don’t call me Mr. Huntingdon; my name is Arthur.’

‘I’ll call you nothing if you talk in that way. If you mean to deceive my aunt as you say, you are very wicked; and if not, you are wrong to jest on such a subject.’

‘I stand corrected,’ said he, and paused with a sigh. ‘Now, let us talk about something else. Come nearer to me, Helen, and take my arm.’

I complied; but said we must soon return to the house.

‘No one will be down to breakfast yet,’ he answered. ‘You spoke of your guardians just now, Helen, but is not your father living?’

‘Yes, but I always look upon my uncle and aunt as my guardians, for my father has entirely given me up to their care. I have never seen him since dear mamma died, when I was a very little girl, and my aunt, at my mamma’s request, offered to take charge of me. She took me away to Staningley, where I have remained ever since; and I don’t think my father would object to anything that she sanctioned.’

‘But would he sanction anything to which she objected?’

‘No, I don’t think he cares enough about me.’

‘He doesn’t know what an angel he has for his daughter – which is all the better for me. If he did, he would not be willing to part with such a treasure.’

‘Mr. Huntingdon,’ said I, ‘you know I am not an heiress?’

He protested he had never given it a thought. I was glad of this; for Annabella Wilmot is the probable heiress to all her uncle’s wealth, in addition to her late father’s property.

I now insisted upon returning to the house; but we walked slowly, talking as we went. I need not repeat all we said: let me move on to what passed between my aunt and me, after breakfast. Mr. Huntingdon called my uncle aside, and she beckoned me into another room, where she once more warned me against him.

‘You judge him uncharitably, aunt,’ said I. ‘His friends are not half so bad as you say. For instance, Walter Hargrave, Milicent’s brother, is one; and he is little lower than the angels, according to her. She is always lauding his virtues to the skies.’

‘You will form a very poor idea of a man’s character,’ replied she, ‘if you judge by what a fond sister says. The worst of them know how to hide their misdeeds from their sisters’ eyes.’

‘And there is Lord Lowborough,’ continued I, ‘quite a decent man.’

‘Who told you so? Lord Lowborough is a desperate man. He has dissipated his fortune in gambling and extravagance, and is now seeking an heiress to retrieve it. I told Miss Wilmot so; but she haughtily answered that she knew when a man was seeking her for her fortune, and she flattered herself she had experience enough to trust to her own judgment. As for his lordship’s lack of fortune, she cared nothing about that, as her own would suffice for both; and as for his wildness, she supposed he was no worse than others – besides, he was reformed now. Yes, they can all play the hypocrite when they want to take in a misguided woman!’

‘Well, I think he’s about as good as she is,’ said I. ‘But when Mr. Huntingdon is married, he won’t have many opportunities of consorting with his bachelor friends. And the worse they are, the more I long to deliver him from them.’

‘To be sure, my dear; and the worse he is, I suppose, the more you long to deliver him from himself.’

‘Yes – that is, the more I long to deliver him from his faults – to give him an opportunity of shaking off any evil, and shine out in his own genuine goodness – to help his better self against his worse, and make him what he would have been if he had not had

a selfish, miserly father; and a foolish mother who indulged him and did her utmost to encourage those germs of folly and vice it was her duty to suppress.'

'Poor man!' said she, sarcastically, 'his family have greatly wronged him!'

'They have!' cried I – 'but his wife shall undo what his mother did!'

'Well,' said she, after a short pause, 'I must say, Helen, I thought better of your judgment and your taste. How can you love such a man, or find pleasure in his company; for "what fellowship hath light with darkness; or he that believeth with an infidel?"'

'He is not an infidel; and I am not light, and he is not darkness. His only vice is thoughtlessness.'

'And thoughtlessness,' pursued my aunt, 'may lead to every crime. Mr. Huntingdon's Maker has endowed him with reason and conscience as well as the rest of us; the Scriptures are open to him as well as to others. Remember, Helen, "the wicked shall be turned into hell, and they that forget God!" Even if he should continue to love you, and you him, and you pass through life together with tolerable comfort – how will it be in the end, when you see yourselves parted for ever; you, perhaps, taken into eternal bliss, and he cast into the lake that burneth with unquenchable fire – there for ever—'

'Not for ever,' I exclaimed, "'only till he has paid the uttermost farthing.'" For He that "is able to subdue all things to Himself will have all men to be saved," and "will, in the fullness of time, gather together in one all things in Christ Jesus, who tasted death for every man, and in whom God will reconcile all things to Himself."

'Oh, Helen! where did you learn all this?'

'In the Bible, aunt. I have searched it through, and found nearly thirty passages, all supporting the same theory.'

'Is that the use you make of your Bible? And did you find no passages showing the danger and falsity of such a belief?'

'No: I found, indeed, some passages that might seem to contradict that opinion; but they will all bear a different construction, and in most the only difficulty is in the word which we translate as "everlasting" or "eternal." I don't know the Greek, but I believe it strictly means for ages, and might signify either endless or long-enduring. And as for the danger of the belief that God will save all, it is a glorious thought to cherish in one's heart, and I would not part with it for all the world!'

Here our conference ended, for it was time to prepare for church. Every one attended the morning service, except my uncle, who hardly ever goes, and Mr. Wilmot, who stayed at home with him. In the afternoon Miss Wilmot and Lord Lowborough excused themselves from attending; but Mr. Huntingdon accompanied us again.

Whether it was to ingratiate himself with my aunt I cannot tell, but, if so, he certainly should have behaved better. I must confess, I did not like his conduct during service. Holding his prayer-book upside down, or open at the wrong place, he did nothing but stare about him, unless he happened to catch my aunt's eye or mine; and then he looked at his book with an air of mock solemnity that would have been ludicrous, if it had not been so provoking.

Once, during the sermon, after attentively watching Mr. Leighton for a few minutes, he suddenly produced his pencil-case and snatched up a Bible. He whispered to me that he was going to make a note of the sermon; but instead, I could not help seeing that he

was drawing a caricature of the preacher, giving him the appearance of an absurd old hypocrite. And yet, upon his return, he talked to my aunt about the sermon with a discrimination that tempted me to believe he had really attended to it.

Just before dinner my uncle called me into the library.

‘Now, Nell,’ said he, ‘this young Huntingdon has been asking for you: what must I answer? Your aunt would answer “no” – but what say you?’

‘I say yes, uncle,’ replied I, without a moment’s hesitation.

‘Very good!’ cried he. ‘Now that’s a good honest answer. I’ll write to your father tomorrow. He’s sure to give his consent; so you may look on the matter as settled. You’d have done a deal better if you’d taken Wilmot, I can tell you; but at your time of life, it’s love that rules, not gold. I suppose now, you’d never dream of looking into the state of your husband’s finances, or troubling your head about settlements, or anything of that sort?’

‘I don’t think I should.’

‘Well, be thankful, then, that you’ve wiser heads to think for you. I haven’t had time, yet, to examine this young rascal’s affairs, but I see that a great part of his father’s fine property has been squandered away. Still, I think, there’s a pretty fair share left; and we must persuade your father to give you a decent fortune. And, if you behave well, who knows but what I may remember you in my will!’ he continued, with a knowing wink.

‘Thank you, uncle, for all your kindness.’

‘Well, I questioned this young spark on the matter of settlements,’ continued he; ‘and he seemed disposed to be generous enough—’

‘I knew he would!’ said I. ‘But pray don’t worry; for all I have will be his, and all he has will be mine; and what more could either of us require?’ I was about to leave, but he called me back.

‘Stop, stop!’ cried he; ‘we haven’t mentioned the day yet. When is the marriage to be?’

‘I should like to wait till after Christmas.’

‘That long?’

Nevertheless, it is quite true. I am in no hurry at all. How can I be, when I think of the momentous change that awaits me, and of all I have to leave? It is happiness enough to know that we are to be united; and that he really loves me, and I may love him as devotedly. However, I insisted upon consulting my aunt about the time of the wedding, for I decided her advice should not be disregarded; and no decision has been made yet.

## Chapter 21

October 1st.

All is settled now. My father has given his consent, and the time is fixed for Christmas, a compromise between hurry and delay. Milicent Hargrave is to be one bridesmaid and Annabella Wilmot the other – not that I am particularly fond of the latter, but she is an intimate of the family, and I have no other friend.

When I told Milicent of my engagement, she rather provoked me by staring at me in mute surprise, and said,

‘Well, Helen, I suppose I ought to congratulate you – and I am glad to see you so happy; but I did not think you would take him. I can’t help feeling surprised that you should like him so much.’

‘Why so?’

‘Because you are so superior to him in every way, and there’s something so bold and reckless about him. Somehow I want to get out of his way when I see him approach.’

‘You are timid, Milicent; but that’s no fault of his.’

‘And then his looks,’ continued she. ‘Of course he is handsome; but there’s nothing noble or lofty in his appearance.’

‘In fact, you wonder that I can love any one so unlike the stilted heroes of romance. Well, give me my flesh and blood lover, and I’ll leave all the Sir Herberts and Valentines to you – if you can find them.’

‘I don’t want them,’ said she. ‘I’ll be satisfied with flesh and blood too – only the spirit must shine through. But don’t you think Mr. Huntingdon’s face is too red?’

‘No!’ cried I, indignantly. ‘It’s not red at all. There is just a pleasant, healthy glow in his complexion. I hate a man to be all sickly white.’

‘Well, tastes differ,’ replied she. ‘To tell the truth, Helen, I had been deluding myself with the hope that you would one day be my sister-in-law. I expected Walter would be introduced to you next season; and I thought you would like him, and was certain he would like you. He mayn’t be exactly what you would call handsome, but he’s far more distinguished-looking, and nicer than Mr. Huntingdon.’

‘You think so, because you’re his sister; so I’ll forgive you, Milicent; but nobody else could disparage Arthur Huntingdon to me with impunity.’

Miss Wilmot expressed her feelings on the subject almost as openly.

‘And so, Helen,’ said she, coming up to me with a cool smile, ‘you are to be Mrs. Huntingdon?’

‘Yes,’ replied I. ‘Don’t you envy me?’

‘Oh, dear, no!’ she exclaimed. ‘I shall probably be Lady Lowborough some day, and then you know, dear, I shall be able to ask, “Don’t you envy me?”’

‘I shall envy no one,’ returned I.

‘Indeed! Are you so happy then?’ said she, thoughtfully; and something like disappointment shadowed her face. ‘And does he love you? Does he idolise you as much as you do him?’ she added, fixing her eyes upon me with ill-disguised anxiety.

‘I don’t want to be idolised,’ I answered; ‘but I am assured that he loves me more than anybody else in the world – as I do him.’

‘Exactly,’ said she, with a nod. ‘I wish—’ She paused.

‘What do you wish?’

‘I wish,’ she answered, with a short laugh, ‘that all the attractions of the two gentlemen were united in one – that Lord Lowborough had Huntingdon’s handsome face and good temper, and his wit, and mirth and charm, or else that Huntingdon had Lowborough’s title, and delightful old family seat, and I had him; and you might have the other and welcome.’

‘Thank you, dear Annabella. I am better satisfied with things as they are; and I hope you are as well content with your intended as I am with mine,’ said I. It was true enough; for her frankness touched me, and I could afford to pity her and wish her well.

Mr. Huntingdon’s acquaintances appear to be no better pleased with our approaching union than mine. This morning’s post brought him letters from several of his friends, which made him grimace over breakfast. But he crushed them all into his pocket, with a laugh, and said nothing till the meal was over. Then, while the company was leaving, he came and leant over the back of my chair, with his face touching my curls, and with a quiet little kiss, poured forth complaints into my ear:

‘Helen, you witch, do you know that you’ve called down the curses of all my friends? I wrote to them the other day, to tell them of my happy prospects, and now, instead of a bundle of congratulations, I’ve got a pocketful of bitter reproaches. There’s not one kind wish among them. They say there’ll be no more fun now, no more merry days and glorious nights – and all my fault – I am the first to break up the jovial band, and others, in pure despair, will follow.’

‘You may join them again, if you like,’ said I, somewhat piqued at his sorrowful tone. ‘I should be sorry to stand between you and so much happiness; and perhaps I can manage to do without you, as well as your poor deserted friends.’

‘Bless you, no,’ murmured he. ‘It’s “all for love or the world well lost,” with me. Let them go to – where they belong. But if you saw how they abuse me, Helen, you would love me all the more for having ventured so much for your sake.’

He pulled out his crumpled letters. I told him I did not wish to see them.

‘I’m not going to show them to you, love,’ said he. ‘Most of them are hardly fit for a lady’s eyes. But look here. This is Grimsby’s scrawl – only three lines, the sulky dog! But the less he says, the more he thinks. And this is Hargrave’s letter. He is grieved at me, because he had fallen in love with you from his sister’s reports, and meant to have married you himself, as soon as he had sown his wild oats.’

‘I’m vastly obliged to him.’

‘And so am I,’ said he. ‘And look at this. This is Hattersley’s – every page stuffed full of accusations, bitter curses and complaints, ending up with swearing that he’ll get married himself in revenge: he’ll throw himself away on the first old maid that sets her cap at him – as if I cared.’

‘Well,’ said I, ‘if you do give up your friendship with these men, I don’t think you will have much cause to regret it; for it’s my belief they never did you much good.’

‘Maybe not; but we had a merry time, though mingled with sorrow and pain, as Lowborough knows to his cost – Ha, ha!’ While he was laughing, my uncle came and slapped him on the shoulder.

‘Come, my lad!’ said he. ‘Are you too busy making love to my niece to make war with the pheasants? The sun shines – the rain’s stopped – even Boarham’s not afraid to venture out in his waterproof boots!’

So Mr. Huntingdon departed; and I saw no more of him till dinner. It seemed a weary time without him.

The three elder gentlemen have proved themselves much keener sportsmen than the two younger ones; for both Lord Lowborough and Arthur Huntingdon have almost daily neglected the shooting excursions to accompany us in our rides and rambles. But these merry times are fast drawing to a close. In less than a fortnight the party breaks up, much to my sorrow, for every day I enjoy it more and more, now that Mr. Huntingdon is become my Arthur, and I may enjoy his society without restraint. What shall I do without him?

## Chapter 22

October 5th.

My cup of sweets is not unmingled: it is dashed with a bitterness that I cannot hide from myself. I may try to persuade myself that the sweetness overpowers it; I may call it a pleasant aromatic flavour; but it is still there.

I cannot shut my eyes to Arthur's faults; and the more I love him the more they trouble me. His very heart is, I fear, less warm and generous than I thought it. At least, he gave me an example of his character today that seemed more than thoughtlessness.

He and Lord Lowborough were accompanying Annabella and me in a long, delightful ride. He was riding by my side, and Annabella and Lord Lowborough were a little ahead, talking confidentially.

'Those two will make a match of it, Helen,' observed Huntingdon. 'Lowborough's fairly besotted. But he'll find himself in a fix when he's got her.'

'And she'll find herself in a fix when she's got him,' said I, 'if what I've heard of him is true.'

'Not a bit of it. She knows what she's doing; but he, poor fool, deludes himself with the notion that she'll make him a good wife. Because she's told him some nonsense about despising rank and wealth, he flatters himself that she's devoted to him; that she does not court him for his rank, but loves him for himself alone.'

'But is not he courting her for her fortune?'

'No, not he. That was the first attraction, certainly; but now he has quite lost sight of it. No; he's fairly in love, although he thought he never could be again. He was to have been married before, two or three years ago; but he lost his bride by losing his fortune through gambling; and he was always unlucky. That's a mode of self-torment I never was much addicted to. When I spend my money I like to enjoy the full value of it: I see no fun in wasting it on thieves. But I have sometimes frequented the gaming-houses just to watch the goings-on there – I've had many a laugh at the madmen.'

'Lowborough was always resolving to give it up, and always breaking his resolutions. Every venture was the 'just once more:' if he lost, he must go on till he had retrieved that money: bad luck could not last for ever; and every lucky hit was looked upon as the dawn of better times, till experience proved the contrary.'

'At length he grew desperate. He made a large stake, which he determined should be the last, whether he lost or won. He had often so determined before, to be sure, and as often broken his determination; and so it was this time. He lost; and while his antagonist smilingly swept away the stakes, he turned white, drew back in silence, and wiped his forehead. I was present; and I knew well enough what was passing in his mind.'

'“Is it the last, Lowborough?” said I.

'“The last but one,” he answered, with a grim smile; and then, rushing back to the table, he struck his hand upon it, and swore a solemn oath that, come what would, this trial should be the last, and called curses on his head if ever he should shuffle a card or rattle a dice-box again. He then doubled his former stake, and challenged anyone present to play against him. Grimsby instantly stepped forward. Grimsby had much skill and

little scruple, and whether he dealt unfairly by him, I cannot say; but Lowborough lost again.

“You’d better try once more,” said Grimsby, leaning across the table. And he winked at me.

“I’ve nothing to try with,” said the poor devil, with a ghastly smile.

“Oh, Huntingdon will lend you what you want,” said the other.

“No; you heard my oath,” answered Lowborough, turning away in quiet despair. I took him by the arm and led him out.

“Is it to be the last, Lowborough?” I asked, when I got him into the street.

“The last,” he answered. I took him to our club – for he was as submissive as a child – and plied him with brandy-and-water till he began to look rather more alive.

“Huntingdon, I’m ruined!” said he.

“Not you,” said I. “You’ll find a man can live without his money as merrily as a wasp without its body.”

“But I’m in debt,” said he. “And I can never, never get out of it.”

“Well, what of that? Many a better man than you has lived and died in debt; and they can’t put you in prison, you know, because you’re a peer.” And I handed him another brandy.

“But I hate to be in debt!” he shouted. “And I’ve lost my Caroline.” And he began to snivel, for the brandy had softened his heart.

“Never mind,” I answered, “there are more Carolines in the world than one.”

“There’s only one for me,” he sighed.

“Somebody will take you for your title; and then you’ve your family estate; that’s entailed, you know.”

“I wish to God I could sell it to pay my debts,” he muttered.

“And then,” said Grimsby, who had just come in, “you can try again, you know. I’d have another chance, if I were you. I’d never stop here.”

“I won’t, I tell you!” shouted he. And he left the room – rather unsteadily, for he was not so much used to the liquor then. But after that he took to it to soothe his cares.

‘He kept his oath about gambling, to our surprise, though Grimsby did his utmost to tempt him to break it; but his new habit bothered him nearly as much, for he soon discovered that the demon of drink was as black as the demon of play, and nearly as hard to get rid of – especially as his kind friends did all they could to encourage him in his cravings.’

‘Then they were demons themselves,’ I cried, indignantly. ‘And you, Mr. Huntingdon, it seems, were the first to tempt him.’

‘Well, what could we do?’ replied he. ‘We meant it kindly. We couldn’t bear to see the poor fellow so miserable: and besides, he was so silent and glum, when he was sober. But after a drink, if he was not merry himself, he was an unfailing source of merriment to us. Even Grimsby could chuckle over his odd sayings.’

‘But one evening, when we were sitting over our win, after one of our club dinners, when Lowborough had been giving us mad toasts, he suddenly relapsed into silence, sinking his head on his hand, till, suddenly raising his head, he interrupted us by exclaiming, ‘Gentlemen, where is all this to end?’ He rose.

“A speech, a speech!” we shouted. “Hear, hear! Lowborough’s going to give us a speech!”

‘He waited calmly till the cheers and jingling of glasses had ceased, and then proceeded, “It’s only this, gentlemen: that I think we’d better go no further. We’d better stop while we can. And if you choose to go on, I won’t go with you. We must part company.” And taking up his glass of wine, he exclaimed, “I renounce this hell broth for ever!” And he threw the wine out across the table.

“Fill it again!” said I, handing him the bottle, “and let us drink to your renouncing drink.”

“It’s rank poison,” said he, grasping the bottle; he was on the point of pouring the whole contents on to the table, but Hargrave wrested it from him. Backing from the room, he shouted, “Farewell, ye tempters!” and vanished amid shouts of laughter and applause.

‘We expected him back among us the next day; but, to our surprise, we saw nothing of him for a whole week; and we really began to think he was going to keep his word. At last, one evening, when most of us were assembled together again, he entered, silent and grim as a ghost. He would have quietly slipped into his usual seat, but we all rose to welcome him, and ask what he would have. I offered him a tumbler of brandy-and-water, but he peevishly pushed it away, saying,

“Do let me alone, Huntingdon! Do be quiet, all of you! I’m only come to be with you awhile, because I can’t bear my own thoughts.” And he folded his arms, and leant back in his chair; so we let him be. But I left the glass beside him; and, after a while, Grimsby directed my attention towards it with a wink; and I saw it was drained to the bottom. I was replacing it when Lowborough snatched the glass from my hand, dashed the contents of it in Grimsby’s face, threw the empty tumbler at me, and then bolted from the room.’

‘I hope he broke your head,’ said I.

‘No, love,’ replied he, laughing; ‘he would have done so, but, luckily, my forest of curls saved my skull, and prevented the glass from breaking. After that, Lowborough kept aloof from us a week or two longer. I used to meet him occasionally in the town. He bore no malice against me; on the contrary, he would cling to me, and follow me anywhere but to the club, and the gaming-houses, he was so weary of his own melancholy mind.

‘At last, I got him to come with me to the club, on condition that I would not tempt him to drink; and, for some time, he continued to join us regularly – still abstaining, with wonderful perseverance. But some of our members protested. They did not like to have him sitting there like a skeleton at a feast: they vowed it was not fair; he should join in, or be expelled.

‘However, I recommended them to let him be, saying that, with a little patience on our parts, he would soon come round again. But, to be sure, it was rather provoking; for, though he refused to drink like an honest Christian, he kept a private bottle of laudanum, which he was continually soaking at – or rather, abstaining one day and exceeding the next – just like the spirits.

‘One night, he glided in, like the ghost in “Macbeth,” and seated himself, as usual, a little back from the table. I saw by his face that he was suffering from the effects of his laudanum; but nobody spoke to him, and he spoke to nobody, until he startled us by

suddenly drawing up his chair, and leaning forward with his elbows on the table, he exclaimed:

“Well! I don’t know what you are so merry about. What you see in life I don’t know – I see only darkness, and a fearful judgment and fiery indignation!”

‘All the company pushed up their glasses to him, and I tenderly patted him on the back, and bid him drink; but he pushed away the glasses, muttering,

“I won’t taste it, I tell you!” So I handed them back to the owners; but I saw that he followed them with a glare of hungry regret. Then he clasped his hands before his eyes, and two minutes after lifted his head again, and said, in a hoarse but vehement whisper, “And yet I must! Huntingdon, get me a glass!”

“Take the bottle, man!” said I, thrusting the brandy-bottle into his hand – but stop, I’m telling too much,’ muttered the narrator, startled at the look I turned upon him. ‘But no matter. In his desperate eagerness, he seized the bottle and drank, till he suddenly dropped from his chair, disappearing under the table amid a tempest of applause. This imprudence led to a rather severe brain fever—’

‘And what did you think of yourself, sir?’ said I.

‘Of course, I was very penitent,’ he replied. ‘I went to see him once or twice – no, three or four times – and when he got better, I tenderly brought him back to the bosom of the club, and because of the feebleness of his health and extreme lowness of his spirits, I recommended him to “take a little wine for his stomach’s sake.” I encouraged him to take the middle road – not to kill himself like a fool, nor abstain like a ninny – in a word, to enjoy himself like a rational creature, as I did; for I’m not a tippler, and never shall be. I value my comfort far too much. I see that a man cannot give himself up to drinking without being mad or miserable, and I like to enjoy my life. Moreover, drinking spoils one’s good looks,’ he concluded, with a conceited smile that ought to have provoked me more than it did.

‘And did Lord Lowborough profit by your advice?’ I asked.

‘Why, yes. For a while he managed very well; but he had not the gift of moderation. If he overshot the mark one night, the effects of it made him so miserable the next day that he must repeat the offence to mend it; and so on from day to day. And in his sober moments, he so bothered his friends with his remorse, and his terrors and woes, that they were obliged in self-defence to get him to drown his sorrows in wine; and then he would grow desperate, and be as great a blackguard as any of them could desire.

‘At last, one day when he and I were alone together, he suddenly grasped my arm, and said,

“Huntingdon, this won’t do! I’m resolved to have done with it. I’m going to reform.”

“You’ve been going to reform these twelve months and more.”

“Yes, but you wouldn’t let me; and I was such a fool I couldn’t live without you. But now I see what it is that keeps me back, and what’s wanted to save me; only I’m afraid there’s no chance of getting it.” And he sighed as if his heart would break.

“What is it, Lowborough?” said I.

“A wife,” he answered. “If I could get a wife, with fortune enough to pay off my debts and set me straight in the world, and sweetness and goodness enough to make home tolerable, and to reconcile me to myself, I think I should do yet. I shall never be in love

again, that's certain; but I should make a good husband in spite of it. But could anyone be in love with me? Huntingdon, do you think anybody would take me – ruined and wretched as I am?"

"Yes, certainly. Any neglected old maid, fast sinking in despair."

"No, no," said he, "it must be somebody that I can love."

"Why, you just said you could never be in love again!"

"Well, somebody that I can like. I'll search all England through, at all events!" he cried, with a sudden burst of hope, or desperation. "Succeed or fail, it will be better than rushing headlong to destruction at that club – that devil's den!"

'This was shameful language, but I shook hands with him, and we parted. He kept his word; and from that time forward he has been a pattern of propriety, as far as I can tell; though I have not had very much to do with him. I did not find his company very entertaining, especially as he sometimes attempted to awaken my conscience and draw me away from perdition; but when I did meet him, I asked after the progress of his matrimonial efforts, and he could only give me a poor account. The mothers were repelled by his empty coffers and his reputation for gambling, and the daughters by his melancholy temper.

'A year later, I found him still a disconsolate bachelor, though looking a little better. The young ladies had ceased to be afraid of him, and were beginning to think him quite interesting; but the mammas were still unrelenting. It was about this time, Helen, that I met you; and then I had eyes and ears for nobody else. But, meantime, Lowborough became acquainted with our charming friend, Miss Wilmot; and here at Staningley, in the absence of other admirers, she held out every encouragement to his timid advances. Then, indeed, he began to hope for a brighter dawn; and if, for a while, I darkened his prospects by standing between him and his sun, it only strengthened his hopes when I abandoned the field in the pursuit of a greater treasure. In a word, as I told you, he is fairly besotted. At first, he could dimly perceive her faults, and they gave him considerable uneasiness; but now his passion and her art together have blinded him to everything but her perfections and his amazing good fortune. Last night he came to me brimful of his new-found felicity:

"Huntingdon, I am not a castaway!" said he, seizing my hand and squeezing it like a vice. "She loves me!"

"Indeed!" said I. "Has she told you so?"

"No, but I can no longer doubt it. Do you not see how kind and affectionate she is? And she knows the extent of my poverty, and cares nothing about it! She knows all the folly and wickedness of my former life, and is not afraid to trust me – and my rank and title are nothing to her. She is the most generous, high-minded being – she will save me from destruction. Already, she has made me three times better, wiser than I was. Oh! what have I done to deserve so magnificent a creature?"

'And the cream of the jest,' continued Mr. Huntingdon, laughing, 'is that the artful minx loves nothing about him but his title and pedigree, and "that delightful old family seat."'

'How do you know?' said I.

‘She told me so herself. She said, “As for the man, I thoroughly despise him; but if I waited for someone who could elicit my esteem and affection, I should have to pass my life in singleness, for I detest you all!” Ha, ha! I suspect she was wrong there; but it’s evident she has no love for him, poor fellow.’

‘Then you ought to tell him so.’

‘What! and spoil all her plans and prospects, poor girl? No, no: that would be a breach of confidence, wouldn’t it, Helen? Besides, it would break his heart.’ And he laughed again.

‘Well, Mr. Huntingdon, I see nothing to laugh at.’

‘I’m laughing at you, just now, love,’ said he.

Leaving him to enjoy his merriment alone, I cantered on to rejoin our companions; for we had dropped a long way behind. Arthur was soon at my side again; but not wishing to talk to him, I broke into a gallop. He did the same; and we did not slacken our pace till we caught up with Miss Wilmot and Lord Lowborough, half a mile from the park-gates. I avoided all further conversation with him till the end of our ride, when I meant to jump off my horse and vanish into the house; but while I was freeing my skirts from the saddle, he lifted me off and held me, asserting that he would not let me go till I had forgiven him.

‘I have nothing to forgive,’ said I. ‘You have not injured me.’

‘No, darling – God forbid that I should! but you are angry because Annabella confessed her lack of esteem for her lover to me.’

‘No, Arthur, it is not that that displeases me: it is your conduct towards your friend – and if you wish me to forget it, go now, and tell him what sort of a woman it is that he adores so madly.’

‘I tell you, Helen, it would break his heart – besides being a scandalous trick to play on poor Annabella. Besides, she may keep up the deception; and then he will be just as happy in the illusion as if it were reality. So, my angel, you see I cannot make the atonement you require. What other request have you to make? peak, and I will gladly obey.’

‘None but this,’ said I, as gravely as before: ‘that, in future, you will never make a jest of the sufferings of others, and always use your influence with your friends to aid them against their evil propensities, instead of encouraging them.’

‘I will do my utmost,’ said he, ‘to remember and perform the commands of my angel;’ and after kissing my gloved hands, he let me go.

When I entered my room, I was surprised to see Annabella Wilmot standing before my mirror, composedly surveying her features in the glass.

‘She certainly is magnificent!’ thought I, as I beheld that tall, finely developed figure, and the handsome face reflected in the mirror, with the glossy dark hair, the rich complexion glowing with exercise, and the black eyes sparkling. On perceiving me, she turned round, with a laugh that savoured more of malice than of mirth, and spoke, ignoring my maid Rachel’s presence.

‘Why, Helen! I came to tell you my good fortune. Lord Lowborough has proposed, and I have been graciously pleased to accept him. Don’t you envy me, dear?’

‘No, my love,’ said I. ‘And do you like him, Annabella?’

‘Like him! yes, to be sure – head over ears in love!’

‘Well, I hope you’ll make him a good wife.’

‘Thank you, my dear! And what else do you hope?’

‘I hope you will love each other, and both be happy.’

‘Thanks; and I hope you will make a very good wife to Mr. Huntingdon!’ said she, with a queenly bow, and retired.

‘Oh, Miss! how could you say so to her!’ cried Rachel.

‘Say what?’ replied I.

‘Why, that you hoped she would make him a good wife!’

‘I do hope it.’

‘Well,’ said she, ‘I’m sure I hope he’ll make her a good husband. They tell queer things about him downstairs—’

‘I know, Rachel, but he’s reformed now. They have no business to tell tales about their masters.’

‘No, mum – but they have said some things about Mr. Huntingdon too.’

‘I won’t hear them, Rachel; they tell lies.’

‘Yes, mum,’ said she, quietly, as she went on arranging my hair.

‘Do you believe them, Rachel?’ I asked, after a short pause.

‘No, Miss, not all. You know servants like to talk about their betters; and some, for a bit of swagger, like to make it appear as though they knew more than they do, and to hint at things just to astonish the others. But I think, if I was you, Miss Helen, I’d look very well before I leaped. A young lady can’t be too careful who she marries.’

‘Of course not,’ said I. ‘Be quick, will you, Rachel?’

I was anxious to be rid of her, for I could hardly keep the tears out of my eyes while she dressed me. My tears were not for Lord Lowborough – nor Annabella – nor for myself. They were for Arthur Huntingdon.

\* \* \*

13th.

They are gone, and he is gone. We are to be parted for more than ten weeks! a long, long time not to see him. But he has promised to write often, and made me promise to write still oftener, because he will be busy settling his affairs, and I shall have nothing better to do.

Well, I think I shall have plenty to say. But oh! for the time when we shall be always together, and can exchange our thoughts without the intervention of pen, ink, and paper!

\* \* \*

22nd.

I have had several letters from Arthur already. They are not long, but very sweet, and just like himself, full of ardent affection, and playful lively humour; but there is always a ‘but’ in this imperfect world, and I do wish he would sometimes be serious. I cannot get him to write or speak in real, solid earnest. I don’t much mind it now, but if it be always so, what shall I do with the serious part of myself?

## Chapter 23

Feb. 18, 1822.

Early this morning Arthur mounted his hunter and set off in high glee to meet the hounds. He will be away all day, so I will amuse myself with my neglected diary. It is exactly four months since I last opened it.

I am married now, and settled down as Mrs. Huntingdon of Grassdale Manor. I have had eight weeks' experience of matrimony. And do I regret the step I have taken? No, though I must confess, in my secret heart, that Arthur is not what I thought him at first, and if I had known him in the beginning as thoroughly as I do now, I probably never should have loved him; and if I loved him first, and then made the discovery, I fear I should have thought it my duty not to have married him.

To be sure I might have known better, for everyone was willing enough to tell me about him, and he himself was no hypocrite. But I was wilfully blind; and now I am glad of it, for it has saved me a great deal of battling with my conscience, and consequent trouble and pain. Whatever I ought to have done, my duty now is plainly to love him and to cleave to him, and this tallies with my wish.

He is very fond of me, almost too fond. I could do with less caressing and more rationality. I should like to be less of a pet and more of a friend; but I won't complain: I am only afraid his affection loses in depth where it gains in ardour. I sometimes liken it to a fire of dry twigs compared with one of solid coal, very bright and hot; but if it should burn itself out and leave nothing but ashes behind, what shall I do? But it won't, it shan't, I am determined; and surely I have power to keep it alive.

But Arthur is selfish. I acknowledge that; and, indeed, the admission gives me less pain than might be expected, for, since I love him so much, I can easily forgive him for loving himself. He likes to be pleased, and it is my delight to please him; and when I regret his tendency, it is for his own sake, not for mine.

The first instance he gave was on our honeymoon. He wanted to hurry it, for all the continental scenes were already familiar to him: many had lost their interest in his eyes, and others had never had anything to lose. So, after a flying transit through part of France and part of Italy, I came back nearly as ignorant as I went, my head swarming with a confusion of objects and scenes; some, it is true, leaving a deeper and more pleasing impression than others, but embittered by the recollection that my emotions had not been shared by my companion. On the contrary, when I had expressed a particular interest in anything that I saw, it displeased him – because I could take delight in anything other than himself.

We barely touched Paris, and he would not give me time to see one-tenth of the beauties of Rome. He wanted to get me home, he said, to have me all to himself at Grassdale Manor, just as naïve, and piquante as I was; and as if I had been some frail butterfly, he expressed himself fearful of rubbing the silver off my wings by bringing me into contact with society. Moreover, he did not scruple to tell me that there were ladies in both Rome and Paris that would tear his eyes out if they happened to meet him with me.

Of course I was vexed at all this; but it was less the disappointment to myself that annoyed me, than my disappointment in him, and the excuses I had to make to my friends for having seen so little, without blaming him. But when we returned to my new, delightful home, I was so happy and he was so kind that I freely forgave him all; and I was beginning to think my husband was actually too good for me, when, on the second Sunday after our arrival, he shocked and horrified me by another instance of his unreasonable demands.

We were walking home from the morning service at church, for it was a fine frosty day, and I had requested the carriage should not be used.

‘Helen,’ said he, with unusual gravity, ‘I am not quite satisfied with you.’

I asked to know what was wrong.

‘But will you promise to reform if I tell you?’

‘Yes, if I can, and without offending God.’

‘Ah! there it is, you see: you don’t love me with all your heart.’

‘I don’t understand you, Arthur (at least I hope I don’t): pray tell me what I have done wrong.’

‘It is nothing you have done; it is something that you are – you are too religious. Now I like a woman to be religious, and I think your piety one of your greatest charms; but it may be carried too far. To my thinking, a woman’s religion ought not to lessen her devotion to her earthly lord. She should have enough to purify her soul, but not enough to raise her above all human sympathies.’

‘Am I above all human sympathies?’ said I.

‘No, darling; but you are heading that way; for all these two hours I have been thinking of you and wanting to catch your eye, and you were so absorbed in your devotions that you had not even a glance to spare for me. It is enough to make one jealous of one’s Maker – which is very wrong, you know; so don’t cause such wicked passions again, for my soul’s sake.’

‘I will give my whole heart and soul to my Maker if I can,’ I answered. ‘What are you, sir, that you should set yourself up as a god, and presume to dispute possession of my heart with Him to whom I owe all I have and all I am, every blessing I ever enjoyed – yourself included – if you are a blessing, which I am half inclined to doubt.’

‘Don’t be so hard upon me, Helen; and don’t pinch my arm so.’

‘Arthur,’ continued I, relaxing my hold of his arm, ‘you don’t love me half as much as I do you; and yet, if you loved me far less than you do, I would not complain, provided you loved your Maker more. I should rejoice to see you at any time so deeply absorbed in your prayers that you had no thought to spare for me. Indeed, I should lose nothing, for the more you loved your God the more deep and true would be your love to me.’

At this he only laughed and kissed my hand, calling me a sweet enthusiast.

‘But look here, Helen,’ he went on, ‘I was not made to be a saint – I have no strong sense of veneration.’

‘You are not without the capacity of veneration, and faith and hope, and conscience and reason, and every other thing a Christian needs, if you choose to employ them. All our talents increase in the using, and every faculty, both good and bad, strengthens by exercise. If you choose to use the bad, and neglect the good till they dwindle away, you

have only yourself to blame. But you have talents, Arthur, such as many a better Christian would be glad to possess, if you would only employ them in God's service. It is quite possible to be a good Christian without ceasing to be a happy, merry-hearted man.'

'You speak like an oracle, Helen, and all you say is indisputably true; but if I am hungry, and see before me a good dinner, and am told that if I abstain from this today I shall have a sumptuous feast tomorrow, I would not wait. The solid meal of today is more to my taste than the dainties that are promised me; and I don't see tomorrow's banquet, so how can I tell that it is not all a fiction? So with your leave, I'll sit down and satisfy my cravings of today, and leave tomorrow to shift for itself.'

'But you are not required to abstain from the substantial dinner of today: you are only advised to eat in moderation so that you may enjoy Heaven's choicer banquet of tomorrow. If you choose to make a beast of yourself now, and over-eat and over-drink, who is to blame if afterwards, while you are suffering the torments of yesterday's gluttony, you see more temperate men sitting down to enjoy themselves at that splendid entertainment which you are unable to taste?'

'Most true, my patron saint; but our friend Solomon says, "There is nothing better for a man than to eat and to drink, and to be merry."'

'And again,' returned I, 'he says, "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment."'

'Well, but Helen, I'm sure I've been very good these last few weeks. What have you seen amiss in me, and what would you have me to do?'

'Nothing more than you do, Arthur: your actions are all right so far; but I would have your thoughts changed; I would have you to fortify yourself against temptation, and not to call evil good, and good evil; I should wish you to think more deeply, to look further, and aim higher than you do.'

## Chapter 24

March 25th.

Arthur is getting tired – not of me, I trust, but of the idle, quiet life he leads – and no wonder, for he has so few sources of amusement. He never reads anything but newspapers and sporting magazines; and when he sees me occupied with a book, he won't let me rest till I close it.

In fine weather he generally manages to get through the time pretty well, but on rainy days, of which we have had a good many lately, it is quite painful to witness his boredom. I do all I can to amuse him, but it is impossible to get him interested in what I most like to talk about, while he likes to talk about things that cannot interest me – or that annoy me.

His favourite amusement is to loll beside me on the sofa, and tell me stories of his former amours, always turning upon the ruin of some confiding girl or the deceiving of some unsuspecting husband; and when I express my horror and indignation, he thinks I am jealous, and laughs till the tears run down his cheeks. I used to fly into passions or melt into tears at first, but seeing that this increased his delight, I now try to suppress my feelings and receive his revelations with silent, calm contempt; but still he interprets this as wounded jealousy. When he has had enough fun, he tries to kiss and soothe me into smiles again – never were his caresses so little welcome as then! This is double selfishness, to me and to the victims of his former love.

There are times when, with a momentary pang – a flash of wild dismay – I ask myself, 'Helen, what have you done?' But I rebuke myself: for if he were ten times worse, I would have no right to complain. And I don't and won't complain. I do and will love him still; and I do not and will not regret that I have linked my fate with his.

April 4th.

We have had a downright quarrel. This is what happened: Arthur had told me the whole story of his intrigue with Lady F—, which at first I would not believe. It was some consolation, however, to find that in this instance the lady had been more to blame than he, for he was very young at the time, and she had made the first advances, if what he said was true. I hated her for it, for it seemed as if she had largely caused his corruption; and when he was beginning to talk about her the other day, I begged he would not mention her, for I detested the very sound of her name.

'Not because you loved her, Arthur, mind, but because she injured you and deceived her husband, and was altogether an abominable woman.'

But he defended her by saying that she had a dotting old husband, whom it was impossible to love.

'Then why did she marry him?' said I.

'For his money.'

'Then that was another crime, and her solemn promise to love and honour him was yet another.'

‘You are too severe upon the poor lady,’ laughed he. ‘But never mind, Helen, I don’t care for her now; and I never loved any of them half as much as I do you, so you needn’t fear I’ll forsake you like I did them.’

‘If you had told me these things before, Arthur, I never should have given you the chance.’

He laughed incredulously.

‘I wish I could convince you of it!’ cried I, jumping up: and for the first time in my life, and I hope the last, I wished I had not married him.

‘Helen,’ said he, more gravely, ‘do you know that if I believed you now I should be very angry? but thank heaven I don’t. Though you stand there with your white face and flashing eyes, looking at me like a very tigress, I know your heart perhaps better than you know it yourself.’

Without another word I left the room and locked myself up in my own chamber. In half an hour he came to the door, tried the handle, and then knocked.

‘Won’t you let me in, Helen?’ said he.

‘No; you have displeased me,’ I replied, ‘and I don’t want to see your face or hear your voice again till morning.’

He paused a moment, and then turned and walked away. This was only an hour after dinner: I knew he would find it very dull to sit alone all the evening; and this softened my resentment, though it did not make me relent. I was determined to show him that my heart was not his slave, and I could live without him if I chose. Soon after ten o’clock I heard him come up, but he passed my door and went straight to his own room.

I was rather anxious to see how he would meet me in the morning, and disappointed to behold him enter the breakfast-room with a careless smile.

‘Are you cross still, Helen?’ said he.

I coldly turned to the table, and began to pour out the coffee, observing that he was rather late.

With a low whistle, he sauntered to the window, where he stood for some minutes looking out upon the sullen grey clouds, streaming rain, soaking lawn, and dripping leafless trees, and muttering curses on the weather. Then he sat down to breakfast, saying that his coffee was ‘d—d cold.’

‘You should not have left it so long,’ said I.

He made no answer, and we sat in silence. It was a relief when the letter-bag was brought in. It contained a newspaper and one or two letters for him, and a couple of letters for me, which he tossed across the table without a remark. One was from my brother, the other from Milicent Hargrave, who is now in London with her mother. His, I think, were business letters; he crushed them into his pocket with some muttered expletives that I should have reproved him for at any other time. He opened the newspaper, and pretended to be deeply absorbed in it during breakfast, and for some time after.

The reading and answering of my letters, and the direction of household concerns, filled my morning: after lunch I drew, and from dinner till bed-time I read. Meanwhile, poor Arthur was sadly at a loss for something to amuse him. He wanted to appear as busy and unconcerned as I did. Had the weather permitted, he would doubtless have ordered his horse and set off somewhere, no matter where: had there been a lady within reach, of

any age between fifteen and forty-five, he would have sought revenge by trying to get up a flirtation with her; but since he could not do either of these things, his sufferings were great.

When he had done finished yawning over his paper and scribbling short answers to his letters, he spent the rest of the day in fidgeting about from room to room, watching the clouds, cursing the rain, alternately petting and teasing and abusing his dogs, sometimes lounging on the sofa with a book that he did not read, and very often gazing at me when he thought I did not notice, with the vain hope of detecting tears, or tokens of remorse upon my face.

But I preserved a grave serenity throughout the day. I was not really angry: I felt for him, and longed to be reconciled; but I determined he should make the first advances, or at least show some signs of contrition; for, if I began, it would only increase his arrogance and self-conceit, and quite destroy the lesson I wanted to give him.

He made a long stay in the dining-room after dinner, and, I fear, took an unusual quantity of wine; but when he came in and found me quietly occupied with my book, he merely murmured an expression of suppressed annoyance, and stretched himself at full length on the sofa to sleep.

But his favourite cocker spaniel, Dash, who had been lying at my feet, jumped upon him and began to lick his face. He struck the dog smartly, and the poor thing squeaked and ran cowering back to me. When he woke up, about half an hour after, he called it to him, but Dash only looked sheepish. He called again more sharply, but Dash clung closer to me, and licked my hand, as if imploring protection.

Enraged at this, his master snatched up a heavy book and hurled it at his head. The poor dog yelped piteously, and ran to the door. I let him out, and then quietly picked up the book.

‘Give that book to me,’ said Arthur, in no very courteous tone. I gave it to him.

‘Why did you let the dog out?’ he asked; ‘you knew I wanted him.’

‘How did I know?’ I replied. ‘By your throwing the book at him? but perhaps it was intended for me?’

‘No; but I see you’ve got a taste of it,’ said he, looking at my hand, that had also been struck, and was severely grazed.

I returned to my reading, and he tried to occupy himself in the same manner; but in a little while, after several yawns, he pronounced his book to be ‘cursed trash,’ and threw it on the table. Then followed eight or ten minutes of silence, during which he was staring at me. At last his patience was tired out.

‘What is that book, Helen?’ he exclaimed.

I told him.

‘Is it interesting?’

‘Yes, very.’

I went on reading, or pretending to read, at least – for while my eyes ran over the pages, my brain was earnestly wondering what Arthur would say next, and what I should answer. But he did not speak again till I rose to make the tea, and then it was only to say he would not take any. He continued lounging on the sofa till bed-time, when I rose, and took my candle and retired.

‘Helen!’ cried he, the moment I had left the room. I turned back, and stood awaiting his commands.

‘What do you want, Arthur?’ I said.

‘Nothing,’ replied he. ‘Go!’

I went, but hearing him mutter something as I was closing the door, I turned again. It sounded very like ‘confounded slut,’ but I was quite willing it should be something else.

‘Were you speaking, Arthur?’ I asked.

‘No,’ was the answer, and I shut the door and departed.

I saw nothing more of him till the following morning at breakfast, when he came down a full hour after the usual time.

‘You’re very late,’ I said.

‘You needn’t have waited for me.’ He walked up to the window again. It was just such weather as yesterday. ‘Oh, this confounded rain!’ he muttered. But then a bright idea seemed to strike him, for he suddenly exclaimed, ‘But I know what I’ll do!’

He returned to the table, unlocked the letter-bag, and examined the contents. Then he opened the newspaper and began to read.

‘You had better take your coffee,’ suggested I; ‘it will be cold again.’

‘You may go,’ said he, ‘if you’ve finished; I don’t want you.’

I rose and withdrew to the next room, wondering if we were to have another such miserable day as yesterday, and wishing intensely for an end of these mutually inflicted torments. Shortly afterwards I heard him ring the bell and give orders to the coachman, and I heard something about the carriage and the horses, and London, and seven o’clock tomorrow morning, that startled and disturbed me.

‘I must not let him go to London,’ said I to myself; ‘he will run into all kinds of mischief, and I shall be the cause. But how am I to alter his purpose? I will wait and see if he mentions it.’

I waited most anxiously; but not a word was spoken to me. He whistled and talked to his dogs, and wandered from room to room, as on the previous day. At last I began to think I must introduce the subject myself, and was wondering how, when John brought a message from the coachman:

‘Please, sir, Richard says one of the horses has got a very bad cold, and he thinks, sir, if you could make it convenient to go the day after tomorrow, instead of tomorrow—’

‘Confound his impudence!’ interjected the master.

‘Please, sir, he says it would be a deal better,’ persisted John, ‘for he hopes there’ll be a change in the weather shortly, and he says when a horse is so bad with a cold—’

‘Devil take the horse!’ cried Arthur. ‘Well, tell him I’ll think about it.’ He cast a searching glance at me, as the servant withdrew, expecting to see some sign of alarm; but, being prepared, I remained stoically indifferent. His face fell as he met my steady gaze, and he turned away in very obvious disappointment, walked up to the fire-place, and stood in an attitude of undisguised dejection, leaning on the mantel-piece with his forehead on his arm.

‘Where do you want to go, Arthur?’ said I.

‘To London,’ replied he, gravely.

‘What for?’

‘Because I cannot be happy here.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because my wife doesn’t love me.’

‘She would love you with all her heart, if you deserved it.’

‘What must I do to deserve it?’

This seemed humble and earnest enough; and I was so much affected, between sorrow and joy, that I was obliged to pause a few seconds before I could steady my voice to reply.

‘If she gives you her heart,’ said I, ‘you must take it, thankfully, and use it well, and not pull it in pieces and laugh in her face, because she cannot snatch it away.’

He now turned round, and stood facing me. ‘Come, then, Helen, are you going to be a good girl?’ said he.

This sounded rather too arrogant, and his smile did not please me. I therefore hesitated to reply. Perhaps my former answer had implied too much: he had heard my voice falter, and might have seen me brush away a tear.

‘Are you going to forgive me, Helen?’ he resumed, more humbly.

‘Are you penitent?’

‘Heart-broken!’ he answered, with a rueful countenance, yet with a merry smile just lurking about the corners of his mouth; but this could not repulse me, and I flew into his arms. He fervently embraced me, and though I shed a torrent of tears, I think I never was happier in my life than at that moment.

‘Then you won’t go to London, Arthur?’ I said, when the tears and kisses had subsided.

‘No, love – unless you will go with me.’

‘I will, gladly,’ I answered, ‘if you think the change will amuse you, and if you will put off the journey till next week.’

He agreed, but said we should not be staying long, for he did not wish me to be Londonized, and to lose my country freshness by too much contact with the ladies of the world. I thought this was foolishness; but I did not wish to contradict him: so I merely said that I was a home-lover, and had no particular wish to mingle with the world.

So we are to go to London the day after tomorrow. It is now four days since the end of our quarrel, and I am sure it has done us both good: it has made me like Arthur a great deal better, and made him behave a great deal better to me. He has never once attempted to annoy me since, by any allusion to Lady F—, or any of those disagreeable reminiscences of his former life. I wish I could blot them from my memory, or get him to repent them.

Well! it is something to have made him see that they are not subjects for a jest. He may see further some time. In spite of my aunt’s forebodings and my own unspoken fears, I trust we shall be happy yet.

## Chapter 25

On the eighth of April we went to London; on the eighth of May I returned, in obedience to Arthur's wish; very much against my own, because I left him behind.

If he had come with me, I should have been very glad to get home again, for he led me such a round of restless dissipation in London that I was quite tired out. He was determined to display me to his friends and acquaintances, and to the public in general. It was good to feel that he was proud of me; but I paid dearly for that feeling.

In the first place, to please him I had to overcome my preference for a plain, dark, sober style of dress – I must sparkle in costly jewels and deck myself out like a painted butterfly. In the second place, I was continually trying to satisfy his expectations, and fearing to disappoint him by some awkwardness or ignorance about the customs of society, especially when I acted as hostess. And, in the third place, I was weary of the throng and bustle, the restless hurry and ceaseless change of a life so alien to all my previous habits.

At last, he suddenly discovered that the London air did not agree with me, and I was languishing for my country home, and must immediately return to Grassdale.

I laughingly assured him that the case was not so urgent as he appeared to think, but I was quite willing to go home if he was. He replied that he needed to remain a week or two longer, as he had business that required his presence.

'Then I will stay with you,' said I.

'No, Helen, for then I shall attend to you and neglect my business.'

'But I won't let you,' I replied; 'I shall insist upon your attending to your business, and letting me alone; and, to tell the truth, I shall be glad of a little rest. I can take my rides and walks in the Park as usual; and your business cannot occupy all your time. I shall see you at meal-times, and in the evenings at least, and that will be better than never seeing you at all.'

'But, my love, how can I settle my affairs when I know that you are neglected?'

'I shall not feel neglected: while you are doing your duty, Arthur, I shall never complain of neglect. Tell me what your business is; and I will be your taskmaster, instead of being a hindrance.'

'No, no,' he persisted; 'you must go home, Helen. Your bright eyes are faded, and that delicate bloom has deserted your cheek. It is the London air: you are pining for the fresh breezes of your country home. And remember your situation, dearest Helen; on your health, you know, depends the health of our future child.'

'Then you really wish to get rid of me?'

'I do; and I will take you down to Grassdale, and then return. I shall not be absent more than a fortnight.'

'What helpless creature do you take me for,' I replied, 'that you cannot trust me to go a hundred miles in our own carriage, with our own footman and a maid to attend me? But tell me, Arthur, what is this tiresome business; and why did you never mention it before?'

'It is only a little business with my lawyer,' said he; and he told me something about a piece of property he wanted to sell, in order to pay off a part of the encumbrances on his

estate; but perhaps I was rather dull in comprehending, for I could not understand how that should keep him in town a fortnight.

Still less can I now understand how it should keep him a month, for it is nearly that time since I left him, with no signs of his return as yet. In every letter he promises to be with me in a few days, and every time deceives me, or deceives himself. His excuses are vague. I cannot doubt that he has got among his former companions again. Oh, why did I leave him! I do intensely wish he would return!

June 29th.

No Arthur yet; and for many days I have been looking and longing in vain for a letter. His letters, when they come, are kind, but very short, full of trivial excuses and untrustworthy promises; and yet how anxiously I look forward to them! how eagerly I open and devour those little, hastily-scribbled returns for the three or four long letters he has had from me!

Oh, it is cruel to leave me so long alone! He knows I have no one but Rachel to speak to, for we have no neighbours here, except the Hargraves. I was glad when I learnt that Milicent was so near us, and her company would be a solace to me now; but she is still in town with her mother. There is no one at the Grove but little Esther and her French governess, for Milicent's brother Walter is always away. I saw that paragon of manly perfection in London: he scarcely seemed to merit the praise of his mother and sister, though he certainly appeared more agreeable than Lord Lowborough, more high-minded than Mr. Grimsby, and more gentlemanly than Mr. Hattersley.

Oh, Arthur, why won't you come? why won't you write to me at least? You talked about my health: how can you expect me to thrive here, pining in solitude and restless anxiety? I would beg my uncle and aunt, or my brother, to come and see me, but I do not like to complain of my loneliness to them. But what is he doing? What keeps him away? It is this ever-recurring question that distracts me.

July 3rd.

My last bitter letter has brought an answer at last, and a longer one than usual; but I don't know what to make of it. He playfully abuses me for the sourness of my letter, tells me I can have no idea of the many engagements that keep him away, but says that, in spite of them all, he will be with me before the end of next week – though it is impossible for him to fix the precise day of his return.

Meantime he exhorts me to have patience, 'that first of woman's virtues,' and desires me to remember that 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder,' so that the longer he stays away the better he shall love me when he returns; and he begs I will continue to write to him constantly, for, though he is sometimes too idle and often too busy to answer my letters, he likes to receive them daily; and if I punish him by ceasing to write, he will be very angry. He adds this piece of news about poor Milicent Hargrave:

'Your little friend Milicent is likely, before long, to follow your example, and marry a friend of mine. Hattersley, you know, has not yet fulfilled his dire threat of throwing

himself away on the first old maid that shows any tenderness for him; but he is still determined to marry before the year is out.

“Only,” said he to me, “I must have somebody that will let me have my own way in everything – not like your wife, Huntingdon: she is charming, but she looks as if she had a will of her own, and could play the vixen upon occasion” (I thought “You’re right there, man,” though I did not say so,)’ my husband added.

“I must have some good, quiet soul,” said Hattersley, “that will let me just do what I like without reproach or complaint; for I can’t do with being bothered.” “Well,” said I, “I know somebody that will suit you, if you don’t care about money, and that’s Hargrave’s sister, Milicent.” He asked to be introduced to her. So you see, Helen, I have managed pretty well, both for your friend and mine.’

Poor Milicent! But I cannot imagine she will ever accept a suitor so repugnant to all her ideas of a man to be honoured and loved.

5th.

Alas! I was mistaken. I got a long letter from her this morning, telling me she is engaged, and expects to be married very soon.

‘I hardly know what to say about it,’ she writes, ‘or what to think. To tell you the truth, Helen, I don’t like the thought of it at all. If I am to be Mr. Hattersley’s wife, I must try to love him; and I do try with all my might; but I have made very little progress yet. And the worst of it is, that the further away he is from me the better I like him. He frightens me with his abrupt manners and hectoring ways, and I dread the thought of marrying him.

“Then why have you accepted him?” you will ask; and I didn’t know I had accepted him; but mamma tells me I have, and he seems to think so too. I certainly didn’t mean to do so; but I did not like to give him a flat refusal, for fear mamma should be angry, and I wanted to talk to her first about it: so I gave him what I thought was a half negative answer; but she says it was as good as an acceptance, and I could not draw back. Indeed I was so confused and frightened at the time, I hardly know what I said. And when he began to settle matters with mamma, I had not the courage to contradict them, and how can I do it now? They would think me mad.

‘Besides, mamma is so delighted with the idea of the match that I cannot bear to disappoint her. I do object sometimes, and tell her what I feel, but you don’t know how she talks. Mr. Hattersley, you know, is the son of a rich banker, and as Esther and I have no fortunes, and Walter very little, our dear mamma is very anxious to see us all well married to rich partners. It is not my idea of being well married, but she means it for the best. She says when I am safe off her hands it will be such a relief to her mind; and she assures me it will be a good thing for the family as well as for me. Even Walter is pleased, and said my reluctance was all childish nonsense.

‘Do you think it nonsense, Helen? I should not care if I thought I could grow to love and admire him, but I can’t. There is nothing about him to hang one’s esteem and affection upon; he is so opposite to what I imagined my husband should be. Do write to me, and say all you can to encourage me. Don’t attempt to dissuade me, for my fate is fixed: and don’t say a word against Mr. Hattersley, for I want to think well of him; and

though I have spoken against him, it is for the last time. From now on I shall never permit myself to utter a word in his dispraise, however he may seem to deserve it.

‘After all, I think he is quite as good as Mr. Huntingdon, if not better; and you love him, and seem to be happy and contented; and perhaps I may manage as well. You must tell me, if you can, that Mr. Hattersley is better than he seems – that he is upright, honourable, and open-hearted – a perfect diamond in the rough. He may be all this, but I don’t know him. I know only the exterior, and what, I trust, is the worst part of him.’

‘Good-bye, dear Helen. I am waiting anxiously for your advice.’

Alas! poor Milicent, what encouragement can I give you? or what advice? except that it is better to make a bold stand now, and risk angering mother and brother and lover, than to devote your whole life to misery and vain regret?

Saturday, 13th.

The week is over, and he is not come. All the sweet summer is passing away without one breath of pleasure to me or benefit to him. And I had been looking forward to this season with the fond, delusive hope that we should enjoy it together; and that, with God’s help, it would aid in elevating his mind, and bringing him to appreciate the pure delights of nature, and peace, and holy love.

But now – at evening, when I see the sun sink quietly down behind those woody hills, leaving them sleeping in a warm, red-golden haze, I only think another lovely day is lost to him and me. And at morning, roused by the flutter and chirp of the sparrows, and the gleeful twitter of the swallows – all intent upon feeding their young, and full of life and joy – when I open the window to inhale the soul-reviving air, and look out upon the lovely landscape, laughing in dew and sunshine – I too often shed tears of thankless misery.

When I wander in the ancient woods, and meet the little wild flowers smiling in my path, or sit in the shadow of our noble ash-trees by the water-side, with their branches gently swaying in the murmuring summer breeze – my ears full of that low music mingled with the dreamy hum of insects, with the little tree-lined lake before me – still I feel no pleasure; for the greater the happiness that nature shows me, the more I lament that he is not here to taste it. The more my senses are pleased, the more my heart is oppressed; for he keeps it with him, confined amid the dust and smoke of London.

But most of all, at night, when I enter my lonely chamber, and look out upon the summer moon floating in the vault of heaven, shedding a flood of silver radiance over everything, so pure, so peaceful, so divine – and think, Where is he now? – perhaps revelling with his companions – God help me, it is too much!

23rd.

Thank heaven, he is come at last! But how altered! Flushed and feverish, listless and languid, his beauty strangely diminished, his vigour and vivacity quite departed. I have not upbraided him at all; I have not even asked what he has been doing. I have not the heart to, for I think he is ashamed of himself.

My forbearance pleases him – even touches him, I think. He says he is glad to be home again, and God knows how glad I am to get him back, even as he is. He lies on the

sofa, and I play and sing to him for hours together. I write his letters, and get him everything he wants; and sometimes I read to him, and sometimes talk, and sometimes only sit by him and soothe him with caresses. I know he does not deserve it; and I fear I'm spoiling him; but this once, I will forgive him, freely and entirely. I will shame him into virtue if I can, and I will never let him leave me again.

He is pleased with my attentions – maybe grateful. He likes to have me near him: and though he is peevish and testy with his servants and his dogs, he is gentle and kind to me. What he would be like, if I did not pay such attention to his wants, and so carefully avoid doing anything that might disturb him, I cannot tell.

How intensely I wish he were worthy of all this care! Last night, as I sat beside him, with his head in my lap, passing my fingers through his beautiful curls, this thought made my eyes overflow with sorrowful tears. A tear fell on his face and made him look up. He smiled, but not insultingly.

'Dear Helen!' he said, 'why do you cry? you know that I love you, and what more could you desire?'

'Only, Arthur, that you would love yourself as truly and as faithfully as you are loved by me.'

'That would be hard, indeed!' he replied, tenderly squeezing my hand.

August 24th.

Arthur is himself again, as lusty and reckless and as light of heart and head as ever, and as restless and hard to amuse as a spoilt child; and almost as full of mischief too, especially when wet weather keeps him inside. I wish he had something to do, some useful employment – anything to occupy his head or hands for a few hours, and give him something besides his own pleasure to think about.

If only he would play the country gentleman and attend to the farm – but he knows nothing about it, and won't consider it – or if he would take up some literary study, or learn to draw or play the piano, as he is so fond of music – but he is far too idle for that. He has no more idea of exerting himself to overcome obstacles than he has of restraining his appetites; and these two things are the ruin of him. I blame his harsh yet careless father, and his madly indulgent mother. If ever I am a mother I will zealously strive against this crime of over-indulgence.

Happily, it will soon be the shooting season, and then, if the weather permits, he will find occupation enough in the pursuit and destruction of the partridges and pheasants. But he says it is dull work shooting alone; he must have a friend or two to help him.

'Let them be tolerably decent then, Arthur,' said I. The word 'friend' makes me shudder: I know it was some of his 'friends' that induced him to stay behind in London for so long. Indeed, he has hinted that he showed them my letters, to let them see how fondly his wife watched over his interests, and how keenly she regretted his absence; and that they induced him to remain week after week, and to plunge into all manner of excesses, to avoid being laughed at for a wife-ridden fool, and, perhaps, to show how far he could go without shaking her attachment. It is a hateful idea, but I cannot believe it is a false one.

‘Well,’ replied he, ‘I thought of inviting Lord Lowborough; but I cannot get him without our mutual friend, Annabella. You’re not afraid of her, are you, Helen?’ he asked, with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

‘Of course not,’ I answered: ‘why should I be? And who besides?’

‘Hargrave for one. He will be glad to come, for he owns little land to shoot on; and he is thoroughly respectable, you know, Helen. And I think, Grimsby: he’s a decent, quiet fellow enough. You’ll not object to Grimsby?’

‘I hate him: but if you wish it, I’ll try to endure his presence for a while.’

‘All a mere woman’s prejudice, Helen.’

‘No; I have solid grounds for my dislike. Is that all?’

‘I think so. Hattersley will be too busy billing and cooing with his bride to have much time to spare at present,’ he replied.

And that reminds me, I have had several letters from Milicent since her marriage, and she either is, or pretends to be, quite reconciled to her lot. She claims to have discovered numberless virtues in her husband, some of which, I fear, less partial eyes would fail to see; and now that she is accustomed to his loud voice, and abrupt, uncourteous manners, she says she finds no difficulty in loving him, and begs I will burn that previous letter.

So I trust she may yet be happy; but, if she is, it will be entirely the reward of her own goodness of heart; for if she had chosen to consider herself a victim, she might have been thoroughly miserable; and if, for duty’s sake, she had not made every effort to love her husband, she would, doubtless, have hated him to the end of her days.

## Chapter 26

Sept. 23rd.

Our guests arrived three weeks ago. Lord and Lady Lowborough have now been married eight months; and I will do the lady the credit to say that her husband is quite an altered man; his looks, his spirits, and his temper are all changed for the better. But there is room for improvement still. He is not always cheerful, and she often complains of his ill-humour, although he never displays it against her. He adores her, and would go to the world's end to please her. She knows her power, and she uses it; but knowing that to wheedle and coax is safer than to command, she flatters him enough to make him think himself a favoured and a happy man.

But she has a way of tormenting him, in which I suffer too. This is by openly, but not too glaringly, flirting with Mr. Huntingdon, who is quite willing to be her partner in the game. I don't care for it, because, with him, I know there is nothing but personal vanity, and a mischievous desire to excite my jealousy, and she, no doubt, has the same motives; only with more malice and less playfulness.

It is obviously better for me to disappoint them both, by appearing cheerfully serene. Accordingly, I show the fullest confidence in my husband, and the greatest indifference to the arts of my attractive guest. I have never reproached Arthur except once, and that was for laughing at Lord Lowborough's depressed face one evening, when they had both been particularly provoking. Then I rebuked him sternly; but he only laughed, and said, 'You can feel for him, Helen, can't you?'

'I can feel for anyone that is unjustly treated,' I replied, 'and I can feel for those that injure them too.'

'Why, Helen, you are as jealous as he is!' cried he, laughing still more; and I found it impossible to convince him otherwise. So, from that time, I have refrained from taking any notice of the subject whatever, and left Lord Lowborough to take care of himself.

He either has not the sense or the power to follow my example, though he does try to conceal his uneasiness; but still, it appears in his face and his ill-humour. But I confess I do feel jealous at times, most painfully so; when she sings and plays to Arthur, and he hangs over the piano and dwells upon her voice with genuine interest; for then I know he is really delighted, and I have no power to awaken similar fervour. I can amuse him with my simple songs, but not delight him thus.

28th.

Yesterday, we all went to the Grove, Mr. Hargrave's much-neglected home. His mother frequently asks us over, so that she may have the pleasure of her dear Walter's company; and this time she had invited us to a dinner-party, with some of the country gentry. The entertainment was very well got up; but I could not help thinking about the cost of it.

I don't like Mrs. Hargrave; she is a hard, pretentious, worldly woman. She has money enough to live very comfortably, if she only knew how to use it wisely, and had taught her son to do the same; but she is always straining to keep up appearances. She is stingy

to her dependants and her servants, and deprives her daughters and herself of comforts, because she is determined her cherished son should 'hold up his head with the highest gentlemen in the land.'

This same son, I imagine, is a man of expensive habits – no reckless spendthrift, but one who likes to have 'everything handsome about him,' to maintain his reputation as a man of fashion among his lawless companions; while he is too selfish to consider how many comforts his fond mother and sisters are deprived of with the money he wastes upon himself. This is a harsh judgment of 'dear, noble-minded, generous-hearted Walter,' but I fear it is just.

Mrs. Hargrave's anxiety to make good matches for her daughters is partly the cause, and partly the result, of these errors. By showing them off to advantage, she hopes to obtain better chances for them; and by lavishing so much on their brother, she renders them penniless. Poor Milicent, I fear, has already fallen a sacrifice to the manoeuvrings of this mother, who congratulates herself on the match, and hopes to do as well for Esther. But Esther is a child as yet, a merry little romp of fourteen: honest-hearted, with a fearless spirit of her own, that I fancy her mother will find some difficulty in bending to her purposes.

## Chapter 27

October 9th.

It was on the night of the 4th, a little after tea, when Annabella had been singing and playing, with Arthur as usual at her side. She had ended her song, but still sat at the instrument; and he stood leaning on the back of her chair, conversing in scarcely audible tones, with his face very close to hers.

I looked at Lord Lowborough. He was at the other end of the room, talking with Messrs. Hargrave and Grimsby; but I saw him glance at his lady and his host with intense disquietude. Grimsby smiled.

Determined to interrupt the tête-à-tête, I rose, and, selecting a piece of music from the music stand, stepped up to the piano, intending to ask the lady to play it; but I stood transfixed on seeing her listening with an exultant smile to his soft murmurings, with her hand clasped in his. The blood rushed first to my heart, and then to my head; for as I approached, he cast a hurried glance over his shoulder, and then ardently pressed her hand to his lips.

On raising his eyes, he saw me, and looked confounded and dismayed. She saw me too, and gave me a look of hard defiance. I laid the music on the piano, and retired. I felt ill; but I did not leave the room. Luckily it was getting late, and the company would soon disperse.

I went to the fire, and leant my head against the chimney-piece. Some one asked me if I felt unwell. I did not answer; but I looked up, and saw Mr. Hargrave standing beside me.

‘Shall I get you a glass of wine?’ said he.

‘No, thank you,’ I replied; and looked round. Lady Lowborough was beside her husband, bending over him with her hand on his shoulder, softly talking and smiling at him; and Arthur was at the table, turning over a book of engravings. I seated myself in the nearest chair, and Mr. Hargrave withdrew.

Shortly after, when the guests were retiring to their rooms, Arthur approached me, smiling with assurance.

‘Are you very angry, Helen?’ murmured he.

‘This is no jest, Arthur,’ said I, seriously, but as calmly as I could, ‘unless you think it a jest to lose my affection for ever.’

‘What! so bitter?’ he exclaimed, laughingly, clasping my hand; but I snatched it away, in indignation – almost in disgust, for he was obviously affected with wine.

‘Then I must go down on my knees,’ said he; and kneeling before me, with hands uplifted in mock humiliation, he continued imploringly, ‘Forgive me, dear Helen, and I’ll never do it again!’ and, burying his face in his handkerchief, he pretended to sob aloud.

I took my candle, and, slipping quietly from the room, hastened upstairs. But he rushed up after me and caught me in his arms, just as I had entered my chamber, and was about to shut the door in his face.

‘No, by heaven, you shan’t escape me so!’ he cried. Then, alarmed at my agitation, he begged me not to put myself in such a passion, telling me I was white in the face.

‘Let me go, then,’ I murmured; and immediately he released me. It was well he did, for I was really in a passion. I sank into the easy-chair and tried to compose myself, for I wanted to speak to him calmly. He stood beside me silently for a few seconds; then, approaching a little nearer, he dropped on one knee – not in mock humility, but to bring himself nearer my level, and began in a low voice: ‘It is all nonsense, Helen – a jest, a mere nothing – not worth a thought. Will you never learn,’ he continued more boldly, ‘that you have nothing to fear? that I love you wholly and entirely?’ He added with a lurking smile, ‘If I ever do give a thought to another, it is only a fancy here and gone like a flash of lightning, while my love for you burns on steadily, like the sun. You little tyrant, will not that—’

‘Be quiet a moment, will you, Arthur?’ said I. ‘Listen to me – and don’t think I’m in a jealous fury: I am perfectly calm. Feel my hand.’ And I gravely held it out to him – but took his with an energy that made him smile. ‘You needn’t smile, sir,’ said I, still tightening my grasp, and looking steadfastly on him till he almost quailed. ‘You may think it all very fine, Mr. Huntingdon, to amuse yourself with rousing my jealousy; but take care you don’t rouse my hate instead. And when you have once extinguished my love, you will find it no easy matter to kindle it again.’

‘Well, Helen, I won’t do it again. But I meant nothing. I had taken too much wine, and I was scarcely myself.’

‘You often take too much; and that is another practice I detest.’ He looked up astonished at my warmth. ‘Yes,’ I continued; ‘I never mentioned it before, because I was ashamed to do so; but it distresses me, and may disgust me if don’t check the habit. But your conduct to Lady Lowborough is not caused by wine; and tonight you knew perfectly well what you were doing.’

‘Well, I’m sorry,’ replied he, with more sulkiness than contrition.

‘You are sorry that I saw you, no doubt,’ I answered coldly.

‘If you had not seen me,’ he muttered, ‘it would have done no harm.’

My heart felt ready to burst; but I resolutely swallowed back my emotion, and answered calmly, ‘You think not?’

‘No. After all, what have I done? It’s nothing, except that you choose to make it a subject of accusation and distress.’

‘What would Lord Lowborough think, if he knew? or what would you think, if he or anyone else had behaved the same to me, as you have with Annabella?’

‘I would blow his brains out.’

‘Well, then, Arthur, how can you call it nothing? Is it nothing to trifle with your friend’s feelings and mine – to try to steal a woman’s affections from her husband? Are the marriage vows a jest; and is it nothing to make it a game to break them? Can I love a man that does such things, and coolly maintains it is nothing?’

‘You are breaking your marriage vows yourself,’ said he, indignantly rising and pacing to and fro. ‘You promised to honour and obey me, and now you attempt to hector me, and threaten and accuse me, and call me worse than a highwayman. If it were not for your situation, Helen, I would not submit so tamely. I won’t be dictated to by a woman, even my wife.’

‘What will you do, then? Will you go on till I hate you, and then accuse me of breaking my vows?’

He was silent a moment, and then replied: ‘You never will hate me. You cannot hate me as long as I love you.’

‘But how can I believe that you love me, if you continue to act in this way? Just imagine yourself in my place: would you think I loved you, if I did so?’

‘The cases are different,’ he replied. ‘It is a woman’s nature to be constant – to love one and one only, blindly, tenderly, and for ever; but you must have some commiseration for us, Helen; you must give us a little more licence, for, as Shakespeare says—

*Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm,  
More longing, wavering, sooner lost and won  
Than women’s are.*

‘Do you mean by that, that your fancies are lost to me, and won by Lady Lowborough?’

‘No! I think her mere dust and ashes in comparison with you, and shall continue to think so, unless you drive me from you by too much severity. You are an angel of heaven; only be not too austere, and remember that I am a poor, fallible mortal. Come now, Helen; won’t you forgive me?’ he said, gently taking my hand, and looking up with an innocent smile.

‘If I do, you will repeat the offence.’

‘I swear by—’

‘Don’t swear; I’ll believe your word as much as your oath. I wish I could have confidence in either.’

‘Try me, then, Helen: only pardon me this once, and you shall see! Come, I am in hell’s torments till you speak the word.’

I did not speak it, but I put my hand on his shoulder and kissed his forehead, and then burst into tears. He embraced me tenderly; and we have been good friends ever since. He has been decently temperate at table, and well-conducted towards Lady Lowborough. The first day he held aloof from her: since then he has been friendly and civil, but nothing more – in my presence, at least, but nor, I think, at any other time; for she seems haughty and displeased, and Lord Lowborough is more cheerful, and more cordial towards his host than before.

But I shall be glad when they are gone. I have so little love for Annabella that it is hard to be civil to her, and as she is the only other woman here, we are thrown much together. Next time Mrs. Hargrave calls I shall hail her arrival as quite a relief. I might ask Arthur’s leave to invite the old lady to stay with us till our guests depart. I think I will. She will take it as a kind attention, and, though I have little relish for her society, she will be truly welcome as a third to stand between Lady Lowborough and me.

The first time Annabella and I were alone together, after that unhappy evening, was after breakfast the following day, when the gentlemen had gone out. She was busy with her needlework, and I was re-reading a paper which I had read twenty minutes before. It was a moment of painful embarrassment to me, and I thought it must be more so to her; but it seems I was mistaken. She was the first to speak; and, smiling with the coolest assurance, she began,

‘Your husband was merry with wine last night, Helen: is he often so?’

My face grew hot; but it was better she should attribute his conduct to this than to anything else.

‘No,’ replied I, ‘and never will be so again, I trust.’

‘You gave him a lecture, did you?’

‘No! but I told him I disliked such conduct, and he promised not to repeat it.’

‘I thought he looked rather subdued this morning,’ she continued; ‘and you, Helen? You’ve been weeping, I see – that’s our grand resource, you know. But do you always find it works?’

‘I never cry for effect; nor can I conceive how anyone can.’

‘Well, I don’t know. I’ve never tried; but if Lowborough were to commit such improprieties, I’d make him cry. But he never will do anything of the kind. I keep him in too good order for that.’

‘Are you sure you don’t take too much of the credit to yourself? Lord Lowborough was remarkable for his abstemiousness before you married him, I have heard.’

‘Oh, about the wine you mean – yes, he’s safe enough for that. And as for looking at other women, he’s safe enough for that too, for he worships the ground I tread on.’

‘Indeed! Are you sure you deserve it?’

‘I can’t say. We’re all fallible creatures, Helen; we none of us deserve to be worshipped. But are you sure your darling Huntingdon deserves all the love you give to him?’

I knew not what to answer to this. I was burning with anger; but I suppressed all signs of it, and only bit my lip and pretended to arrange my work.

‘At any rate,’ resumed she, ‘you can console yourself with the assurance that you are worthy of all the love he gives to you.’

‘You flatter me,’ said I; ‘but, at least, I can try to be worthy of it.’ And then I turned the conversation.

## Chapter 28

December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1822.

Last Christmas I was a bride, with a heart overflowing with bliss, and full of ardent hopes for the future, though not unmingled with foreboding. Now I am a wife: my bliss is sobered, but not destroyed; my hopes diminished, but not departed; my fears increased, but not confirmed; and, thank heaven, I am a mother too. God has sent me a soul to educate for heaven, and give me a new and calmer bliss, and stronger hopes to comfort me.

Dec. 25th, 1823.

Another year is gone. My little Arthur thrives. He is healthy, but not robust, full of gentle playfulness, already affectionate, with passions and emotions he cannot yet express in words. He has won his father's heart at last; and now my constant terror is, lest he should be ruined by that father's thoughtless indulgence. But I must beware of my own weakness too, for I never knew till now how strong are a parent's temptations to spoil an only child.

I need consolation in my son, for I have little in my husband. I love him still; and he loves me, in his own way – but oh, how different from the love I could have given, and once had hoped to receive! How little real sympathy exists between us; how many of my thoughts are gloomily cloistered within my own mind; how much of my higher and better self is indeed unmarried – doomed either to harden and sour in the sunless shade of solitude, or to fall away for lack of nutriment in this unwholesome soil!

But I have no right to complain; only let me state the truth – some of the truth, at least. We have been married two years; the romance of our attachment must be worn away. Surely I have now got down to the lowest level in Arthur's affection, and discovered all the evils of his nature: if there is any further change, it must be for the better, as we become more accustomed to each other; surely we shall find no lower depth than this.

Arthur is not what is commonly called bad: he has many good qualities; but he is a man without self-restraint or aspirations, a lover of pleasure. He is not a bad husband, but his notions of matrimonial duties and comforts are not my notions. His idea of a wife is a thing to love her husband devotedly, and to stay at home to wait upon him, and amuse him and minister to his comfort in every possible way; and, when he is absent, to patiently await his return, no matter how he may be occupied.

Early in spring he announced his intention of going to London to see to his affairs of business. He expressed his regret at leaving me, but hoped I would amuse myself with the baby till he returned.

'But why leave me?' I said. 'I can go with you.'

'You would not take that child to town?'

'Yes; why not?'

He said it was absurd: the town air would be certain to disagree with him; the late hours and London habits would not suit me; and altogether it would be excessively

troublesome and unsafe. I argued as well as I could, for I trembled at the thoughts of his going alone, and would sacrifice almost anything to prevent it; but at length he told me, plainly, and somewhat testily, that he was worn out with the baby's restless nights, and must have some rest. I proposed separate rooms; but it would not do.

'The truth is, Arthur,' I said at last, 'you are weary of my company, and determined not to have me with you. You might as well have said so at once.'

He denied it; but I immediately left the room, and flew to the nursery, to hide my feelings there.

I was too much hurt to refer to the subject again, except for the necessary arrangements concerning his departure, till the day before he went. Then I earnestly exhorted him to take care of himself and keep out of the way of temptation. He laughed at my anxiety, but assured me there was no need for it.

'I suppose it is no use asking you to fix a day for your return?' said I.

'Why, no; love; but I shall not be long away.'

'I don't wish to keep you a prisoner at home,' I replied. 'I should not grumble at your staying whole months away provided I knew you were safe; but I don't like the idea of your being among your friends, as you call them.'

'Pooh, you silly girl! Do you think I can't take care of myself?'

'You didn't last time. But this time, Arthur,' I added earnestly, 'show me that you can, and that I can trust you!'

He promised, but in the way we seek to soothe a child.

And did he keep his promise? No; and henceforth I can never trust his word. Bitter, bitter confession! Tears blind me while I write.

It was early in March that he went, and he did not return till July. He did not trouble himself to make excuses as before, and his letters were less frequent, shorter and less affectionate; they became more terse and careless every time.

But still, when I omitted writing, he complained of my neglect. When I wrote sternly and coldly, as I confess I frequently did at the end, he blamed my harshness, and said it was enough to scare him away. When I tried mild persuasion, he was a little more gentle in his replies, and promised to return; but I had learnt to disregard his promises.

## Chapter 29

Those were four miserable months, alternating between intense anxiety, despair, and indignation, pity for him and pity for myself. And yet, through all, I was not wholly comfortless: I had my darling little one to console me. But even this consolation was embittered by the constantly-recurring thought, 'How shall I teach him to respect his father, and yet to avoid his example?'

But I remembered that I had brought these afflictions upon myself; and I determined to bear them without a murmur. I would not give myself up to misery, so I tried to divert myself as much as I could. Besides the companionship of my child, and my dear, faithful Rachel, who evidently guessed my sorrows, I had my books and pencil, my housekeeping, and the welfare of Arthur's poorer tenants and labourers to attend to: and I sometimes sought the company of my young friend Esther Hargrave. Occasionally I rode over to see her, or had her to spend the day with me at the Manor. Mrs. Hargrave stayed at home that summer, and, for a wonder, Walter came down to join her in early June, and stayed till late in August.

The first time I saw him was on a sweet, warm evening, when I was sauntering in the park with little Arthur and Rachel – for I preferred committing my child to Rachel's care, with a young nursery-maid under her directions, to engaging anyone else. Besides, it saves money; and that is no trifling recommendation; for, by my own wish, nearly all the income of my fortune is devoted, for years to come, to paying off my husband's debts. The money he contrives to squander in London is incomprehensible.

But to return to Mr. Hargrave. I was standing with Rachel beside the water, amusing the laughing baby with a twig of willow laden with golden catkins, when, to my surprise, he entered the park on his costly black hunter, and crossed the grass to meet me. He saluted me with a fine compliment, and told me he had brought a message from his mother, who had asked him to call at the Manor and beg the pleasure of my company at a family dinner tomorrow.

'There is no one to meet but ourselves,' said he; 'but Esther is very anxious to see you; and my mother fears you will feel solitary in this great house alone, and wishes she could persuade you to give her the pleasure of your company more frequently, till Mr. Huntingdon's return.'

'She is very kind,' I answered, 'but I am not alone, as you see.'

'Will you not come tomorrow, then? She will be sadly disappointed if you refuse.'

I did not relish being thus pitied; but I promised to come.

'What a sweet evening this is!' observed he, looking round at the sunny park, with its placid water and majestic trees. 'What a paradise you live in!'

'It is a lovely evening,' answered I; and I sighed to think how little of a paradise sweet Grassdale was to me. Whether Mr. Hargrave guessed my thoughts, I cannot tell, but with a half-hesitating manner, he asked if I had lately heard from Mr. Huntingdon.

'Not lately,' I replied.

'I thought not,' he muttered, as if to himself.

'Are you not recently returned from London?' I asked.

‘Only yesterday.’

‘And did you see him there?’

‘Yes – I saw him.’

‘Was he well?’

‘Yes – that is,’ said he, with increasing hesitation and some indignation, ‘he was as well as he deserved to be, but under circumstances I should have deemed incredible for a man so favoured as he is.’ He here looked up and bowed to me. I suppose my face was crimson.

‘Pardon me, Mrs. Huntingdon,’ he continued, ‘but I cannot suppress my indignation when I behold such infatuated blindness and perversion of taste; but, perhaps, you are not aware—’ He paused.

‘I am aware of nothing, sir, except that he delays his coming; and if, at present, he prefers the society of his friends to that of his wife, I suppose I have those friends to thank for it. Their tastes and occupations are similar to his, and I don’t see why his conduct should surprise you.’

‘You wrong me,’ answered he. ‘I have shared little of Mr. Huntingdon’s society for the last few weeks; and as for his occupations, they are quite beyond me. Where I have but sipped, he drains the cup to the dregs; and if ever for a moment I have sought to drown the voice of reflection in folly, or if I have wasted my time among dissipated companions, God knows I would gladly renounce them for ever, if I had half the blessings that man so thanklessly casts behind his back – such a home, and such a partner to share it! It is infamous!’ he muttered, between his teeth. ‘And don’t think, Mrs. Huntingdon, that I incite him to persevere in his pursuits. On the contrary, I have remonstrated with him again and again – but to no purpose; he only—’

‘Enough, Mr. Hargrave; you ought to be aware that whatever my husband’s faults may be, it can only make things worse to hear them from a stranger.’

‘Am I then a stranger?’ said he sorrowfully. ‘I am your nearest neighbour, your child’s godfather, and your husband’s friend; may I not be yours also?’

‘I know little of you, Mr. Hargrave.’

‘Have you forgotten the six or seven weeks I spent under your roof last autumn? I have not forgotten them. And I know enough of you, Mrs. Huntingdon, to think that your husband is the most enviable man in the world, and I should be the next most enviable if you would deem me worthy of your friendship.’

‘If you knew more of me, you would not think it; and you would not expect me to be flattered by the compliment.’

I stepped backward as I spoke. He saw that I wished the conversation to end; and he gravely bowed, wished me good-evening, and turned his horse away. He appeared hurt at my unkind reception of his overtures. I was not sure that I had done right in speaking so harshly; but, at the time, I had felt irritated – almost insulted by his conduct. It seemed as if he was presuming upon my husband’s absence, and insinuating more than the truth.

During our conversation, Rachel had moved a few yards away. Now he rode up to her, and asked to see the child. Taking it carefully into his arms, he looked upon it with an almost paternal smile, and said, ‘And this, too, he has forsaken!’ He tenderly kissed it, and restored it to the gratified nurse.

‘Are you fond of children, Mr. Hargrave?’ said I, a little softened.

‘Not in general,’ he replied, ‘but that is such a sweet child, and so like its mother.’

‘You are mistaken there; he resembles his father.’

‘Am I not right, nurse?’ said he, appealing to Rachel.

‘I think, sir, there’s a bit of both,’ she replied.

He departed; and Rachel pronounced him a very nice gentleman. I had still my doubts.

Over the following six weeks I met him several times, but always, except once, in company with his mother or sister, or both. When I called on them, he always happened to be at home, and, when they called on me, it was always he that drove them over in the phaeton.

The time that I met him alone was on a bright, warm day, in the beginning of July. I had taken little Arthur into the wood by the park, and seated him on the moss-cushioned roots of an old oak. Having gathered a handful of bluebells, I was kneeling before him, and presenting them to the grasp of his tiny fingers; forgetting, for the moment, all my cares, laughing at his gleeful laughter, and delighting myself with his delight – when a shadow suddenly fell on the grass before us; and I saw Walter Hargrave standing gazing at us.

‘Excuse me, Mrs. Huntingdon,’ said he, ‘but I was spell-bound; I did not wish to interrupt. How vigorous my little godson grows! how merry he is this morning!’ He approached the child, and stooped to take his hand; but, on seeing that his caresses were likely to produce tears, he prudently drew back.

‘What a pleasure he must be to you, Mrs. Huntingdon!’ he observed, with a touch of sadness.

‘He is.’

‘You have not heard from Huntingdon lately?’ he asked, with some timidity.

‘Not this week,’ I replied. Not these three weeks, I might have said.

‘I had a letter from him this morning. I wish it were such a one as I could show to you.’ He half drew from his waistcoat-pocket a letter with Arthur’s still beloved hand on the address, and put it back again, adding, ‘But he tells me he is to return next week.’

‘He tells me so every time he writes.’

‘Indeed! well, it is like him. But to me he always said it was his intention to stay till this month.’ This struck me like a blow. ‘It tallies with the rest of his conduct,’ observed Mr. Hargrave, thoughtfully regarding me.

‘Then he is really coming next week?’

‘You may rely upon it, if the assurance can give you any pleasure. Is it possible, Mrs. Huntingdon, that you can rejoice at his return?’ he exclaimed.

‘Of course, Mr. Hargrave; is he not my husband?’

‘Oh, Huntingdon; you know not what you slight!’ he murmured.

I took up my baby, wished him good-morning, and left him to be with my thoughts.

Was I glad? Yes, delighted; though I was angered by Arthur’s conduct. I felt that he had wronged me, and was determined he should feel it too.

## Chapter 30

On the following morning I received a few lines from him, confirming his return. And he did come the next week, but in a condition of body and mind even worse than before. I did not intend to pass over his derelictions without a remark; 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 tomorrow.

Next morning he was weary still: I would wait a little longer. But at dinner, 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 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 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.

'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, drinking down a tumbler of wine and water. 'I have an infernal fire in my veins, that all the waters of the ocean cannot quench!'

At that moment the butler entered and began to take away the things.

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

Benson, in some surprise, removed the cheese, and did his best to quickly clear the rest; but, unfortunately, there was a rumple in the carpet, caused by the hasty pushing back of his master's chair, on which he tripped and stumbled. There was an alarming crash of crockery, but no damage, except a broken sauce tureen; but, to my shame and dismay, Arthur turned furiously 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 set out the dessert and withdrew.

'What do you mean, Helen, by taking the servant's part against me?' said Arthur, as soon as the door was closed.

'The poor man was quite frightened and hurt at your sudden explosion, Arthur.'

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

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

'Why shouldn't I have nerves as well as you?'

'Oh, I don't doubt you have them, but I never complain of mine.'

'No, how should you, when you never risk injuring them?'

'Then why do you risk 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 away? You told me that you could, and would; you promised—’

‘Come, Helen, don’t begin 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 jangled, 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 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 day. How can that make you better?’

With some coaxing, I got him to leave the table. I tried to amuse him with the baby; but poor little Arthur was cutting his teeth, and his father could not bear his complaints. The baby was banished at the first sign of fretfulness; and because I went to share his exile for a little while, I was reproached, on my return, for preferring my child to my husband.

‘Well!’ exclaimed the injured man, still lying on the sofa. ‘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—’

‘It has not been pleasantly employed,’ I interrupted. ‘I have been nursing our poor little baby, who is 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 entreaty.’

‘Now, Helen,’ said he emphatically, half rising from the sofa, ‘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, and sinking back into his former position, with an impatient half-sigh, half-groan, he languidly closed his eyes, as if to sleep.

What my book was, I cannot tell, for I never looked at it. I gave 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 clasped his hand between my own. ‘Don’t you know that you are a part of me? 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, for heaven’s sake! Oh, Hattersley! you were right: this woman will be the death of me, with her strong feelings and her interesting force of character.’

‘Arthur, you must repent!’ cried I, in a frenzy of desperation, throwing my arms around him and burying my face in his bosom. ‘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 away. ‘You’ve nearly squeezed the breath out of my body.’ He looked really agitated and ill.

‘Get me a glass of wine,’ said he, ‘to remedy what you’ve done, you tiger! I’m almost ready to faint.’

I flew to get it, and 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 life, or will to the end of your days; 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: you will lose your health, and 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 to begin with, if it’s so easily demolished. If you don’t take care, my pretty tyrant, you’ll make me regret my choice, and envy my friend Hattersley his meek little Milicent: she’s quite a model wife, Helen. He had her with him in London all the season, and she was no trouble at all. He could amuse himself just as he pleased, in regular bachelor style, and she never complained; he could come home at any hour, or not come home at all; be sullen, sober, or glorious drunk; and play the fool or the madman, without any fear or botheration. She never gives him a word of reproach. 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 misery.’

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

‘It is not so. I have several letters from her, expressing the greatest anxiety about him, and complaining that you incite him to commit those extravagances. In one letter she implores me to use my influence to get you away from London, and says that her husband never did such things before you came, and would certainly stop as soon as you departed.’

‘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. 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 town if I could, but had little hope of success. I told her that I thought she was wrong in supposing that you enticed Mr. Hattersley into error. I believed that you mutually corrupted each other; and, perhaps, if she used a little gentle remonstrance with her husband, it might be of use; for, though he was more rough-hewn than mine, I believed he was more persuadable.’

‘And so that is the way you go on – encouraging mutiny, and abusing each other’s partners, and your own!’

‘According to your own account,’ said I, ‘my evil counsel has had little effect upon her. And as to abusing our husbands, we are both of us far too deeply ashamed of their errors and vices to make them the common subject of our correspondence. We would willingly keep your failings to ourselves – even from ourselves if we could, unless we could deliver you from them.’

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

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

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

Thenceforth I restrained my tears as much as I could. I spared him my exhortations and fruitless efforts at conversion, for I saw it was all in vain: God might awaken that heart, supine and stupefied with self-indulgence, but I could not. His injustice and ill-

humour towards his servants, who could not defend themselves, I still resented and withstood; but when I alone was the object of his bad mood, I endured it with calm forbearance.

Occasionally however, worn out or stung to distraction by some new irrationality, I gave way in spite of myself, so that he accused me of cruelty and impatience. I attended carefully to his needs and amusements, but not, I admit, with the same devoted fondness as before. Besides, I had now another claimant on my time and care – my ailing infant, for whose sake I frequently suffered the reproaches of his unreasonable father.

But Arthur is not naturally a peevish or irritable man; so there was something almost ludicrous in his fretfulness, which would have been laughable were it not for the intense pain he suffered. 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 effort that I did not give up in despair.

His appetite for wine had increased, as I had foreseen. It was now more to him than an aid to social enjoyment: it was an enjoyment in itself. In his weakness and depression he would have made it his medicine and support, his comforter, his recreation, and his friend, and would have sunk deeper and deeper. But I was 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, firmness, and vigilance, I succeeded in preserving him from absolute bondage to that need for drink, so inexorable in its tyranny, so disastrous in its effects.

And here I was 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 to the winds, and made ‘a night of it,’ if his friend had chosen to comply. Thus he might, in a night or two, have ruined the labour of weeks. I was so fearful of this at first, that I humbled myself enough to privately hint my fears to Mr. Hargrave, and to express a hope that he would not encourage Arthur’s drinking.

He was pleased to be confided in, and did not betray my confidence. After that his presence served as a check upon Arthur; he always succeeded in bringing him from the dining-room in good time, and in tolerably good condition, for he would insist upon leaving the table 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 idleness and isolation, and a useful ally to me. I could not but feel grateful to him; and I thanked him at the first convenient opportunity.

Yet, as I did so, my heart whispered all was not right, and brought a glow to my face. His steady, serious gaze doubled my misgivings. His high delight at being able to help me was chastened by sympathy for me and commiseration for himself – his sighs of suppressed affliction seemed to come from a full heart; but I would not ask him what the matter was. There was enough between us already, with our secret understanding over Arthur. It seemed wrong to me; but I thought, ‘If it is wrong, surely Arthur’s is the fault, not mine.’

And indeed, I so identify myself with him, that I feel his degradation and his failings as my own. I blush for him, I fear for him; I repent, weep, pray, and feel for him as for

myself. But I cannot act for him; and hence 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, 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, but I am gradually losing my instinctive horror and repulsion. I flatter myself I am more charitable; but am I not becoming more indifferent too?

Fool that I was, to dream that I had strength and purity enough to save myself and him! Yet God preserve me from perdition, 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.

For his conduct has lately been irreproachable – but I know his heart is still unchanged; and I know that spring is coming, and deeply dread the consequences.

As he began to recover his vigour, and with it his impatience, I suggested a short stay by the sea-side, both for his benefit and for the health of our little one. 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, grouse-shooting and deer-stalking, and had promised 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 my past short-comings. You needn’t fear me this time: there are no temptations on the mountains. Pay a visit to Staningley, if you like: your uncle and aunt have long been wanting us to go there; but somehow there’s such a repulsion between your aunt and me, that I could never bring myself to visit.’

About the third week in August, Arthur set out for Scotland, and Mr. Hargrave accompanied him, to my private satisfaction. Shortly afterwards, I, with little Arthur and Rachel, went to Staningley, my dear old home, which I saw again with mingled feelings of pleasure and pain so blended that I could scarcely distinguish the one from the other.

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 of London. His letters now, though neither long nor loverlike, were more regular than ever before; and when he did return, to my great joy, 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 liking for the pleasures of the table, against which I have to struggle and watch; but he has begun to notice his son. And his fox-hunting and coursing keep him occupied when the ground is not hardened by frost, so that he is not dependent on me for entertainment.

But it is now January; spring is approaching. That sweet season, which I once so joyously welcomed as the time of hope and gladness, awakens now far other anticipations.

## Chapter 31

March 20th, 1824.

The dreaded time is come, and Arthur is gone. This time he announced he would have only a short stay in London, and go to the Continent for a few weeks; but I shall not expect him for many weeks. I now know that, with him, days signify weeks, and weeks months.

July 30th.

He returned about three weeks ago, rather better in health than before, but worse in temper. And yet, perhaps, I am wrong: it is I that am less patient and forbearing. I am tired out with his injustice, his selfishness and hopeless depravity. I wish a milder word would do; I am no angel.

My poor father died last week: Arthur was vexed to hear of it, because he saw that I was shocked and grieved, and he feared that it would spoil his comfort. When I spoke of ordering my mourning clothes, he exclaimed, 'Oh, I hate black! I suppose you must wear it for form's sake; but I hope, Helen, you won't think it your duty to look as glum as your clothes. Why should you sigh and groan, and make me uncomfortable, because an old gentleman – a perfect stranger to us both – has thought proper to drink himself to death? There, now, I declare you're crying! It's affectation.'

He would not hear of my attending the funeral, or going to cheer poor Frederick. It was quite unnecessary, he said, and I was unreasonable to wish it. What was my father to me? I had only seen him once since I was a baby, and he had never cared a straw about me; and my brother, too, was little better than a stranger.

'Besides, dear Helen,' said he, embracing me with flattering fondness, 'I cannot spare you for a single day.'

'Then how have you managed without me these many days?' said I.

'Ah! then I was knocking about the world. Now I am at home; and home without you, my goddess, would be intolerable.'

'Yes, as long as I'm necessary to your comfort; but before, you urged me to leave you so that you might get away from home without me,' retorted I.

Before the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them. It seemed so heavy a charge: if false, too gross an insult; if true, too humiliating a fact. But I might have spared myself that self-reproach. He only chuckled, as if he viewed the whole thing as a clever, merry jest. Surely that man will make me dislike him at last! I made my own medicine, and I will drink it to the very dregs: and none but myself shall know how bitter I find it!

August 20th.

We are back to our usual position. Arthur has returned to his former condition and habits; and I have found it wisest to shut my eyes against the past and future, as far as he is concerned, and live only for the present: to love him when I can; to smile (if possible) when he smiles, be cheerful when he is cheerful; and when he is not, to try to make him so; and if that doesn't work, to bear with him, to excuse him, and forgive him as well as I

can, and restrain my own evil passions from aggravating his; and to do all in my power to save him from worse.

But we shall not be long alone. Soon we shall entertain the same group of friends as the autumn before last, with the addition of Mr. Hattersley and, at my request, his wife and child. I long to see Milicent, and her little girl, who is now one, and will be a charming playmate for my little Arthur.

September 30th.

Our guests have been here a week or two; but I have had no time to write about them. I cannot get over my dislike of Lady Lowborough – I thoroughly disapprove of her. I always avoid her company as much as I can; but when we do speak, it is with the utmost civility, even apparent cordiality on her part. Preserve me from such cordiality! It is like handling briar-roses, bright enough to the eye, and soft to the touch, but you know there are thorns beneath, and every now and then you feel them too.

Lately, however, I have seen nothing in her conduct towards Arthur to alarm me. During the first few days I thought she was trying to win his admiration. He noticed her manoeuvres, which made him smile; but, to his credit, her shafts fell powerless. He received her most bewitching smiles and haughtiest frowns with the same careless good-humour, till she gave up her efforts, and became, to all appearance, as perfectly indifferent as himself.

This is as it should be; but Arthur will never let me be satisfied with him. I have never, for a single hour since I married him, known the repose of quiet confidence in him. Those two detestable men, Grimsby and Hattersley, have destroyed all my labour against his love of wine. They encourage him daily to overstep the bounds of moderation, and often to disgrace himself by positive excess.

I shall not forget the second night after their arrival. Just as I retired from the dining-room with the ladies, before the door was closed, Arthur exclaimed, ‘Now then, my lads, what say you to a jollification?’

Milicent glanced at me with a half-reproachful look, as if I could hinder it; but her face changed when she heard Hattersley’s loud voice, shouting, ‘I’m your man! Send for more wine!’

We had scarcely entered the drawing-room before we were joined by Lord Lowborough.

‘Why have you come so soon?’ exclaimed his lady, with a most ungracious air of dissatisfaction.

‘You know I never drink, Annabella,’ replied he.

‘But you might stay with them a little: it looks so silly to be always dangling after the women!’

He reproached her with a look of mingled bitterness and surprise, and, sinking into a chair, suppressed a heavy sigh.

‘You did right to leave them, Lord Lowborough,’ said I. ‘I trust you will always continue to honour us so early with your company. And if Annabella knew the misery of folly and – and intemperance, she would not talk such nonsense, even in jest.’

He gravely turned his eyes upon me, with a half-surprised, half-abstracted look, and then looked at his wife.

‘At least,’ said she, ‘I know the value of a warm heart and a bold, manly spirit.’

‘Well, Annabella,’ said he, in a deep, hollow tone, ‘since my presence is disagreeable to you, I will relieve you of it.’

‘Are you going back to them, then?’ said she, carelessly.

‘No,’ exclaimed he, with harsh and startling emphasis. ‘I will never stay with them one moment longer than I think right! But you needn’t mind that; I shall never trouble you again by intruding my company upon you in this way.’

He left the room: I heard the hall-door open and shut, and immediately afterwards, on drawing the curtain, I saw him pacing down the park, in the comfortless damp twilight.

‘It would serve you right, Annabella,’ said I, ‘if Lord Lowborough were to return to his old habits, which so nearly ruined him: you would then repent your conduct.’

‘Not at all, my dear! I shouldn’t mind if his lordship got drunk every day: I should be the sooner rid of him.’

‘Oh, Annabella!’ cried Milicent. ‘How can you say such wicked things! It would, indeed, be a just punishment, if Providence should take you at your word, and make you feel—’ She paused at a sudden burst of loud talking and laughter from the dining-room, in which the voice of Hattersley was conspicuous.

‘What you feel at this moment, I suppose?’ said Lady Lowborough, with a malicious smile.

Milicent did not reply, but averted her face and brushed away a tear. At that moment the door opened and admitted Mr. Hargrave, a little flushed, his dark eyes sparkling.

‘Oh, I’m so glad you’re come, Walter!’ cried his sister. ‘But I wish you could have got Ralph to come too.’

‘Utterly impossible, dear Milicent,’ replied he, gaily. ‘I had much ado to get away myself. Ralph attempted to keep me by violence; Huntingdon threatened me with the loss of his friendship; and Grimsby tried to make me ashamed of my virtue, with the most wounding sarcasm. So you see, ladies, you ought to make me welcome when I have suffered so much for your sweet society.’ He smilingly turned to me and bowed.

‘Isn’t he handsome, Helen!’ whispered Milicent, full of sisterly pride.

‘He would be,’ I returned, ‘if that brilliance of eye and cheek were natural to him.’

Mr. Hargrave took a seat near me, and asked for a cup of coffee.

‘I am in paradise, now,’ he said, as I handed one to him; ‘but I have fought my way through flood and fire to win it. Ralph Hattersley set his back against the door, and swore I should not leave except through his body (a pretty substantial one too). Luckily, that was not the only door, and I escaped through the butler’s pantry, to the amazement of Benson, who was cleaning the plate.’

Mr. Hargrave laughed, and so did his cousin; but his sister and I remained silent and grave.

‘Pardon my levity, Mrs. Huntingdon,’ murmured he, more seriously. ‘You are not used to these things: you allow them to affect you too much. But I thought of you in the midst of those lawless roisterers; and I tried to persuade Mr. Huntingdon to think of you too, but to no purpose. He is determined to enjoy himself tonight; it will be no use

keeping the coffee waiting for him or his companions. Meantime, I earnestly wish I could banish the thoughts of them from your mind – and my own too, for when I think of the power Mr. Huntingdon possesses over the happiness of one so superior to himself, and the use he makes of it, I positively detest the man!

‘You had better not say so to me, then,’ said I; ‘for, bad as he is, he is part of myself, and you cannot abuse him without offending me.’

‘Pardon me. Let us say no more of him at present.’

At last they came; but not till after ten. Much as I had longed for their coming, my heart failed me at the riotous uproar of their approach; and Milicent turned pale as Mr. Hattersley burst into the room with a clamorous volley of oaths, which Hargrave tried to check by entreating him to remember the ladies.

‘Ah! you do well to remind me of the ladies, you dastardly deserter,’ cried he, shaking his fist at his brother-in-law. ‘If it were not for them, I’d demolish you in the twinkling of an eye, and give your body to the fowls of heaven!’ Then, planting a chair by Lady Lowborough’s side, he sat down and began to talk to her with a mixture of absurdity and impudence that seemed to amuse her; though she kept him at bay with her smart and spirited retorts.

Meantime Mr. Grimsby sat by me, and gravely stated that he would thank me for a cup of tea. Arthur placed himself beside poor Milicent, who shrank away. His face was exceedingly flushed: he laughed incessantly, and while I blushed for him, I was glad that he talked to his companion in so low a tone that no one else could hear.

‘What fools they are!’ drawled Mr. Grimsby, who had been talking away, at my elbow, with sententious gravity all the time; but I had been too much absorbed in the others to listen.

‘Did you ever hear such nonsense as they talk, Mrs. Huntingdon?’ he continued. ‘I’m quite ashamed of them: they can’t take a bottle without losing their heads—’

‘You are pouring the cream into your saucer, Mr. Grimsby.’

‘Ah! yes, but we’re almost in darkness here,’ he said in drawling and uncertain tones. ‘But as I was saying, Mrs. Huntingdon, they can’t take half a bottle without being affected; whereas I’ve drunk three times as much as they have, and you see I’m perfectly steady. Now that may strike you as very singular, but I can explain it: you see their brains – I mention no names, but you’ll know – their brains are light to begin with, and the fumes of liquor make them lighter still; whereas my brains, being more solid, will absorb a considerable quantity of the alcoholic vapour without any sensible result—’

‘I think you will find a sensible result produced on that tea,’ interrupted Mr. Hargrave, ‘by the amount of sugar you have put into it. Instead of your usual single lump, you have put in six.’

‘Have I?’ he replied the philosopher, diving with his spoon into the cup, and bringing up several half-dissolved sugar cubes. ‘Hum! Thus, Madam, you see the evil of thinking too much. If I had had my wits about me, like ordinary men, instead of within me like a philosopher, I should not have spoiled this cup of tea.’

‘That is the sugar-basin, Mr. Grimsby. Now you have spoiled the sugar too; and I’ll thank you to ring for some more, for here is Lord Lowborough; and I hope his lordship will sit down with us, and take some tea.’

Hargrave rang for the sugar, while Grimsby lamented his mistake, saying it was owing to the badness of the lights. Lord Lowborough was standing before the door, grimly surveying the company. He now stepped up to Annabella, who sat beside Hattersley, who was loudly abusing his host.

‘Well, Annabella,’ said her husband, as he leant over the back of her chair, ‘which of these three “bold, manly spirits” would you have me resemble?’

‘By heaven and earth, you shall resemble us all!’ cried Hattersley, starting up and rudely seizing him by the arm. ‘Hey, Huntingdon!’ he shouted. ‘I’ve got him! Come and help me! And d—n me, if I don’t make him drunk before I let him go!’

There followed a disgraceful contest: Lord Lowborough, in desperate earnest, and pale with anger, silently struggling to release himself from the powerful madman. I urged Arthur to interfere, but he could do nothing but laugh.

‘Huntingdon, you fool, come and help me, can’t you!’ cried Hattersley.

‘I’m wishing you God-speed, Hattersley,’ cried Arthur, ‘and aiding you with my prayers: I can’t do anything else if my life depended on it!’ And leaning back in his seat, he clapped his hands on his sides and groaned aloud.

‘Annabella, give me a candle!’ said Lowborough, whose antagonist had now got him round the waist and was endeavouring to uproot him from the door-post.

‘I shall take no part in your rude sports!’ replied the lady, coldly drawing back.

I snatched up a candle and brought it to him. He held the flame to Hattersley’s hands, till, roaring like a wild beast, Hattersley let him go. Lord Lowborough vanished; and, swearing and cursing like a maniac, Hattersley threw himself on to the sofa. Now that the door was free, Milicent attempted to make her escape from the scene of her husband’s disgrace; but he called her back.

‘What do you want, Ralph?’ murmured she, reluctantly approaching him.

‘I want to know what’s the matter with you,’ said he, pulling her on to his knee like a child. ‘What are you crying for, Milicent?’

‘I’m not crying.’

‘You are,’ persisted he, rudely pulling her hands from her face. ‘How dare you tell such a lie!’

‘I’m not crying now,’ pleaded she.

‘But you just have been, and I will know what for. Come, now, you tell me!’

‘Do let me alone, Ralph! Remember, we are not at home.’

‘No matter: answer my question!’ exclaimed her tormentor; and he shook her, and remorselessly crushed her slight arms with his powerful fingers.

‘Don’t let him treat your sister in that way,’ said I to Mr. Hargrave.

‘Come now, Hattersley, I can’t allow that,’ said that gentleman, stepping up to them. As he tried to unclasp the ruffian’s fingers from her arm, he was driven backward, and nearly laid upon the floor by a violent blow on the chest.

‘Take that for your insolence!’ shouted Hattersley. ‘And don’t you interfere again.’

‘If you were not drunk, I’d call you out for that!’ gasped Hargrave, white and breathless as much from anger as from the effects of the blow.

‘Go to the devil! Now, Milicent, tell me what you were crying for.’

‘I’ll tell you when we are alone,’ she murmured.

‘Tell me now!’ said he, with another shake and a squeeze that made her draw in her breath and bite her lip to suppress a cry of pain.

‘I’ll tell you, Mr. Hattersley,’ said I. ‘She was crying from pure shame and humiliation; because she could not bear to see you conduct yourself so disgracefully.’

‘Confound you, Madam!’ muttered he, with a stare of stupid amazement. ‘It was not that, was it, Milicent?’ She was silent. ‘Come, speak up, child!’

‘I can’t tell now,’ sobbed she.

‘But you can say “yes” or “no”!’

‘Yes,’ she whispered, hanging her head.

‘Curse you for an impertinent hussy, then!’ cried he, throwing her from him with such violence that she fell on her side; but she was up again before either I or her brother could come to her assistance, and stumbled out of the room, and, I suppose, upstairs.

Next Hattersley turned on Arthur. ‘Now, Huntingdon,’ he exclaimed, ‘I won’t have you sitting there and laughing like an idiot!’

‘Oh, Hattersley,’ cried he, wiping his eyes, ‘you’ll be the death of me.’

‘Yes, I’ll have the heart out of your body, man, if you keep up that imbecile laughter! There! see if that’ll settle you!’ cried Hattersley, snatching up a footstool and hurling it at his host’s head. He missed, while Arthur still sat collapsed and quaking with feeble laughter.

Hattersley cursed and swore; then he took some books from the table beside him, and threw them, one by one, at the object of his wrath; but Arthur only laughed the more. Finally, Hattersley rushed upon him in a frenzy, and seizing him by the shoulders, gave him a violent shaking, under which he laughed and shrieked.

But I had seen enough of my husband’s degradation; and leaving Annabella and the rest to follow when they pleased, I withdrew. Dismissing Rachel, I walked up and down my room, in an agony of misery and suspense, not knowing what might still happen, or how or when that unhappy creature would come up to bed.

At last he came, slowly and stumblingly ascending the stairs, supported by Grimsby and Hattersley, who neither of them walked steadily themselves, but were both laughing and joking and making noise enough for all the servants to hear. Arthur himself was no longer laughing now, but sick and stupid. I will write no more about that.

Such disgraceful scenes have been repeated more than once. I don’t say much to Arthur about it, for it would do more harm than good; but I let him know that I intensely dislike such exhibitions; and each time he has promised they should never be repeated.

But I fear he is losing the little self-command and self-respect he once possessed: formerly, he would have been ashamed to act this way. His prudent friend Hargrave never disgraces himself by taking too much wine, and is always the first to leave the table after Lord Lowborough, who, wiser still, leaves the dining-room immediately after us.

Since Annabella offended him so deeply, Lord Lowborough has never once entered the drawing-room before the rest. He spends the interval in the library, which I take care to have lit for him; or, on fine nights, he roams about the grounds. But I think she regrets her misconduct, for she has not repeated it, and has behaved with wonderful propriety towards him, treating him with more kindness. I date this improvement from the time when she ceased to strive for Arthur’s admiration.

## Chapter 32

October 5th.

Esther Hargrave is growing into a fine girl. She is not out of the school-room yet, but her mother frequently brings her over; and when we go to the Grove, I always talk more to her than to anyone else, for we are very much attached to each other. 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 one else for company, except her mother and her governess (an artificial, conventional person), and, now and then, her subdued, quiet sister.

I often wonder what her future will be: she is full of buoyant hope, as I was once. I shudder to think of her being awakened, like me, to a sense of delusion. I think I would feel her disappointment even more deeply than my own. She is so joyous and fresh, so light of heart, and guileless and unsuspecting. Oh, it would be cruel to make her feel as I feel now!

Her sister trembles for her too. Yesterday morning, 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 latest 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 our breath, while they toddled together along the broad, sunny walk. My Arthur supported the feebler steps of little Helen, and pointed out to her the brightest flowers. After laughing at the pretty sight, we began to talk of the children's future; and that made us thoughtful. We both relapsed into silent musing as we walked; until Milicent said,

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

'Not very often.'

'But more often than I do; and she loves you, I know, and respects your opinion. She says you have more sense than mamma.'

'That is because my opinions generally coincide more with hers than with your mamma's. But what of it, Milicent?'

'I wish you would seriously impress upon her, never, on any account, to marry for the sake of money, or rank, or any earthly thing, but true affection and esteem.'

'There is no need for that,' said I, 'for we have already talked about it, and I assure you her ideas of love and matrimony are as romantic as anyone could wish.'

'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 closely allied to the truth.'

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

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

‘No – or worse. She might have far worse to suffer, for I am really contented, Helen, though you mayn’t think it: I would not exchange my husband for any man on earth, even if I could.’

‘I believe you: but 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 he will improve, don’t you think, Helen? he’s only six-and-twenty.’

‘He may,’ I answered.

‘He will, he will!’

‘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 as an octogenarian.’

‘And yet you still hope for Mr. Huntingdon?’

‘I do; for it seems as if life and hope must cease together. Is he so much worse, Milicent, than Mr. Hattersley?’

‘Well, to be honest, 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 am not offended, love; and if there is a comparison to be made between the two, the difference, for the most part, is certainly in Hattersley’s favour.’

With a childlike impulse, Milicent suddenly kissed my cheek without a word of reply. Then, turning away, she caught up her baby, and hid her face. How odd that we so often weep for each other’s distresses, when we shed not a tear for our own! Her heart had been full of her own sorrows, but it overflowed at the idea of mine; and I, too, shed tears at the sight of her emotion, though I had not wept for myself for many a week.

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. With our books, our children, and each other, we expected to have a very agreeable morning. After a while, however, Mr. Hattersley came in, attracted, I suppose, by the voice of his child; for he is extremely fond of her, and she of him.

He smelt of the stables, where he had been since breakfast. But that was no matter to little Helen; as soon as the colossal shape of her father darkened the door, she uttered a shrill scream of delight, and ran crowing towards him with outstretched arms. Embracing his knee, she laughed in his face.

He might well look smilingly upon those small features, radiant with mirth, and those clear blue eyes. Did he think how unworthy he was of such a possession? I fear no such idea crossed his mind. He caught her up for a few minutes of rough play, during which it is difficult to say whether the father or the daughter laughed and shouted the loudest.

At length, however, the little one was hurt, and began to cry; and he tossed her into her mother’s lap. The child nestled in Milicent’s arms, and sinking her little weary head on her bosom, soon dropped asleep.

Meantime Mr. Hattersley strode up to the fire, and stood blocking it with arms akimbo, gazing round as if the house and all its contents were his own possessions.

‘Deuced bad weather this! There’ll be no shooting today.’ Then he suddenly regaled us with a few bars of a rollicking song. He finished with a whistle, and continued:

‘I say, Mrs. Huntingdon, what a fine stud your husband has! I’ve been looking at the horses this morning; and upon my word, Black Bess, and Grey Tom, and that young Nimrod are the finest animals I’ve seen for many a day!’ Then followed a detailed discussion of their various merits, succeeded by a sketch of the great things he intended to do in the horse-jockey line. ‘What are you two doing here?’ he finished. ‘And 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 disconcerted as he went on. ‘What a noble figure she has; and magnificent black eyes; and what a fine spirit; and what a tongue of her own, too, when she likes to use it. I 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 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.

‘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 hand within his arm, looked up in his face, and said softly,

‘What does it amount to, Ralph? Only 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,’ she murmured, withdrawing her hand from his arm. ‘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 through her tears, 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 surprise.

‘Yes, 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, Milly, did you never walk over a dry sea-shore? The sands are smooth and soft and easy: but if you plod along, for half an hour, over this soft, easy carpet, you’ll find it wearisome work, and be glad to come to a bit of good firm rock, that won’t budge underfoot: and, though it be hard as a millstone, you’ll find it easier footing after all.’

‘I know what you mean, Ralph,’ said she, nervously. ‘But I thought you always liked to be yielded to.’

‘I do like it,’ replied he, pulling closer 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 ill-humour, he must complain that she wears him out with 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 myself, as long as there's one ready to help me, with no sins 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, and went to the door.

'Where are you going now?'

'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 touch too soft – she almost melts in one's hands. I think I ill-use her sometimes, when I've taken too much – but she never complains, so I suppose she doesn't mind it.'

'She does mind it, Mr. Hattersley,' said I: 'and she minds some other things still more, yet you will not hear her complain of them.'

'How do you know? Does she complain to you?' demanded he, with a sudden spark of fury.

'No,' I replied; 'but I have known her longer than you have. 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, every single day you inflict upon her some pang that you might spare her if you wanted.'

'Well, it's not my fault,' said he carelessly, plunging his hands into his pockets. 'If my goings-on 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?'

'True, but we shouldn't always have what we want. How can I help misbehaving when I see it's all one to her whether I behave like a Christian or a scoundrel? and how can I help teasing her when she's so 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?'

'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? 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; 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've been imbibing.'

'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), blame yourself: be sure it is something you have done wrong that distresses her.'

'I don't believe it. If it were, she should tell me so: I don't like that way of moping in silence. 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.’

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

‘It is a great matter,’ interrupted I, ‘both to yourself and to all connected with you, most especially your wife. Indeed, it is nonsense to talk about injuring no one but yourself: it is impossible to injure yourself, without injuring hundreds besides, in a greater or lesser degree, either by the evil you do or the good you leave undone.’

‘As I was saying,’ continued he, ‘I should do better if I were joined to one that would remind me when I was wrong – if I had a mate that would not be always yielding, and always kind, but that would have the spirit to stand at bay now and then, and honestly tell me her mind, as you do.’

‘Well, I would never contradict you without a cause, but certainly I would always let you know what I thought of your conduct. If you oppressed me, 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,’ said I.

‘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. You can’t reform him: he’s ten times worse than I. He’s afraid of you, to be sure; he’s always on his best behaviour in your presence.’

‘I wonder what his worst behaviour is like, then?’ I could not help observing.

‘It’s very bad indeed – isn’t it, Hargrave?’ said he, for Mr. Hargrave had entered the room unnoticed by me. ‘Isn’t Huntingdon as great a reprobate as ever lived?’

‘His lady will not like it,’ replied Mr. Hargrave, coming forward; ‘but I must say, I thank God I am not such a man.’

‘Perhaps it would be better,’ said I, ‘to look at what you are, and say, “God be merciful to me a sinner.”’

‘You are severe,’ returned he, with a proud yet injured air.

Hattersley laughed, and clapped him on the shoulder, but he moved away. ‘Isn’t it a shame, Mrs. Huntingdon?’ cried Hattersley; ‘I struck Walter Hargrave when I was drunk, the second night here, and he’s turned a cold shoulder on me ever since; though I asked his pardon the morning after!’

‘You were not too drunk to know what you were doing.’

‘You wanted to interfere between me and my wife,’ grumbled Hattersley. ‘But I wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t been excited; and if you choose to bear malice for it after all the handsome things I’ve said, do so and be damned!’

‘I would refrain from such language in a lady’s presence, at least,’ said Mr. Hargrave, with a look of disgust.

‘I’ve said nothing but heaven’s truth,’ returned Hattersley. ‘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, he stepped forward and offered his hand. It was immediately clasped in his brother-in-law’s.

‘I guess the best return I can make is to take myself off,’ muttered Hattersley, with a broad grin, and he left the room.

This put me on my guard. Mr. Hargrave turned 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. I am not going to trouble you with the mention of my own feelings, but I have something to reveal to you which you ought to know, and which, yet, it pains me inexpressibly—’

‘Then don’t reveal it!’

‘But it is of importance—’

‘If so I shall hear it soon enough, especially if it is bad news. At present I am going to take the children to the nursery. Come, Arthur.’

‘But you will return?’

‘Not yet; don’t wait.’

‘Then when may I see you again?’

‘At lunch,’ said I, departing carrying little Helen and leading Arthur by the hand.

He turned away, muttering some impatient sentence, 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 to hear. But the fact is, I have a painful disclosure to make; and I want you to give me a few minutes of your attention in private at any time you like. It is not from any selfish motive that I ask it, so you need not kill me with that look of pitiless disdain. I know too well the bearers of bad tidings are regarded—’

‘What is this amazing piece of news?’ 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.’

‘You are right; but I feel it is my duty to disclose it to you.’

‘Oh, spare us both the infliction, and I will excuse you from the duty. You have offered to tell; I have refused to hear: my ignorance will not be your fault.’

‘Very well. But if the blow falls suddenly upon you, remember I wished to soften it!’

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

6th.

He has not alluded to this momentous mystery since. The threatened blow has not struck, and I do not greatly fear it. At present I am pleased with Arthur: he has not positively disgraced himself for over 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 temper and appearance. Dare I hope this will continue?

## Chapter 33

7th

Yes, I will hope! Tonight I heard Grimsby and Hattersley grumbling together about the inhospitality of their host. They did not know I was near, for I happened to be standing behind the curtain, watching the moon rise, and wondering why Arthur was so sentimental as to stand outside, leaning against the outer pillar of the portico, apparently watching it too.

‘So, I suppose we’ve seen the last of our merry carousals in this house,’ said Mr. Hattersley; ‘I thought it wouldn’t last long. But,’ added he, laughing, ‘I didn’t expect it would end this way. I rather thought our pretty hostess would be setting up her porcupine quills, and threatening to turn us out if we didn’t mind our manners.’

‘You didn’t foresee this, then?’ answered Grimsby, with a guttural chuckle. ‘But he’ll change again when he’s sick of her, in a year or two; you’ll see.’

‘I don’t know,’ replied Hattersley: ‘she’s not the sort of woman you soon tire of. But it’s devilish provoking that we can’t be jolly, because he chooses to be on his good behaviour.’

‘These cursed women!’ muttered Grimsby: ‘they’re the bane of the world! They bring trouble wherever they come, with their deceitful tongues.’

At this point I emerged, and smiling on Mr. Grimsby as I passed, left the room and went out in search of Arthur. Having seen him go towards the shrubbery, I followed him, and found him just entering the shadowy walk. I was so light of heart, so overflowing with affection, that I sprang upon him and clasped him in my arms.

First, he murmured, ‘Bless you, darling!’ and returned my close embrace with a fervour like old times. Then he started, and, in a tone of absolute terror, exclaimed, ‘Helen! what the devil is this?’

How strange that the instinctive impulse of affection should come first, and then the shock of the surprise! But at least the affection is genuine: he is not sick of me yet.

‘I startled you, Arthur,’ said I, laughing. ‘How nervous you are!’

‘What the deuce did you do it for?’ cried he, quite testily. ‘Go back, Helen – go back directly! You’ll get your death of cold!’

‘I won’t, till I’ve told you what I came for. They are blaming you, Arthur, for your temperance, and I’m come to thank you for it. They say it is all “these cursed women,” and that we are the bane of the world; but don’t let them grumble you out of your good resolutions, or your affection for me.’

He laughed. I hugged him again, and cried in tearful earnest, ‘Do persevere! and I’ll love you better than ever I did before!’

‘Well, I will!’ said he, hastily kissing me. ‘There, now, go. You mad creature, how could you come outside into this chill autumn night? You’ll catch your death. Run away, do!’

‘Do you see my death among those trees, Arthur?’ said I, for he was gazing intently at the shrubs. I was reluctant to leave him, but he grew angry at my delay, so I kissed him and ran back to the house.

I was in such a good humour that night: Milicent whispered that she had never seen me so brilliant. Certainly, I talked enough for twenty, and smiled upon them all. Grimsby stared and wondered; Hattersley laughed and jested, but behaved as well as he knew how. Hargrave and Annabella copied me, and doubtless both surpassed me, the former in his eloquence, the latter in boldness at least. Milicent was lively and gay too, in her quiet way.

Even Lord Lowborough caught the contagion: his dark eyes lit up beneath their moody brows; his gloom and proud reserve had vanished for the time; and he astonished us all, not only by his cheerfulness, but by the positive flashes of true force of intellect. Arthur did not talk much, but he laughed, and listened to the rest, and was in perfect good-humour. So that, altogether, we made a very merry, innocent, and entertaining party.

9th.

Yesterday, when Rachel came to dress me for dinner, I saw that she had been crying. I wanted to know why, but she seemed reluctant to tell. Was she unwell? No. Had she heard bad news from her friends? No.

‘Oh, no, ma’am!’ she answered; ‘it’s not for myself.’

‘What then, Rachel?’

She sighed. ‘Oh, ma’am, I don’t like master’s ways of going on.’

‘What do you mean, Rachel? He’s going on very properly at present.’

‘Well, ma’am, if you think so.’

And she went on dressing my hair, in a hurried way, quite unlike her usual calm manner, murmuring, half to herself, that it was beautiful hair: she ‘would like to see ’em match it.’ And she gently patted my head.

‘Is that affection intended for my hair, or for me?’ said I, laughingly turning round; but a tear was in her eye. ‘What is it, Rachel?’

‘If I was you, ma’am. I wouldn’t have that Lady Lowborough in the house another minute – not another minute I wouldn’t!’

I was thunderstruck; but before I could demand an explanation, Milicent entered my room, and stayed with me till it was time to go down to dinner. She must have found me very unsociable, for Rachel’s words rang in my ears. But I hoped they were no more than some idle rumour of the servants. At dinner I narrowly observed Lady Lowborough and Arthur, and saw nothing extraordinary in the conduct of either.

Immediately after dinner Annabella went out with her husband to share his moonlight ramble, for it was another splendid evening. Mr. Hargrave entered the drawing-room a little before the others, and challenged me to a game of chess. He did it without any of that sad but proud humility he usually assumes in addressing me. His eye met mine keenly, but steadily: there was something about him I did not understand, but he seemed sober enough. I suggested he play Milicent.

‘She plays badly,’ said he, ‘Come now! Lay down your needlework. I know you never take it up except when there is nothing better to do.’

So I consented, and Milicent told us she would watch the game.

‘Now, Mrs. Huntingdon,’ said Hargrave, as he arranged the chessmen on the board, speaking with a peculiar emphasis, ‘you are a good player, but I am a better: we shall have a long game, and you will give me some trouble; but I can be as patient as you, and in the end I shall certainly win.’ He fixed his eyes upon me with a glance I did not like, keen, crafty, and almost impudent; already half triumphant in anticipated success.

‘I hope not, Mr. Hargrave!’ returned I, with a vehemence that must have startled Milicent. He only smiled and murmured, ‘Time will show.’

We began to play: I was intensely eager to disappoint his expectations, for I felt an almost superstitious dread of being beaten. I did not want success to add one jot to his insolent self-confidence, or encourage his dream of future conquest. His play was cautious and deep, but I struggled hard against him.

For some time the combat was doubtful: at length, to my joy, the victory seemed inclining to my side: I had taken several of his best pieces. He paused, in evident perplexity. I rejoiced in my advantage, but dared not glory in it yet.

At length, he lifted his head, and making his move, said calmly, ‘Now you think you’ll win, don’t you?’

‘I hope so,’ replied I, taking his pawn.

‘It is those bishops that trouble me,’ said he; ‘but the bold knight can overleap them,’ taking my last bishop with his knight; ‘and now, those sacred persons once removed, I shall carry all before me.’

‘Oh, Walter, how you talk!’ cried Milicent; ‘she has far more pieces than you still.’

‘I intend to give you some trouble yet,’ said I; ‘and perhaps, sir, you will find yourself checkmated before you are aware.’

The combat deepened. The game was a long one, and I did give him some trouble: but he was a better player than I.

‘What keen gamesters you are!’ said Mr. Hattersley, who had now entered, and was watching us. ‘Why, Mrs. Huntingdon, your hand trembles! and, Walter, you dog, you look as keen and cruel as if you would drain her heart’s blood! If I were you, I wouldn’t beat her: she’ll hate you if you do!’

‘Hold your tongue, will you?’ said I: his talk distracted me. A few more moves, and I was inextricably entangled in the snare of my antagonist.

‘Check,’ cried he. I sought in agony some means of escape. ‘Mate!’ he added, quietly, but with delight. I was foolishly disconcerted. Hattersley laughed; Milicent was troubled. Hargrave placed his hand on mine as it rested on the table, and squeezing it, murmured, ‘Beaten, beaten!’ and gazed into my face with a look where exultation was blended with ardour.

‘No, never, Mr. Hargrave!’ exclaimed I, quickly withdrawing my hand. ‘Only in that game.’

‘Will you try another, then?’

‘No.’

‘You acknowledge my superiority?’

‘Yes, as a chess-player.’ I rose to resume my work.

‘Where is Annabella?’ said Hargrave.

‘Gone out with Lord Lowborough,’ I answered.

‘And not yet returned!’ he said, seriously. ‘Where is Huntingdon?’ looking round again.

‘Gone out with Grimsby, as you know,’ said Hattersley, suppressing a laugh.

Why did he laugh? Why did Hargrave connect them thus together? Was this the dreadful secret he had wished to reveal to me? I instantly rose and left the room to go in search of Rachel and demand an explanation of her words; but Mr. Hargrave followed me into the anteroom, and gently laid his hand upon the door.

‘May I tell you something, Mrs. Huntingdon?’ said he, in a subdued tone.

‘If it is anything worth hearing,’ replied I, struggling to be composed.

‘Do not be alarmed,’ said he: ‘what I wish to say is nothing in itself; and I will leave you to draw your own inferences from it. You say that Annabella is not yet returned? And you hear that Huntingdon is gone out with Grimsby?’

‘Well?’

‘I heard Grimsby say to your husband, “I shall manage it! They’re down by the water; I’ll meet them, and tell him I want to talk with him about something that we needn’t trouble the lady with; and she’ll say she can walk back to the house; and then I’ll tip her a wink to go through the shrubbery. I’ll keep him talking as long as I can, and then bring him round the other way.”’ Mr. Hargrave paused, and looked at me.

Without a word of comment, I rose, darted from the room, and left the house. The torment of suspense was not to be endured: I must know the truth at once. I flew to the shrubbery. Scarcely had I reached it, when a sound of voices stopped me.

‘We have lingered too long; he will be back,’ said Lady Lowborough’s voice.

‘Surely not, dearest!’ was the reply; ‘but you run across the lawn, and get in as quietly as you can; I’ll follow in a while.’

My knees trembled under me; my brain swam. I shrunk among the bushes, and leant against the trunk of a tree to let her pass.

‘Ah, Huntingdon!’ said she reproachfully, pausing where I had stood with him the night before. ‘It was here you kissed that woman!’

He answered, with a careless laugh, ‘Well, dearest, I couldn’t help it. You know I must keep straight with her as long as I can. Haven’t I seen you kiss your dolt of a husband scores of times? and do I ever complain?’

‘But tell me, don’t you love her still – a little?’ said she, placing her hand on his arm, looking earnestly in his face. I could see them plainly in the moonlight, which shone full upon them.

‘Not one bit!’ he replied, kissing her cheek.

‘Good heavens, I must be gone!’ cried she, breaking from him, and away she flew.

There he stood before me; but I had not strength to confront him now. My tongue cleaved to the roof of my mouth; I was well-nigh sinking to the earth. My senses seemed to fail me as I saw his shadowy form pass, and through the rushing sound in my ears I heard him say, as he stood looking up the lawn, ‘Run, Annabella, run! There – in with you!’ And his low laugh reached me as he walked away.

‘God help me now!’ I murmured, sinking on my knees among the damp weeds, and looking up at the moonlit sky through the scant foliage above. It seemed all dim and quivering now to my darkened sight. My burning, bursting heart strove to pour forth its agony to God, but could not frame its anguish into prayer; until a gust of cool wind swept over me, which revived my sinking frame.

Then, while I lifted up my soul in speechless supplication, some heavenly influence seemed to strengthen me: I breathed more freely; my vision cleared; I saw distinctly the pure moon shining, and the light clouds skimming the clear, dark sky, and the eternal stars twinkling down. I knew their God was mine, and He was strong to save and swift to hear.

‘*I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee,*’ seemed whispered from above the stars. No; He would not leave me comfortless: I should have strength for all my trials.

Refreshed, invigorated, if not composed, I rose and returned to the house. Much of my new-born strength and courage forsook me, I confess, as I entered: everything sickened my heart – the hall, the lamp, the staircase, the doors, the sound of talk and laughter from the drawing-room. How could I bear my future life! In this house, among those people – oh, how could I endure to live!

John entered the hall, and told me he had been sent in search of me, and that the company wished to know if I were coming.

‘Say I am not well tonight, John,’ I answered.

I retired into the empty dining-room, where all was silence and darkness, but for the soft sighing of the wind outside, and the faint gleam of moonlight that pierced the curtains. There I walked rapidly up and down, thinking bitter thoughts. How different to yesterday! That, it seems, was the last expiring flash of my life’s happiness. Poor, blinded fool that I was! I could now see the reason of Arthur’s burst of kindness in the shrubbery; it was for his paramour. The start of horror was for his wife.

I heard the drawing-room door open: a light, quick step came out, crossed the hall, and ascended the stairs. It was poor Milicent, gone to see how I was. No one else cared for me; but she still was kind. I had shed no tears before, but now they came, fast and free.

I heard her come down, more slowly than she had ascended. Would she come in and find me? No; she turned in the opposite direction and re-entered the drawing-room. I was glad, for I knew not how to meet her, or what to say. I had taken the burden upon myself; let me bear it alone.

As bed-time approached I dried my eyes, and tried to clear my voice and calm my mind. I must speak to Arthur, but I would do it calmly: there should be no scene – nothing to complain or boast of to his companions – nothing to laugh at with his lady-love. When the company were retiring to their chambers I gently opened the door, and as he passed, beckoned him in.

‘What’s to do with you, Helen?’ said he. ‘What the deuce are you here for, in the dark? You look like a ghost!’

‘That does not matter to you,’ I answered, ‘for you have no longer any regard for me, it appears; and I have no longer any for you.’

‘Hal-lo! what the devil is this?’ he muttered.

‘I would leave you tomorrow,’ continued I, ‘but for my child’ – I paused a moment to steady my voice.

‘What in the devil’s name is this, Helen?’ cried he.

‘You know perfectly well.’

He vehemently swore he knew nothing about it, and insisted upon hearing who had been blackening his name.

‘Nobody,’ I replied coldly. ‘I was in the shrubbery this evening, and I saw and heard for myself.’

He uttered a suppressed exclamation of dismay, and muttering, ‘I shall catch it now!’ set down his candle on the nearest chair, and stood confronting me with folded arms.

‘Well, what then?’ said he, with the calm insolence of desperation.

‘Only this,’ returned I; ‘will you let me take our child and what remains of my fortune, and go?’

‘Go where?’

‘Anywhere, where he will be safe from your contaminating influence, and you and I shall be delivered from each other’s presence.’

‘No.’

‘Will you let me have the child then, without the money?’

‘No! Do you think I’m going to be made the talk of the country for your fastidious caprices?’

‘Then I must stay here, to be hated and despised. But henceforth we are husband and wife only in name.’

‘Very well.’

‘I am your child’s mother, and your housekeeper, nothing more. So you need not trouble yourself any longer to feign the love you cannot feel: I will expect no more heartless caresses from you, nor offer them either.’

‘We shall see who will tire first, my lady.’

‘If I tire, it will be of living in the world with you,’ I said: ‘not of living without your mockery of love. When you tire of your sinful ways, and show yourself truly repentant, I will forgive you, and, perhaps, try to love you again, though that will be hard indeed.’

‘Humph! and meantime you will go and talk me over to Mrs. Hargrave, and write long letters to aunt Maxwell to complain of me?’

‘I shall complain to no one. Until now I have struggled hard to hide your vices from everyone, and invest you with virtues you never possessed; but now you must look to yourself.’

I left him muttering bad language, and went upstairs.

‘You are poorly, ma’am,’ said Rachel, surveying me with deep anxiety.

‘It is all true, Rachel,’ said I. ‘But don’t you trouble yourself about it,’ and I kissed her pale, time-worn cheek. ‘I can bear it better than you think.’

‘Yes, you were always one for “bearing.” But if I was you I wouldn’t bear it; I’d give way and cry right hard! and I’d talk too – I’d let him know what—’

‘I have talked,’ said I, ‘and I have cried, and I am calm now, really: so let us say no more about it, and don’t mention it to the servants. There, you may go now. Good-night; and don’t disturb your rest for me: I shall sleep well, if I can.’

Despite this resolution, I found my bed so intolerable that, before two o'clock, I rose, and lighting my candle, I sat down in my dressing-gown to write the events of the past evening. It was better than lying in bed torturing my brain with recollections of the past and anticipations of the dreadful future.

I have found relief in describing the very circumstances that have destroyed my peace. No sleep would have done so much towards composing my mind, and preparing me to meet the trials of the day. I fancy so, at least; and yet, when I cease writing, I find my head aches terribly; and when I look into the glass, I am startled at my haggard, worn appearance.

Rachel has been to dress me, and says I have had a sad night of it, she can see. Milicent has just looked in to ask me how I was. I told her I was better, but to excuse my appearance admitted I had had a restless night.

I wish this day were over! I shudder at the thoughts of going down to breakfast. How shall I encounter them all? Yet let me remember that it is not I who am guilty: if they scorn me as a victim of their guilt, I can pity their folly and despise their scorn.

## Chapter 34

Evening.

Breakfast passed: I was calm and cool throughout. I answered composedly all inquiries about my health; and whatever was unusual in my looks was attributed to the indisposition that had caused me to retire early last night.

But how am I to get over the ten or twelve days before they go? Yet why long for their departure? When they are gone, how shall I get through the months or years of my future life in company with that man – my greatest enemy? For none could injure me as he has done.

Oh! when I think how foolishly I've loved him, how madly I have trusted him, how constantly I've laboured, studied, prayed, and struggled for him; and how cruelly he has trampled on my love, betrayed my trust, scorned my prayers and tears, crushed my hopes, destroyed my youth's best feelings, and doomed me to a life of hopeless misery – it is not enough to say that I no longer love my husband. I hate him!

The word stares me in the face like a guilty confession, but it is true: I hate him. I hate him! But God have mercy on his miserable soul! and make him see and feel his guilt. I ask no other vengeance. If he could fully know and truly feel my wrongs I should be well avenged, and I could freely pardon all; but he is so hardened, so heartless and depraved, that I believe he never will.

But it is useless dwelling on this. Let me distract myself by relating minor details.

Mr. Hargrave has annoyed me all day with his serious, sympathising, and (as he thinks) unobtrusive politeness. If it were more obtrusive it would trouble me less, for then I could snub him; but, as it is, I cannot do so without seeming rude. I sometimes think I ought to give him credit for the good feeling he simulates so well; and then again, I suspect him. His kindness may not all be feigned; but I will not let gratitude make me forget myself. I will remember the game of chess, the words he used, and those indescribable looks of his, and I think I shall be safe enough.

I think he wishes to find an opportunity of speaking to me alone: but I have taken care to disappoint him – not that I fear anything he could say, but I have trouble enough; and, for Milicent's sake, I do not wish to quarrel with him.

He excused himself from going out to shoot with the other gentlemen this morning, saying he had letters to write; but instead of retiring for that purpose into the library, he stayed in the morning-room, where I was seated with Milicent and Lady Lowborough. They had sewing, and I had a book. Milicent saw that I wished to be quiet, and accordingly let me alone. Annabella, doubtless, saw it too: but she chatted away, addressing herself almost exclusively to me, with the utmost familiarity, growing the more animated the colder and briefer my answers became.

Mr. Hargrave saw that I could ill endure it, and looking up from his desk, he answered her questions for me if he could, and attempted to transfer her attentions to himself; but it did not work. She saw that her loquacious vivacity annoyed me, so she persisted. But I scribbled on the fly-leaf of my book, and put it into her hand. I wrote:

‘I am too well acquainted with your character and conduct to feel any friendship for you, and as I do not have your talent for acting, I cannot pretend to be cordial. I must, therefore, beg that converse may cease between us; and if I continue to treat you with civility and respect, understand that it is out of regard for your cousin Milicent’s feelings, not for yours.’

Upon reading this she turned scarlet, and bit her lip. Covertly tearing away the leaf, she crumpled it up and put it in the fire, and then pretended to read the book. Then Milicent announced that she was going to the nursery, and asked if I would accompany her.

‘Wait,’ cried Annabella, suddenly looking up; ‘I want to speak to Helen a minute. You go, Milicent, and she’ll follow in a while.’ Milicent went. ‘Will you oblige me, Helen?’ continued Annabella.

Her impudence astounded me; but I followed her into the library. She closed the door, and walked up to the fire.

‘Who told you this?’ said she.

‘No one: I am capable of seeing for myself.’

‘Ah, you are suspicious!’ cried she, smiling.

‘No, Lady Lowborough, I do not found my charge upon suspicion. I enjoy a moonlight ramble as well as you,’ I answered, steadily fixing my eyes on her; ‘and the shrubbery happens to be one of my favourite resorts.’

She coloured, and gazed silently into the fire. I watched her with a feeling of malevolent gratification; then, moving towards the door, I calmly asked if she had anything more to say.

‘Yes, yes!’ she cried, starting up. ‘I want to know if you will tell Lord Lowborough?’

‘Suppose I do?’

‘Well, I cannot dissuade you, of course – but there will be terrible consequences – and if you don’t, I shall think you the most generous of mortals – and if there is anything in the world I can do for you – short of–’ She hesitated.

‘Short of renouncing my husband, you mean?’ said I.

‘I cannot renounce what is dearer than life,’ she muttered, in a low, hurried tone. Then, fixing her gleaming eyes upon me, she continued earnestly: ‘But, Helen – or Mrs. Huntingdon – will you tell him? If you do not, I am ready to acknowledge myself your debtor for your noble forbearance.’

‘I shall not tell him.’

‘You will not!’ cried she, delightedly. ‘Accept my thanks!’

She sprang up, and offered me her hand, but I drew back.

‘Give me no thanks; it is not for your sake that I refrain. I have no wish to publish your shame and I should be sorry to distress your husband so.’

‘And Milicent? will you tell her?’

‘No. I would rather that she should not know the disgrace of her relation!’

‘You use hard words, Mrs. Huntingdon, but I can pardon you.’

‘And now, Lady Lowborough,’ continued I, ‘let me counsel you to leave this house as soon as possible. You must be aware that your continuance here is excessively disagreeable to me – not for Mr. Huntingdon’s sake,’ said I, observing the dawn of a

malicious smile of triumph on her face – ‘you are welcome to him, as far as I’m concerned – but because it is painful to be always disguising my true feelings about you, and struggling to keep up an appearance of civility towards one for whom I have not the slightest shadow of esteem. Also, if you stay, your conduct cannot remain concealed much longer from the only two people in the house who do not know it already. And, for your husband’s sake, Annabella, and even for your own, I earnestly entreat you to break off this unlawful connection, before the dreadful consequences—’

‘Yes, yes,’ said she, with a gesture of impatience. ‘But I cannot go before the day appointed for our departure. What excuse could I give? Our visit is nearly at an end. Surely you can endure my presence for a few more days!’

‘Well, I have nothing more to say to you.’

‘Have you mentioned this to Huntingdon?’ asked she, as I was leaving the room.

‘How dare you mention his name to me!’ was my only answer.

No words have passed between us since, except when pure necessity demanded.

## Chapter 35

19th.

As Lady Lowborough finds she has nothing to fear from me, the closer the time of her departure, the more audacious and insolent she becomes. She speaks to my husband with affectionate familiarity in my presence, when no one else is by, and is particularly fond of displaying her interest in his health and welfare, as if to contrast her kind solicitude with my cold indifference.

And he rewards her with such smiles and glances, such whispered words, or boldly-spoken hints on her goodness and my neglect, as make the blood rush into my face in spite of myself. I would like to be deaf and blind to everything that passes between them, since the more awareness I show, the more she triumphs in her victory, and the more he flatters himself that I love him still.

On such occasions I have sometimes been startled by a subtle, fiendish thought that I should show him otherwise by seeming to encourage Hargrave's advances; but such ideas are banished in a moment with horror; and then I hate him tenfold for having brought me to this! God pardon all my sinful thoughts! Instead of being humbled and purified by my afflictions, I feel that they are turning my nature into gall. This must be my fault as much as theirs, for no true Christian could cherish such bitter feelings as I do against him and her, especially her. Him, I still feel that I could pardon – freely, gladly – at the slightest sign of repentance; but she – words cannot utter my abhorrence.

It is as well that she is leaving tomorrow, for I could not endure her presence for another day. This morning she rose earlier than usual, and I found her in the breakfast room alone.

'Oh, Helen! is it you?' said she, turning as I entered. Then she uttered a short laugh. 'I think we are both disappointed. Ah, here comes one that will not rejoice at my departure!' she murmured, half to herself, as Arthur entered the room.

He shook hands with her and wished her good-morning: then, looking lovingly in her face, and still holding her hand, murmured pathetically, 'The last day!'

'Yes,' said she with some asperity; 'and I rose early to make the best of it; I have been here alone this half-hour, and you – you lazy creature—'

'Well, I thought I was early too,' said he; 'but,' dropping his voice to a whisper, 'we are not alone.'

'We never are,' returned she. But they were almost as good as alone, for I was now standing at the window, struggling to suppress my wrath.

More words passed between them, which I did not overhear; but Annabella had the audacity to come and stand beside me, and even to put her hand upon my shoulder and say softly, 'You need not grudge him to me, Helen, for I love him more than ever you could do.'

This put me beside myself. I took her hand and violently dashed it from me in indignation. Startled, almost appalled, by this sudden outbreak, she recoiled in silence. I would have given way to my fury and said more, but at Arthur's low laugh I fell silent, and scornfully turned away, regretting that I had given him so much amusement.

He was still laughing when Mr. Hargrave came in. How much of the scene he had witnessed I do not know. He greeted his host and his cousin coldly, and gave me a glance intended to express the deepest sympathy.

‘How much allegiance do you owe that man?’ he asked below his breath, as he stood beside me at the window, pretending to observe the weather.

‘None,’ I answered. And returning to the table, I busied myself in making the tea. He followed, and would have entered into conversation with me, but the other guests were now assembling, and I took no more notice of him.

After breakfast, I quietly retreated to the library. Mr. Hargrave followed me there, under pretence of coming for a book; and after selecting a volume, he approached me, and said softly,

‘So you consider yourself free at last?’

‘Yes,’ said I, without raising my eyes from my book, ‘free to do anything except offend God and my conscience.’

There was a momentary pause.

‘Very right,’ said he, ‘provided your conscience is not too morbidly tender, and your ideas of God not too severe; but can you suppose it would offend Him to bring happiness to someone who would die for you? To raise a devoted heart to a state of heavenly bliss, when you could do it without the slightest injury to anyone?’

This was spoken in a low, earnest, melting tone. I raised my head; and steadily confronting his gaze, I answered calmly, ‘Mr. Hargrave, do you mean to insult me?’

He was not prepared for this. Drawing himself up, he answered, with proud sadness, ‘That was not my intention.’

I glanced towards the door, with a slight movement of the head, and returned to my book. He immediately withdrew. This was better than if I had answered with angry words. What a good thing it is to be able to command one’s temper! I must try to cultivate this quality: God only knows how often I shall need it in the rough, dark road that lies before me.

During the morning I drove over to the Grove with the two ladies, so that Milicent might see her mother and sister. They persuaded her to stay with them the rest of the day, Mrs. Hargrave promising to bring her back in the evening.

Consequently, Lady Lowborough and I had the pleasure of returning in the carriage together. For the first mile or two we kept silence, I looking out of my window, and she leaning back in her corner. But when I was tired of the cold, raw wind in my face, I gave up and leant back too.

With her usual impudence, my companion then made some attempts at conversation; but ‘yes,’ or ‘no’ or ‘humph,’ were the most she could elicit from me. At last, on her asking my opinion upon some trivial point, I said, ‘Why do you wish to talk to me, Lady Lowborough? You know what I think of you.’

‘Well, if you will be so bitter against me,’ replied she, ‘I can’t help it; but I’m not going to sulk for anybody.’

Our short drive was now at an end. As soon as the carriage door was opened, she sprang out, and went to meet the gentlemen, who were returning from the woods. Of course I did not follow.

After dinner, I retired to the drawing-room, and she accompanied me. But I had the two children with me, and I gave them my whole attention. Little Helen was soon tired of playing; and while I sat on the sofa with her on my knee, and Arthur seated beside me, Lady Lowborough came and placed herself on the other side.

‘Tomorrow, Mrs. Huntingdon,’ said she, ‘you will be delivered from my presence, which, no doubt, you will be very glad of. But do you know I have rendered you a great service? Have you not observed the change in Mr. Huntingdon? Don’t you see what a sober, temperate man he is become? I know you did your utmost to deliver him from his sad habits, but without success, until I came to your assistance. I told him that I could not bear to see him degrade himself so, and that I should cease to – well, no matter what I told him, but you see he is reformed; and you ought to thank me for it.’

I rose and rang for the nurse.

‘But I desire no thanks,’ she continued; ‘all I ask is, that you will take care of him when I am gone, and not, by harshness and neglect, drive him back to his old customs.’

I was almost sick with anger, but Rachel was now at the door. I pointed to the children: she took them away, and I followed.

‘Will you, Helen?’ continued the speaker, with a malicious smile.

I gave her a look, and departed. In the next room I met Mr. Hargrave. He saw I was in no humour to be spoken to, and let me pass; but when, after a few minutes in the library, I had regained my composure, and was returning to the drawing-room, I found him still lingering, and evidently waiting for me.

‘Mrs. Huntingdon,’ said he, ‘will you allow me one word?’

‘Be quick, if you please.’

‘I offended you this morning; and I cannot live under your displeasure.’

‘Then go, and sin no more,’ replied I, turning away.

‘No, no!’ said he hastily, setting himself before me. ‘I must have your forgiveness. I leave you tomorrow, and I may not have an opportunity of speaking to you again. Let me implore you to forgive my rash presumption, and think of me as if those words had never been spoken. Believe me, I regret them deeply, and I cannot bear the loss of your esteem.’

‘I cannot bestow my esteem on all who desire it, unless they deserve it too.’

‘I shall think my life well spent in labouring to deserve it, if you will pardon this offence. Will you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes! but that is coldly spoken. Give me your hand and I’ll believe you!’

‘Here it is, and my forgiveness with it: only, sin no more.’

He pressed my cold hand with sentimental fervour, but said nothing, and stood aside to let me pass into the room, where all the company were now assembled. Mr. Grimsby saw me enter, immediately followed by Hargrave, and leered at me with a glance of intolerable significance. I looked him in the face, till he sullenly turned away.

Meantime Hattersley had seized Hargrave by the arm, and was whispering in his ear – some coarse joke, no doubt. Thank heaven, they are all going tomorrow.

## Chapter 36

December 20th, 1824.

This is the third anniversary of our happy marriage. It is now two months since our guests left us; and I have had nine weeks' experience of this new phase of married life – two persons living together, as master and mistress of the house, father and mother of a merry little child, with the mutual understanding that there is no love, friendship, or sympathy between them. I try to live peaceably with him: I treat him with civility, give up my convenience to his, and consult him in a business-like way on household affairs, deferring to his pleasure and judgment, even when I know the latter to be inferior to my own.

As for him, for the first week or two he was peevish and low, fretting, I suppose, over his dear Annabella's departure, and particularly ill-tempered to me. Everything I did was wrong; I was cold-hearted, he said; my sour, pale face was perfectly repulsive; my voice made him shudder; he knew not how he could live through the winter with me. Again I proposed a separation, but it would not do: he was not going to be the talk of all the old gossips in the neighbourhood. No; he must try to bear with me.

'I must try to bear with you, you mean,' said I; 'for so long as I act as steward and house-keeper, without pay and without thanks, you cannot afford to part with me. I shall therefore give up these duties when my bondage becomes intolerable.' This threat, I thought, would keep him in check, if anything would.

I believe he was disappointed that I did not feel his insults more acutely, for when he had said anything particularly hurtful, he would stare me searchingly in the face, and then grumble about my 'chilly heart'. If I had wept bitterly for his lost affection, he would, perhaps, have taken me into favour for a while, just to console him for the absence of his beloved Annabella, until he could meet her again. Thank heaven, I am not so weak as that! I was infatuated once, but my affection for him is gone now – wholly crushed and withered away; and he has none but himself to thank for it.

At first, he abstained wonderfully well from solacing his cares in wine; but at length he began to relax his virtuous efforts, and now and then exceeded a little, and still continues to do so – sometimes, more than a little. While he is under the influence of drink, he at times fires up and attempts to play the brute; and then I do not hide my scorn and disgust.

When he is suffering the after-effects, he bemoans his sufferings and errors, and blames me for both. He says he knows such indulgence injures his health, but I drive him to it by my unnatural conduct; it will be the ruin of him, but it is all my fault.

Then I am roused to defend myself, for this is an injustice I cannot endure. Have I not laboured to save him from this very vice? Would I not labour still to deliver him from it if I could? Is it my fault that I have lost my influence with him, or that he has forfeited every claim to my regard? And should I seek a reconciliation with him, when I abhor him, and know that he despises me, and that he continues to correspond with Lady Lowborough? No, never, never! he may drink himself to death, but it is not my fault!

Yet I try to save him still: I tell him that drinking makes his eyes dull, and his face red and bloated, and that it makes him stupid; and that if Annabella were to see him now, she would speedily be disenchanted. These warnings bring only coarse abuse for me – and indeed, I almost feel as if I deserved it, for I hate to use such arguments; but they sink into his stupefied heart, and make him ponder and abstain more than anything else I say.

At present I am enjoying a temporary relief from his presence. He is gone with Hargrave to join a distant hunt, and will not be back before tomorrow evening. How differently I used to feel his absence!

Mr. Hargrave is still at the Grove. He and Arthur frequently pursue their rural sports together: he often calls upon us here, or Arthur rides over to him. I do not think either is overflowing with love for the other, but their common occupations fill the time, and give Arthur better employment than the indulgence of his appetites. The only objection I have is that the fear of meeting Mr. Hargrave prevents me from seeing his sister Esther so often as I otherwise should. Lately he has conducted himself towards me with such unerring propriety that I suppose he is striving to ‘win my esteem.’ If he continues to act in this way, he may win it; but what then? The moment he attempts to demand anything more, he will lose it again.

February 10th.

It is a hard, bitter thing to have one’s kind feelings cast back in one’s teeth. I was beginning to relent towards Arthur; to pity his comfortless condition, made worse by his lack of intellectual resources or a good conscience. I began to think I ought to sacrifice my pride, and renew my efforts to make his home agreeable and lead him back to the path of virtue, by softening my frigid civility into kindness. I had began this course – and what was the result?

No answering spark of kindness, no awakening penitence, but an unappeasable ill-humour, and a tyrannous spirit; and a lurking gleam of self-complacent triumph at every softness in my manner, that congealed me back to marble. This morning he finished the business: I think the petrification is so complete that nothing can melt me again. Among his letters was one which he read with gratification, and then threw across the table to me, saying,

‘There! read that, and take a lesson by it!’

It was in the dashing hand of Lady Lowborough. I glanced at the first page; it seemed full of extravagant protestations of affection; longings for a speedy reunion – and impious railings against God for having doomed them both to the hateful bondage of marriage with those they could not love. He gave a slight titter on seeing me change colour. I folded up the letter, rose, and returned it to him, saying only,

‘Thank you, I will take a lesson by it!’

My little Arthur was standing between his knees, delightedly playing with the bright, ruby ring on his finger. Urged by a sudden, imperative impulse to remove my son from that contaminating influence, I picked him up and carried him out of the room. Not liking this abrupt removal, the child began to cry.

This was a new stab to my already tortured heart. I would not let him go; but, taking him into the library, I shut the door, knelt down and embraced him, kissed him, wept over

with him with passionate fondness. More frightened than consoled by this, he turned struggling from me, and cried out for his papa. I released him, with bitter tears falling from my blinded, burning eyes. Hearing his cries, the father came to the room; I turned away, lest he should see my emotion. He swore at me, and took the now pacified child away.

It is hard that my little darling should love him more than me; and that, when my son's well-being is all I have to live for, I should see my influence destroyed by my husband's selfish affection. If I, for his good, deny him some trifling indulgence, he goes to his father, and the latter, despite his indolence, will give himself trouble to fulfil the child's desires. If I look gravely on him for some childish disobedience, he knows his father will smile and take his part against me.

Thus, not only have I the father's spirit in the son to contend against, but he counteracts my labour for the child's well-being, destroys my influence over his tender mind, and robs me of his very love. I had no earthly hope but this, and he seems to take a diabolical delight in tearing it away.

But it is wrong to despair; I will remember the counsel of the inspired writer to him 'that sitteth in darkness and hath no light; let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God!'

## Chapter 37

December 20th, 1825.

Another year is past; and I am weary of this life. And yet I cannot wish to leave it – I cannot wish to leave my darling in this dark and wicked world alone, without a friend to guide him through its weary mazes, and guard him from its perils. I am not well fitted to be his only companion, I know; but there is no other to supply my place. I am too grave to join in his play, and often his bursts of gleeful merriment alarm me; I see in them his father's temperament, and I tremble, and dampen the innocent mirth I ought to share.

That father, on the contrary, is troubled with no fears, no scruples about his son's welfare. In the evenings especially, when the child sees him the oftenest, he is particularly jovial, ready to laugh and jest with anybody but me, and I am particularly silent and sad: therefore, of course, the child dotes upon his amusing, ever-indulgent papa, and will gladly exchange my company for his.

This disturbs me greatly; not so much for the sake of my son's affection (though I do prize that highly) as for my influence over him, which his father delights to rob me of; making no use of it but to torment me and ruin the child. My only consolation is that he spends little of his time at home, and, during the months he passes in London or elsewhere, I can recover the lost ground, and overcome the evil he has wrought by his wilful mismanagement. But it is a bitter trial to behold him, on his return, doing his utmost to subvert my labours and transform my innocent, affectionate, tractable darling into a selfish, disobedient, and mischievous boy; thereby preparing the soil for those vices he has so successfully cultivated in himself.

Happily, none of Arthur's 'friends' were invited to Grassdale last autumn: he went to visit some of them instead. I wish he would always do so, and that his friends would keep him all year round.

Mr. Hargrave, to my annoyance, did not go with him; but I think I have done with that gentleman at last. For seven or eight months he behaved so well that I was off my guard, and was really beginning to look upon him as a friend, when he decided to overstep the bounds of propriety that had so long restrained him. It was on a pleasant evening at the end of May: I was wandering in the park, and he, seeing me there as he rode past, dismounted and approached me.

This was the first time he had come inside the park without his mother or sister. But he appeared so calm and easy, so respectful, that, though a little surprised, I was not alarmed. He walked with me under the ash-trees and talked with intelligence and good taste on many subjects. Then, after a pause, he suddenly electrified me by beginning, in a peculiar low voice, to pour forth expressions of earnest and passionate love. I cut short his appeal, and repulsed him so determinedly, and with such scornful indignation and sorrow, that he withdrew, astonished and mortified. A few days after, I heard that he had departed for London. He returned, however, in eight or nine weeks, and did not entirely keep aloof from me, but behaved so strangely that his quick-sighted sister, Esther, could not fail to notice the change.

‘What have you done to Walter, Mrs. Huntingdon?’ said she one morning, when I had called at the Grove, and he had just left the room after exchanging a few words of cold civility. ‘He has been so stately of late, I can’t imagine what it is about, unless you have offended him.’

‘I have done nothing willingly to offend him,’ said I. ‘If he is offended, he can best tell you how himself.’

‘I’ll ask him,’ cried the giddy girl, springing up to the window. ‘He’s only in the garden. Walter!’

‘No, no, Esther! you will seriously displease me if you do; and I shall leave immediately, and not come again for months.’

‘Did you call, Esther?’ said her brother, outside the window.

‘Yes; I wanted to ask you – to ask you to get me a rose for Mrs. Huntingdon.’ He departed. ‘Mrs. Huntingdon,’ she exclaimed, turning to me, ‘I’m quite shocked at you. You’re just as cold and distant as he is: and I’m determined you shall be good friends before you go.’

‘Esther, how can you be so rude!’ cried Mrs. Hargrave, who was seated knitting in her easy-chair.

‘Well, mamma, you said yourself–’ But the young lady was silenced by the uplifted finger of her mamma, and a stern shake of the head.

Mr. Hargrave reappeared at the window with a beautiful moss-rose in his hand.

‘Here, Esther, I’ve brought you the rose,’ said he, holding it out to her.

‘Give it her yourself, you blockhead!’ cried she.

‘Mrs. Huntingdon would rather receive it from you,’ replied he, in a low, very serious tone. His sister took the rose and gave it to me.

‘My brother’s compliments, Mrs. Huntingdon, and he hopes you and he will come to a better understanding by-and-by. Will that do, Walter?’ added the saucy girl, turning to him as he stood by the window; ‘or should I have said that you hope she will pardon your offence?’

‘You silly girl! you don’t know what you’re talking about,’ replied he gravely.

‘Indeed, I’m quite in the dark!’

‘Now, Esther,’ interposed Mrs. Hargrave, who, though equally in the dark, saw that her daughter was behaving very improperly, ‘I insist you leave the room!’

‘Pray don’t, Mrs. Hargrave, for I’m leaving it myself,’ said I, and immediately made my farewells.

About a week later, Mr. Hargrave brought his sister to see me. At first, he wore his usual cold, half-melancholy, injured air; but Esther made no remark upon it: she had evidently been schooled into better manners. She talked to me, and laughed and romped with little Arthur. He, somewhat to my discomfort, enticed her from the room to have a run in the hall, and then the garden.

I got up to stir the fire. Mr. Hargrave asked if I felt cold, and shut the door. He then walked up to the fire himself, and asked me if I were aware that Mr. Huntingdon was now at the home of Lord Lowborough, and likely to stay there for some time.

‘No; but it’s no matter,’ I answered carelessly; and if my cheek glowed like fire, it was rather at the question than the information it conveyed.

‘You don’t object?’ he said.

‘Not at all, if Lord Lowborough likes his company.’

‘You have no love left for him, then?’

‘Not the least.’

‘I knew that. I knew you were too high-minded and pure to continue to regard one so utterly false with any feelings but those of indignation and abhorrence!’

‘Is he not your friend?’ said I, turning my eyes to his face, with perhaps some indignation myself.

‘He was,’ replied he, with calm gravity; ‘but I could not continue my friendship with a man who could so infamously forsake and injure one so – well, I won’t speak of it. But tell me, do you never think of revenge?’

‘Revenge! No. What good would that do? It would make him no better, and me no happier.’

‘I don’t know how to talk to you, Mrs. Huntingdon,’ said he, smiling; ‘you are only half a woman, and half an angel. Such goodness overawes me.’

‘Then, sir, I fear you must be very much worse than you should be, if you think I am so vastly your superior; and since there exists so little sympathy between us, I think we had better each look for some more congenial companion.’ And moving to the window, I began to look for my son and his young friend.

‘No, I am no worse than my fellows,’ replied Mr. Hargrave. ‘But there is nobody like you. Are you as happy as you wish to be?’

‘No one is so blest as that.’

‘One thing I know,’ returned he, with a deep, sad sigh; ‘you are immeasurably happier than I am.’

‘I am very sorry for you, then,’ I could not help replying.

‘Are you, indeed? No, for if you were, you would be glad to relieve me.’

‘And so I should, if I could do so without injuring myself or any other.’

‘Can you suppose that I should wish you to injure yourself? On the contrary, it is your own happiness I long for more than mine. You are miserable now, Mrs. Huntingdon,’ continued he, looking me boldly in the face. ‘You do not complain, but I know that you are miserable – and must remain so as long as you keep those walls of ice about your heart; and I am miserable, too. Smile on me and I am happy: trust me, and you shall be happy also, for I can make you so – and I will, in spite of you!’ he muttered between his teeth; ‘and as for others, you cannot injure your husband, you know, and no one else has any concern in the matter.’

‘I have a son, Mr. Hargrave, and you have a mother,’ said I, moving away.

‘They need not know,’ he began; but then Esther and Arthur re-entered the room. Esther glanced at us – both flushed and excited, I daresay, though from far different causes. She must have thought we had been quarrelling; but she was too polite to mention it. She seated herself on the sofa, and began to talk about the garden, chattering away till her brother summoned her to depart.

‘If I have spoken too warmly, forgive me,’ he murmured on taking his leave, ‘or I shall never forgive myself.’ I merely bowed, to Esther’s evident disappointment. Poor child, she little knows the world she lives in!

Mr. Hargrave had no opportunity of meeting me again in private for several weeks; but when he did meet me there was less pride and more melancholy in his manner than before. Oh, how he annoyed me! I was obliged at last to limit my visits to the Grove, at the expense of offending Mrs. Hargrave and seriously afflicting poor Esther, who really values my society, and who ought not to suffer for the fault of her brother.

But he was not yet vanquished: he seemed to be always on the watch. Both I and Rachel frequently saw him riding lingeringly past the house. Rachel soon guessed how matters stood between us, and seeing the enemy from the nursery-window, she would give me a quiet hint if she saw me preparing for a walk. I would confine myself for that day to the park and gardens, or would take Rachel with me, and was not molested.

But one mild, sunshiny day in November, I had ventured out alone to visit a few of the poor tenants, when I was alarmed at the clatter of a horse's feet behind me. There was no gap by which I could escape into the fields, so I walked quietly on, determined that if it were him, I would repel him.

The horse soon overtook me. It was Mr. Hargrave, who greeted me with a smile intended to be soft and melancholy, but full of triumphant satisfaction. After briefly answering his greetings, I turned away and walked on; but he kept his horse at my side: it was evident he intended to be my companion all the way. After a few comments on indifferent subjects, he began in solemn tones:

'It will be four years next April since I first saw you, Mrs. Huntingdon. I admired you then most deeply, but I dared not love you. In the following autumn I saw so much of your perfections that I could not fail to love you, though I dared not show it. For upwards of three years I have endured a perfect martyrdom. I have suffered more than I can tell of silent sorrow, crushed hopes, and trampled affections – and you were the cause of it, and not altogether the innocent cause. My youth is wasting away; my life is a desolate blank; I have no rest day or night: I am become a burden to myself and others, and you might save me by a word, and will not do it. Is this right?'

'In the first place, I don't believe you,' answered I; 'in the second, if you will be such a fool, I can't prevent it.'

Earnestly he replied, 'I know you are not the heartless, icy being you pretend to be – you had a heart once, and gave it to your husband. When you found him utterly unworthy of the treasure, you reclaimed it; will you pretend that you can never love another? I know that in your loneliness you must be miserable. You have it in your power to raise two human beings from a state of suffering to such bliss as only generous, noble, self-forgetting love can give. You may tell me that you scorn and detest me, but, since you have set me the example of plain speaking, I will answer that I do not believe you. You coolly tell me it is the will of God that we should remain miserable. You may call this religion, but I call it wild fanaticism!'

'There is another life for both of us,' said I. 'If it be the will of God that we should sow tears now, it is only that we may reap joy hereafter. It is His will that we should not injure others by the gratification of our own earthly passions; and you have a family who would be seriously injured by your disgrace; and I, too, have friends, whose peace of mind shall never be sacrificed to my enjoyment. If I were alone in the world, I have still

my God and my religion, and I would sooner die than break my faith with heaven to obtain a few brief years of false and fleeting happiness!

‘There need be no disgrace or sacrifice,’ persisted he. ‘I do not ask you to leave your home or defy the world’s opinion.’ But I need not repeat all his arguments. I refuted them to the best of my power; but I was too flurried with indignation – and even shame – that he should thus dare to address me, to contend against his powerful sophistries. Finding, however, that he could not be silenced by reason, and even seemed to be exulting, I changed my course and tried another plan.

‘Do you really love me?’ said I, seriously, pausing and looking him calmly in the face.

‘Do I love you!’ cried he.

‘Truly?’ I demanded.

His countenance brightened; he thought his triumph was at hand. He began a passionate protestation of his fervour, which I cut short by another question:

‘But is it not a selfish love? Could you sacrifice your own pleasure to mine?’

‘I would give my life to serve you.’

‘I don’t want your life; but have you enough real sympathy for my afflictions to make an effort to relieve them, at the risk of discomfort to yourself?’

‘Try me, and see.’

‘If you have, never mention this subject again. You cannot recur to it in any way without doubling those sufferings you so feelingly deplore. I have nothing left but the solace of a good conscience and a hopeful trust in heaven, and you labour continually to rob me of these. If you persist, I must regard you as my deadliest foe.’

‘But hear me a moment—’

‘No, sir! You said you would give your life to serve me; I only ask your silence on this point. I have spoken plainly; and what I say I mean. If you torment me in this way any more, I must conclude that your protestations of love are entirely false!’

He bit his lip, and looked at the ground in silence for a while.

‘Then I must leave you,’ said he at length. ‘I cannot live here, and be for ever silent on my thoughts and wishes.’

‘Formerly, you spent little of your time at home,’ I answered; ‘it will do you no harm to absent yourself again.’

‘And can you bid me go so coolly? Do you really wish it?’

‘Most certainly I do. If you cannot see me without tormenting me as you have lately done, I would gladly say farewell and never see you more.’

He made no answer, but, bending from his horse, held out his hand towards me. I looked up at his face, and saw there genuine agony of soul; so that whether bitter disappointment or wounded pride were uppermost, I could not hesitate to put my hand in his, as if I bade a friend farewell.

He grasped it very hard, and then galloped away. Soon after, I learned that he was gone to Paris, where he still is; and the longer he stays there the better for me.

## Chapter 38

December 20th, 1826.

The fifth anniversary of my wedding-day, and, I trust, the last I shall spend under this roof. My resolution is formed, my plan is made, and already partly put in action.

In September, Grassdale was again alive with a party of ladies and gentlemen (so called): the same as those invited the year before last, with the addition of two or three others, including Mrs. Hargrave and Esther. The gentlemen and Lady Lowborough were invited for the pleasure of the host; the other ladies, I suppose, for the sake of appearances, and to make me civil. But the ladies stayed only three weeks; the gentlemen, with two exceptions, over two months: for Arthur was loth to part with them and be left alone with his bright intellect, his stainless conscience, and his loved and loving wife.

On the day of Lady Lowborough's arrival, I followed her into her room, and plainly told her that if I found reason to believe that she still continued her criminal connection with Mr. Huntingdon, I should think it my duty to inform her husband, however painful it might be, or however dreadful the consequences. She was startled at first; but rallying, she coolly replied that if I saw anything at all reprehensible or suspicious in her conduct, I was free to tell his lordship all about it.

Satisfied with this, I left her; and certainly I saw nothing particularly suspicious in her manner towards her host; but I had the other guests to attend to, and I did not watch her narrowly. I no longer regarded it as any concern of mine, and I dreaded having to inform Lord Lowborough.

But my fears were brought to an end in a manner I had not anticipated. One evening, I had retired into the library to snatch a few minutes' respite from forced cheerfulness; for I could not always bear to smile and listen, and play the attentive hostess. I had just sat down on the window-seat, and was looking out west, where the darkening hills rose against the clear amber light of evening, when I heard a hurried step approaching, and Lord Lowborough entered.

He flung the door open with unusual violence, and cast his hat aside. His face was ghastly pale; his eyes were fixed upon the ground; his teeth clenched: his forehead glistened. It was plain he knew his wrongs at last!

Unconscious of my presence, he began to pace the room in a state of fearful agitation, violently wringing his hands and uttering low groans. I made a movement to let him know that he was not alone; but he was too preoccupied to notice. I rose, and then he perceived me. He started and stood still a moment; and then, advancing with a kind of unnatural composure, said in a deep, almost sepulchral tone, 'Mrs. Huntingdon, I must leave you tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow!' I repeated. 'I do not ask the cause.'

'You know it then, and you can be so calm!' said he, surveying me with profound astonishment, and a kind of resentful bitterness.

'I have so long been aware of – of my husband's character, that nothing shocks me.'

'But this – how long have you been aware of this?' demanded he, laying his clenched hand on the table, and looking me keenly in the face.

I felt like a criminal. 'Not long,' I answered.

'You knew it!' cried he, with bitter vehemence, 'and you did not tell me! You helped to deceive me!'

'My lord, I did not help to deceive you.'

'Then why did you not tell me?'

'Because I knew it would be painful to you. I hoped she would return to her duty.'

'O God! how long has this been going on? Tell me – I must know!' exclaimed, with fearful eagerness.

'Two years, I believe.'

'Great heaven! and she has duped me all this time!' He turned away with a suppressed groan, and paced the room again in a renewed agitation. My heart smote me.

'She is a wicked woman,' I said. 'She has basely deceived and betrayed you. She is as little worthy of your regret as she was of your affection. Let her injure you no further; remove yourself from her, and stand alone.'

'And you, Madam,' said he sternly, 'you have injured me too by this ungenerous concealment!'

A sudden resentment rose within me, urging me to defend myself with answering severity. Happily, I did not yield to the impulse. I saw his anguish as he turned abruptly to the window, and murmured passionately, 'O God, that I might die!' I felt that to add one drop of bitterness to that already overflowing cup would be ungenerous indeed.

And yet I fear there was more coldness than gentleness in my reply. 'I might offer many excuses, but I will not attempt to—'

'I know them,' said he hastily: 'you would say that it was no business of yours: that I ought to have taken care of myself; that if my own blindness has led me into this pit of hell, I have no right to blame another—'

'I confess I was wrong,' continued I; 'but whether lack of courage or mistaken kindness was the cause of my error, I think you blame me too severely. I told Lady Lowborough two weeks ago, on the day she came, that I should certainly inform you if she continued to deceive you: she gave me full liberty to do so if I should see anything suspicious in her conduct. I have seen nothing; and I trusted she had altered her course.'

He continued gazing from the window while I spoke.

'It was wrong, it was wrong!' he muttered bitterly. 'Nothing can excuse it; nothing can atone for it; nothing!'

'I can only now regret that I did not see it in this light before. As you say, nothing can recall the past.'

Something in my voice seemed to alter his mood. Turning towards me, and attentively surveying my face, he said, in a milder tone, 'You, too, have suffered, I suppose.'

'I suffered much, two years ago; and two years hence you will be as calm as I am now, and far happier, I trust, for you are a man, and free to act as you please.'

Something like a smile, but a very bitter one, crossed his face.

'You have not been happy lately?' he said, with a kind of effort to regain composure.

'Happy?' I repeated. 'With such a husband?'

‘I have noticed a change in your appearance since the first years of your marriage,’ pursued he: ‘I mentioned it to – to that infernal demon,’ he muttered between his teeth; ‘and he said it was your own sour temper that was eating away your bloom: it was making you old and ugly before your time. You smile, Mrs. Huntingdon; nothing moves you. I wish my nature were as calm as yours.’

‘My nature was not originally calm,’ said I. ‘I have learned to appear so, through hard lessons and repeated efforts.’

At this point Mr. Hattersley burst into the room.

‘Hallo, Lowborough!’ he began. ‘Oh! I beg your pardon,’ he exclaimed on seeing me. ‘I didn’t know it was a tête-à-tête. Cheer up, man,’ he continued, giving Lord Lowborough a thump on the back, which caused him to recoil with disgust and irritation. ‘I want to speak with you.’

‘Speak, then.’

‘But I’m not sure the lady would like what I have to say.’

‘Then neither would I,’ said his lordship, turning to leave the room.

‘Yes, you would,’ cried the other, following him into the hall. ‘If you’ve the heart of a man, it would be the very ticket for you. It’s just this, my lad,’ he continued, lowering his voice, but not enough to prevent me from hearing every word. ‘I think you’re ill-used – now, don’t flare up; I don’t want to offend you: it’s only my rough way of talking. I must speak right out, you know. I’m come to offer you my services, for though Huntingdon is my friend, he’s a devilish scamp. I know what it is you want to make matters straight: just to exchange a shot with him, and then you’ll feel yourself all right again. Come now, give me your hand, and don’t look so gloomy. Name time and place, and I’ll manage the rest.’

‘That,’ answered the low, deliberate voice of Lord Lowborough, ‘is just the remedy the devil within my heart suggested – to meet him in a duel. Whether I or he should fall, or both, it would be an inexpressible relief to me. Yet, though I hate him, I’ll leave him to God; and though I abhor my own life, I’ll leave that, too, to Him that gave it.’

‘But you see—’

‘Not another word!’ exclaimed his companion. ‘I’ve enough to do against the fiend within me.’

‘Then you’re a cowardly fool, and I wash my hands of you,’ grumbled the tempter, as he swung himself round and departed.

‘Lord Lowborough,’ cried I, darting out and clasping his hand, as he was moving away. ‘I begin to think the world is not worthy of you!’

He turned upon me with a bewildered stare, that made me ashamed of my impulse; but soon a more human expression dawned on his face, and he pressed my hand kindly, while with genuine feeling he murmured, ‘God help us both!’

‘Amen!’ said I; and we parted.

I returned to the drawing-room, where, doubtless, my presence would be desired only by one or two. In the ante-room Mr. Hattersley was railing against Lord Lowborough’s poltroonery to my husband, who was lounging against the table, exulting in his own treacherous villainy, and laughing, and Mr. Grimsby, who quietly rubbed his hands and chuckled with fiendish satisfaction.

In the drawing-room I found Lady Lowborough, evidently struggling hard to conceal her discomposure by a display of unusual cheerfulness and vivacity. She had told the company that her husband had received unpleasant news from home, which necessitated his immediate departure, and had brought on a headache, so that they would not see him tonight. However, she asserted, it was only a business concern, and he did not want to trouble her with it. She was just saying this as I entered, and she darted upon me a glance of defiance that astonished me.

‘But I am troubled,’ continued she, ‘for I think it my duty to accompany his lordship, and of course I am very sorry to part with all my kind friends so unexpectedly.’

‘And yet, Annabella,’ said Esther, ‘I never saw you in better spirits in my life.’

‘Precisely so, my love: because I wish to make the best of your society, since this is to be the last night I am to enjoy it till heaven knows when.’ She glanced round, and seeing her aunt’s eye fixed upon her rather scrutinizingly, she jumped up and continued: ‘I’ll give you a song now, shall I, aunt?’

She and Lord Lowborough occupied the apartments next to mine. I know not how she passed the night, but I lay awake the greater part of it listening to his heavy step pacing up and down his dressing-room. Once I heard him pause and throw something out of the window with a passionate cry; and in the morning, a clasp-knife was found on the grass below. A razor, likewise, was snapped in two and thrust deep into the cinders of the grate – so strong had been the temptation to end his life, so determined his resolution to resist it.

My heart bled for him as I lay listening to that ceaseless tread. Hitherto I had thought too much of myself, too little of him: now I forgot my own afflictions, and thought only of his; of the fond faith so cruelly betrayed. I hated his wife and my husband more intensely than ever, and not for my sake, but for his.

They departed early in the morning, before anyone else was downstairs. Just as I was leaving my room Lord Lowborough was descending to take his place in the carriage, which already held his lady; and Mr. Huntingdon had the insolence to come out in his dressing-gown to bid his ‘friend’ good-bye.

‘What, going already, Lowborough!’ said he. ‘Well, good-morning.’ He smilingly offered his hand.

I think the other would have knocked him down, had he not instinctively moved back. His face pale with furious hate, Lord Lowborough muttered between his closed teeth a deadly curse, and departed.

‘I call that an unchristian spirit now,’ said the villain. ‘But I’d never give up an old friend for the sake of a wife. You may have mine if you like; I can do no more than that, can I?’

But Lowborough had reached the bottom of the stairs, and was crossing the hall. Mr. Huntingdon, leaning over the banisters, called out, ‘Give my love to Annabella! and I wish you both a happy journey,’ and withdrew, laughing, to his chamber.

Later he expressed himself rather glad she was gone. ‘She was so deuced imperious,’ said he. ‘Now I shall be my own man again, and feel more at my ease.’

## Chapter 39

My greatest source of uneasiness at this time was my son. His father and his father's friends encouraged in him all the embryo vices a little child can show; to 'make a man of him' was one of their chief amusements. At first I tried to keep him always with me, or in the nursery, and gave Rachel orders never to let him come down to dessert as long as these 'gentlemen' stayed; but it was no use. These orders were immediately overruled by his father; he was not going to have the little fellow moped to death between an old nurse and a cursed fool of a mother.

So the little fellow came down every evening in spite of his cross mamma, and learned to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and send mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him. To see such things done with the roguish naïveté of that pretty little child, and hear them spoken by that small infantile voice, was as droll to them as it was distressing to me; and when he had set the table in a roar he would look round delightedly, and add his shrill laugh to theirs.

But if that beaming eye rested on me, its light would vanish for a moment, and he would say, in some concern, 'Mamma, why don't you laugh? Make her laugh, papa – she never will.'

So I was obliged to stay among these human brutes, watching for an opportunity to get my child away from them. He was never willing to go, and I frequently had to carry him away by force, for which he thought me very cruel and unjust. Sometimes his father would insist upon my letting him remain; and then I had to retire to indulge my bitterness and despair alone.

But here I must do Mr. Hargrave the justice to acknowledge that I never saw him laugh at the child's misdemeanours, nor utter a word of encouragement. I noticed, at such times, a peculiar, indefinable expression in his face: a slight twitching about the muscles of the mouth, as he glanced at the child and then at me. Then I fancy there arose a gleam of hard, keen, sombre satisfaction in his look at my evident anguish and impotent wrath.

On one occasion, when little Arthur had been behaving particularly badly, and Mr. Huntingdon and his guests had been particularly insulting to me in their encouragement of him, and I was particularly anxious to get him out of the room, Mr. Hargrave suddenly rose from his seat with stern determination. He lifted the child from his father's knee – where he was sitting half-tipsy, laughing at me, and cursing me with words he did not understand – carried him out of the room, and, setting him down in the hall, held the door open for me, gravely bowed as I withdrew, and closed it after me. I heard high words exchanged between him and his half-inebriated host as I departed with my bewildered boy.

This must not continue: better far that my child should live in poverty and obscurity with a fugitive mother, than in luxury with such a father. These guests might not be with us long, but they would return: and he, my child's worst enemy, would still remain. I could endure it for myself, but for my son it must be borne no longer: the world's opinion and the feelings of my friends must not deter me from my duty.

But where should I find refuge, and how could we both live? Oh, I would take my precious charge at early dawn, board the coach to the port, cross the Atlantic, and seek a quiet, humble home in New England, where I would support myself and him by the labour of my hands. The palette and the easel, my darling playmates once, must be my sober toil-fellows now.

But was I a skilful enough artist to earn my livelihood in a strange land, without friends? No; I must wait; I must labour hard to improve my talent, and to produce a body of work to speak for me, whether as a painter or a teacher.

And then I must have money for the journey, and more to support us in our retreat in case I should be unsuccessful at first: for who could tell how long I might have to struggle with the indifference or neglect of others, or my own inexperience or inability to suit their tastes?

Then should I apply to my brother and explain my circumstances? No, no: even if I told him all my grievances, which I was very reluctant to do, he would be certain to disapprove of the step: it would seem like madness to him, as it would to my uncle and aunt, or Milicent. No; I must have patience and gather a hoard of my own. Rachel should be my only confidante, and she could help me, first, to find a picture-dealer in some distant town; then, through her means, I would privately sell whatever pictures I could. Besides this, I would contrive to dispose of my jewels – not the family jewels, but the few I brought with me from home, and those my uncle gave me on my marriage. I could bear a few months' arduous toil; and in the meantime my son could not be much more injured than he was already.

Having formed this resolution, I immediately set to work to accomplish it. I might have kept weighing the pros and cons till the latter overbalanced the former, and have decided to give up the project – had not something occurred to confirm me in my determination.

Since Lord Lowborough's departure I had regarded the library as my own secure retreat. None of our gentlemen had pretensions to a literary taste, except Mr. Hargrave; and if he should look in here, I felt sure he would soon depart, having become so cool and distant towards me. Here, then, I set up my easel, and worked at my canvas from daylight till dusk, with little break except when my duties to little Arthur called me away: for I devoted part of every day to his instruction and amusement.

On the third morning, while I was thus employed, Mr. Hargrave did look in, and did not immediately withdraw. He apologized, and said he had only come for a book; but he condescended to cast a glance over my picture. Being a man of taste, he modestly commented on it, without much encouragement from me, and then talked of art in general. Receiving no encouragement in that either, he dropped the subject, but did not leave.

'You don't give us much of your company, Mrs. Huntingdon,' observed he, after a brief pause, 'and I cannot wonder at it, for you must be heartily sick of us all. I myself am so thoroughly ashamed of my companions, and so weary of their irrational conversation, that I think I shall probably leave this week; and I cannot suppose you will regret my departure.'

I did not answer.

‘Probably,’ he added, with a smile, ‘your only regret will be that I do not take all my companions with me. I flatter myself that though among them, I am not of them; but it is natural that you should be glad to get rid of me.’

‘I shall not rejoice at your departure, for you can conduct yourself like a gentleman,’ said I, thinking it only right to acknowledge this; ‘but I must confess I shall rejoice to bid farewell to the rest.’

‘No one can blame you for that,’ replied he gravely: ‘not even the gentlemen themselves, I imagine. I’ll just tell you what was said last night in the dining-room, after you left us: perhaps you will not mind, as you’re so very philosophical,’ he added with a slight sneer. ‘They were talking about Lord Lowborough and his delectable lady, whose character I could not defend, even though she is my relative – curse me, if I don’t have vengeance for this! If the villain must disgrace the family, must he blazon it abroad to everyone? I beg your pardon, Mrs. Huntingdon. Well, they were talking, and some of them remarked that, as she was separated from Lowborough, your husband might see her again when he pleased.’

“Thank you,” said he; “I’ve had enough of her for the present: I’ll not bother, unless she comes to me.”

“Then what do you mean to do, Huntingdon, when we’re gone?” said Ralph Hattersley. “Do you mean to turn from the error of your ways, and be a good husband, a good father, and so forth; as I do, when I get shut of you and all these rollicking devils? I think it’s time; your wife is fifty times too good for you, you know—”

‘And he added some praise of you, which you would not thank me for repeating, for he proclaimed it without delicacy. Huntingdon, meanwhile, sat quietly drinking his wine, smiling, and offering no reply, till Hattersley shouted out, “Do you hear me, man?”

“Yes, go on,” said he.

“Nay, I’ve done,” said Hattersley: “I only want to know if you intend to take my advice.”

“What advice?”

“To turn over a new leaf, you scoundrel,” shouted Ralph, “and beg your wife’s pardon, and be a good boy.”

“My wife? What wife? I have no wife,” replied Huntingdon, looking innocently up from his glass, “or if I have, I value her so highly that any one among you may have her and welcome: and my blessing into the bargain!”

‘I – ahem – someone asked if he really meant what he said; upon which he solemnly swore he did. What do you think of that, Mrs. Huntingdon?’ asked Mr. Hargrave, keenly examining my half-averted face.

‘I say,’ replied I, calmly, ‘that what he prizes so lightly will not be long in his possession.’

‘Will you leave him then?’

‘Yes.’

‘When: and how?’ asked he, eagerly.

‘When I am ready, and how I can manage it most effectually.’

‘But your child?’

‘My child goes with me.’

‘He will not allow it.’

‘I shall not ask him.’

‘But with whom will you go, Mrs. Huntingdon?’

‘With my son: and possibly, his nurse.’

‘Alone – and unprotected! But where can you go? what can you do? He will follow you and bring you back.’

‘I have laid my plans. Let me once get clear of Grassdale, and I shall consider myself safe.’

Mr. Hargrave advanced one step towards me, and drew in his breath to speak; but I abruptly turned away, and, snatching up my brush, began to dash away at my canvas with rather too much energy for the good of the picture.

‘Mrs. Huntingdon,’ said he with bitter solemnity, ‘you are cruel to me – cruel to yourself.’

‘Mr. Hargrave, remember your promise.’

‘I must speak, or my heart will burst! I have been silent long enough, and you must hear me!’ cried he, boldly intercepting my retreat to the door. ‘You tell me you owe no allegiance to your husband; he openly declares himself weary of you, and calmly gives you up to anybody that will take you; you are about to leave him; no one will believe that you go alone. Few will blame you, or pity him; but all will ask, who is the companion of your flight? You will have no credit for your virtue: even your best friends will not believe in it. But what can you do in the cold, rough world alone? you, a young and inexperienced woman, utterly—’

‘So you would advise me to stay where I am,’ I interrupted.

‘By all means, leave him!’ cried he earnestly; ‘but not alone! Helen! let me protect you!’

‘Never!’ I snatched away the hand he had seized. But now he was determined to hazard all for victory.

‘I must not be denied!’ exclaimed he, vehemently; and holding both my hands tight, he dropped upon his knee, and looked up with a half-imploring, half-imperious gaze. ‘God has designed me to be your comfort and protector – I feel it, I know it – and you spurn me—’

‘Let me go, Mr. Hargrave!’ said I, sternly. But he only tightened his grasp.

‘Let me go!’ I repeated, quivering with indignation.

His face was opposite the window as he knelt. I saw him glance towards it; and then a gleam of malicious triumph lit up his countenance. Looking over my shoulder, I saw a shadow just retiring round the corner.

‘That is Grimsby,’ said he deliberately. ‘He will report what he has seen to Huntingdon and all the rest. He has no love for you, Mrs. Huntingdon, and no belief in virtue. He will give such a version of this story as will leave no doubt about your character in the minds of those who hear it. Your reputation is gone. But give me the power to protect you, and show me the villain that dares to insult you!’

‘No one has ever dared to insult me as you are doing now!’ said I, pulling away my hands, and recoiling from him.

‘I do not insult you,’ cried he, leaping to his feet: ‘I worship you. You are my angel! I lay my powers at your feet, and you shall accept them! I will be your consoler and defender! and if your conscience upbraids you, say I overcame you, and you could not choose but yield!’

As he lunged towards me I snatched up my palette-knife and held it against him. This startled him: he stood and gazed at me in astonishment; I daresay I looked as fierce as he. I moved to the bell, and put my hand upon the cord. With a gesture, he sought to deter me from ringing.

‘Stand off, then!’ said I; he stepped back. ‘And listen to me. I don’t like you,’ I continued, as emphatically as I could; ‘and if I were divorced from my husband, or if he were dead, I would not marry you. There now! I hope you’re satisfied.’

His face grew blanched with anger.

‘I am satisfied,’ he replied, with bitter emphasis, ‘that you are the most cold-hearted, unnatural, ungrateful woman I ever yet beheld!’

‘Ungrateful, sir?’

‘Ungrateful.’

‘No, Mr. Hargrave, I am not. For all the good you ever did me, I most sincerely thank you: for all the evil you have done me, and all you would have done, I pray God to pardon you, and make you of a better mind.’

Here the door was thrown open, and Messrs. Huntingdon and Hattersley appeared. The latter remained in the hall, busy with his gun; my husband walked in, and stood with his back to the fire, surveying Mr. Hargrave and me with a smile of insupportable meaning, accompanied as it was by the sly, malicious twinkle of his eye.

‘Well, sir?’ said Hargrave defensively.

‘Well, sir,’ returned his host.

‘We want to know if you’ll join us in a go at the pheasants, Walter,’ interposed Hattersley from outside. ‘Come!’

A slight flush of anger rose to Hargrave’s cheek; but he said carelessly:

‘I came here to bid farewell to Mrs. Huntingdon, and tell her I must go tomorrow.’

‘Humph! You’re mighty sudden,” said Mr. Huntingdon. ‘What takes you off so soon, may I ask?’

‘Business,’ returned he, repelling the other’s incredulous sneer with a glance of scornful defiance; and he walked away. Mr. Huntingdon, setting his shoulder against the mantel-piece, turned to me, and, addressing me in a low voice, poured forth a volley of the vilest and grossest abuse it was possible to imagine. I did not attempt to interrupt him; but my spirit kindled within me, and when he had done, I replied, ‘If your accusation were true, Mr. Huntingdon, how dare you blame me?’

‘She’s hit it, by Jove!’ cried Hattersley; and, stepping into the room, he took his precious friend by the arm, and attempted to drag him away. ‘Come, my lad,’ he muttered; ‘true or false, you’ve no right to blame her, after what you said last night. So come along.’

There was something implied here that I could not endure.

‘Dare you suspect me, Mr. Hattersley?’ said I, almost beside myself with fury.

‘Nay, nay, I suspect nobody. It’s all right, it’s all right. So come along, Huntingdon, you blackguard.’

‘She can’t deny it!’ cried Mr. Huntingdon, grinning in mingled rage and triumph. ‘She can’t deny it if her life depended on it!’ and muttering more abusive language, he walked into the hall, and took up his hat and gun from the table.

‘I scorn to justify myself to you!’ said I. ‘But you,’ turning to Hattersley, ‘if you have any doubts on the subject, ask Mr. Hargrave.’

At this they both burst into a rude laugh that made my whole frame tingle to the fingers’ ends.

‘Where is he? I’ll ask him myself!’ said I.

Hattersley pointed to the outer door, which was half-open; his brother-in-law was just outside.

‘Mr. Hargrave, step this way, if you please!’ I said, in so determined a manner that he could not resist. Somewhat reluctantly he advanced into the hall.

‘Tell those gentlemen,’ I continued, – ‘these men, whether or not I yielded to your solicitations.’

‘I don’t understand you, Mrs. Huntingdon.’

‘You do understand me, sir; and I charge you, upon your honour as a gentleman, to answer truly. Did I, or did I not?’

‘No,’ muttered he, turning away.

‘Speak up, sir; they can’t hear you. Did I grant your request?’

‘You did not.’

‘No, I’ll be sworn she didn’t,’ said Hattersley, ‘or he’d never look so black. Now, Huntingdon, you see! Clear as day.’

‘I don’t care what he sees,’ said I, ‘or what he imagines; but you, Mr. Hattersley, when you hear my name slandered, will you defend it?’

‘I will.’

I instantly departed and shut myself in the library. What could possess me to make such a request of such a man I cannot tell; but drowning men catch at straws: I hardly knew what I said. There was no other to preserve my name from being blackened; and beside my wretch of a husband, the malignant Grimsby, and the false villain Hargrave, this boorish ruffian shone like a glow-worm in the dark, among its fellow worms.

What a scene was this! Could I ever have imagined that I should be doomed to bear such insults under my own roof, and by those who called themselves gentlemen? And could I have imagined that I should have been able to repel their insults as boldly as I had done? A hardness such as this is taught by rough experience and despair alone.

Such thoughts as these chased through my mind, as I paced to and fro across the room, and longed – oh, how I longed – to take my child and leave them now, without delay! But it could not be; there was work before me: hard work that must be done.

‘Then let me do it,’ said I, ‘and lose not a moment.’ And conquering my agitation with a powerful effort, I immediately resumed my task, and laboured hard all day.

Mr. Hargrave departed the next day, and I have not seen him since. The others stayed on for two or three weeks longer; but I kept aloof from them as much as possible, and continued my labour. I soon told Rachel of my plan, and, to my surprise, found little

difficulty in persuading her to agree. She is a sober, cautious woman, but she so hates her master, and so loves her mistress and her nursling, that after a few faint objections, and many lamentations, she applauded my resolution and agreed to aid me – on condition that she might share my exile.

With touching generosity, she modestly offered to help me with her little hoard of savings, but of course I could not think of such a thing. Now, thank heaven, I have gathered a little hoard of my own, and my preparations are so far advanced that I am looking forward to a speedy freedom. Only let the severity of this winter weather be abated, and then, one morning, Mr. Huntingdon will come down to a solitary breakfast-table, and perhaps go shouting through the house for his invisible wife and child, when they are some fifty miles away.

I am fully alive to the evils that may result from this step; but I never waver in my resolution, because I never forget my son. Only this morning, when he was sitting at my feet, quietly playing, he looked up wistfully in my face, and gravely asked, ‘Mamma, why are you wicked?’

‘Who told you I was wicked, love?’

‘Rachel.’

‘No, Arthur, Rachel never said so, I am certain.’

‘Well, then, it was papa,’ replied he, thoughtfully. Then, after a reflective pause, he added, ‘I’ll tell you how I got to know: when I’m with papa, if I say mamma wants me, or mamma says I’m not to do something, he always says, “Mamma be damned,” and Rachel says it’s only wicked people that are damned. So, mamma, that’s why I think you must be wicked: and I wish you wouldn’t.’

‘My dear child, I am not wicked. Those are bad words, and wicked people often say them of others better than themselves. Those words cannot make people be damned. God will judge us by our own thoughts and deeds, not by what others say about us. And when you hear such words spoken, Arthur, remember never to repeat them: it is wicked to say such things of others, not to have them said against you.’

‘Then it’s papa that’s wicked,’ said he, ruefully.

‘Papa is wrong to say such things, and you will be very wrong to copy him now that you know better.’

‘Does he know better? If he doesn’t, you ought to tell him, mamma.’

‘I have told him.’

He paused and pondered. ‘I’m sorry papa’s wicked,’ said he mournfully, at length, ‘for I don’t want him to go to hell.’ And he burst into tears.

I consoled him with the hope that perhaps his papa would alter and become good; but is it not time to deliver him from such a parent?

## Chapter 40

January 10th, 1827.

While writing the above, yesterday evening, I sat in the drawing-room. Mr. Huntingdon was, I thought, asleep on the sofa behind me. He had risen, however, and had been looking over my shoulder for I know not how long; for when I was about to close the book, he suddenly placed his hand upon it. Saying, 'With your leave, my dear, I'll have a look at this,' he forcibly wrested it from me.

Then he composedly sat down to read it. Unluckily for me, he was more sober that night than he usually is at such an hour.

Of course I tried to snatch the book from his hands, but he held it too firmly for that; I upbraided him in bitterness and scorn for his dishonourable conduct, but that had no effect; finally, I extinguished both the candles, but he only wheeled round to the fire, and calmly continued reading. It was evident that the more anxious I appeared, the more determined he was to scrutinise the book.

'It seems very interesting, love,' said he, lifting his head; 'but it's rather long; I'll look at it some other time; and meanwhile I'll trouble you for your keys, my dear.'

'What keys?'

'The keys of your cabinet, desk, drawers, and whatever else you possess,' said he, rising and holding out his hand.

'I've not got them,' I replied. The key of my desk, in fact, was at that moment in the lock, and the others were attached to it.

'Then you must send for them,' said he; 'and if that old devil, Rachel, doesn't deliver them up, she tramps bag and baggage tomorrow.'

'She doesn't know where they are,' I answered, quietly placing my hand upon them, and taking them from the desk – as I thought, unobserved.

'But I know,' said he, suddenly seizing my closed hand and taking the keys from it. 'Now, then,' sneered he, 'we must have a confiscation of property. But, first, let us take a peep into the studio.'

And putting the keys into his pocket, he walked into the library. I followed, hardly knowing why. My painting materials were laid together on the corner table, ready for tomorrow's use, and covered with a cloth. He deliberately proceeded to cast them into the fire: palette, paints, containers, pencils, brushes, varnish: the palette-knives were snapped in two, the oil and turpentine sent hissing and roaring up the chimney. Then he rang the bell.

'Benson, take those things away,' said he, pointing to the easel, canvas, and stretcher; 'and tell the housemaid she may kindle the fire with them: your mistress won't want them any more.'

Benson paused, aghast, and looked at me.

'Take them away, Benson,' said I; and the things were cleared away.

Mr. Huntingdon then went upstairs. I remained seated in the arm-chair, speechless, tearless, and almost motionless, till he returned about half-an-hour later, and walking up

to me, held the candle in my face and peered into my eyes with looks and laughter too insulting to be borne. With a sudden stroke of my hand I dashed the candle to the floor.

‘Hal-lo!’ muttered he, starting back; ‘she’s the very devil. Did ever any mortal see such eyes? They shine in the dark like a cat’s. Oh, you’re a sweet one!’

So saying, he gathered up the candle and the candlestick. Then he threw my keys into my lap, saying,

‘There! you’ll find nothing gone but your money, and the jewels, and a few little trifles I thought it advisable to take into my own possession. I’ve left you a few sovereigns in your purse, which I expect to last you through the month. When you want more you will be so good as to give me an account of how that’s spent. I shall give you a small monthly allowance, in future, for your private expenses; and you needn’t trouble yourself any more about my concerns. I shall look out for a steward, my dear. And as for the household matters, Mrs. Greaves must be very particular in keeping her accounts; we must go upon an entirely new plan—’

‘What great discovery have you made now, Mr. Huntingdon? Have I attempted to defraud you?’

‘Not in money matters, it seems; but it’s best to keep out of the way of temptation. And so, you thought to disgrace me, did you, by running away and turning artist, and supporting yourself? And you thought to rob me of my son, too, and bring him up to be a dirty Yankee tradesman, or a low, beggarly painter?’

‘Yes, to prevent his becoming such a gentleman as his father.’

‘It’s as well you couldn’t keep your secret – ha, ha! Women must be blabbing. It’s well, too, I wasn’t over full to-night, or I might have snoozed away and never dreamt of looking what my sweet lady was about.’

Leaving him to his self-congratulations, I rose to secure my manuscript, for I now remembered it had been left upon the drawing-room table, and I was determined to save myself the humiliation of seeing it in his hands again. I would sooner burn it, than he should read what I had written when I was such a fool as to love him!

‘And by-the-by,’ cried he, as I was leaving the room, ‘you’d better tell that d—d old sneak of a nurse to keep out of my way.’ As I departed, he went on cursing my faithful friend and servant.

I went to her as soon as I had put away my book, and told her how our project was defeated. She was as distressed and horrified as I was – more so than I was that night, for I was stunned by the blow.

But in the morning, when I woke without that cheering hope that had been my secret comfort and support so long, and all this day, when I have wandered about restless and objectless, shunning my husband, shrinking even from my child, hoping nothing for his future life, and fervently wishing he had never been born – I felt the full extent of my calamity, and I feel it now.

I know that day after day such feelings will return. I am a slave – a prisoner – but that is nothing. If it were myself alone I would not complain, but I am forbidden to rescue my son from ruin, and what was once my only consolation is become the source of my despair.

Have I no faith in God? I try to look to Him and raise my heart to heaven, but it will cleave to the dust. I can only say, 'He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out: He hath made my chain heavy: He hath filled me with bitterness.' I forget to add, 'But though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of His mercies. For He doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men.'

I ought to think of this; and if there be nothing but sorrow for me in this world, what is the longest life of misery to a whole eternity of peace? And little Arthur – has he no friend but me? – when he has his Father in heaven.

## Chapter 41

March 20th.

Having now got rid of Mr. Huntingdon for a season, my spirits are beginning to revive. He left me early in February; and the moment he was gone, I breathed again, and felt my energy return; not with the hope of escape – he has taken care to leave me no chance of that – but with a determination to make the best of things.

Rousing from my apathy, I exerted all my powers to eradicate the weeds that had been planted in Arthur's infant mind, and sow again the good seed there. Thank heaven, it is not a barren or a stony soil; his understanding is quicker, his heart more overflowing with affection than ever his father's could have been. I hope to bend him to obedience, and win him to love and know his own true friend.

I had much trouble at first in breaking him of those evil habits his father had taught him, but now bad language seldom defiles his mouth, and I have succeeded in giving him a disgust for all intoxicating drinks, which I hope not even his father will be able to overcome. He was inordinately fond of wine for so young a creature; if I had forbidden him to taste it altogether, that would only have increased his liking, and made him regard it as a greater treat than ever.

I therefore gave him as much as his father used to: as much, indeed, as he wanted – but into every glass I surreptitiously put a small quantity of tartar-emetica, just enough to produce nausea and depression without positive sickness. He soon grew weary of his treat, but the more he shrunk from it the more I pressed it upon him, till his reluctance was strengthened to perfect abhorrence.

When he was thoroughly disgusted with every kind of wine, I allowed him, at his own request, to try brandy-and-water, and then gin-and-water, for he was familiar with them all, and I was determined that all should be equally hateful to him.

This I have achieved; and since he declares that the taste and smell of them is enough to make him sick, I have given up teasing him about them, except now and then as objects of terror in cases of misbehaviour. 'Arthur, if you're not a good boy I shall give you a glass of wine,' is as good as any threat. I wish this aversion to be so deeply grounded in his nature that nothing in after-life may be able to overcome it.

Thus, I flatter myself, I shall save him from this vice; and as for the rest, if on his father's return Mr. Huntingdon begins again the game of teaching the child to hate and despise his mother, and emulate his father's wickedness – I will yet deliver my son from his hands. I have devised another scheme for escape. If I could only obtain my brother's consent and assistance, I should not doubt of its success.

The old hall where he and I were born, and where our mother died, is not now inhabited, nor yet quite sunk into decay, as I believe. Now, if I could persuade him to have one or two rooms made habitable, and to let them to me as a stranger, I might live there with my child, under an assumed name, and still support myself by my art. He could lend me the money to begin with, and I would pay him back, and live in strict seclusion, for the house stands in a lonely place; and he himself should negotiate the sale of my pictures for me.

I have arranged the whole plan in my head. All I want is to persuade Frederick to agree. He is coming to see me soon, and then I will make the proposal to him, having first told him something of my circumstances.

Already, I believe, he knows more of my situation than I have told him. An air of tender sadness pervades his letters; they seldom mention my husband, and when they do, refer to him with a kind of covert bitterness. And he never comes to see me when Mr. Huntingdon is at home. But he has never openly expressed disapproval of him; he has never asked any questions, or invited my confidence.

Perhaps he feels hurt at my reserve. He is a strange being; I wish we knew each other better. Since our father's death, I have only seen him once, when he came for a few days while Mr. Huntingdon was away. This time, there shall be more friendly candour between us than ever there was before, since our early childhood. My heart clings to him more than ever; and my soul is sick of solitude.

April 16th.

My brother is come and gone. He would not stay more than a fortnight. The time passed quickly, but very happily, and it has done me good. My misfortunes had soured me exceedingly: I was beginning to have very unamiable feelings against my fellow-mortals, the male ones especially; but it is a comfort to see there is at least one among them worthy to be trusted and esteemed; and doubtless there are more, though I have never known them, unless I count poor Lord Lowborough.

But what would Frederick have been, if he had lived in the same world as my acquaintances? and what will Arthur be, if I do not save him from that world and those companions?

I mentioned my fears to Frederick, and introduced the subject of my plan of rescue on the evening after his arrival, when I presented my little son to him.

'He is like you, Frederick,' said I. 'I sometimes think he resembles you more than his father; and I am glad of it.'

'You flatter me, Helen,' replied he, stroking the child's soft, wavy locks.

'No, it is no compliment. Do you know what sort of man Mr. Huntingdon is?' said I.

'I think I have an idea.'

'Have you so clear an idea that you can hear, without surprise or disapproval, that I meditate escaping with that child to some secret refuge, where we can live in peace, and never see him again?'

'Is it really so?'

'I'll tell you something more about him.' And I gave a sketch of his general conduct, in particular his behaviour with regard to his child, and explained my apprehensions, and my determination to deliver Arthur from his father's influence.

Frederick was exceedingly indignant against Mr. Huntingdon; but still he looked upon my project as wild and impracticable. He made so many objections, and suggested so many milder methods for improving my condition, that I was obliged to tell him further details to convince him that my husband was utterly incorrigible – and that, in fact, no other solution would work, unless I actually fled the country.

At length he consented to have one wing of the old hall put into a habitable condition, as a refuge in time of need; but hoped I would not take advantage of it unless it became really necessary, which I was ready to promise. For although such a hermitage appears like paradise itself, compared with my present situation, yet for my friends' sakes – for Milicent and Esther, for the poor tenants of Grassdale, and, for my aunt, I will stay if I possibly can.

July 29th.

Mrs. Hargrave and her daughter are come back from London. Esther is full of her first season in town; but she is still heart-whole and unengaged. Her mother sought out an excellent match for her, but Esther had the audacity to refuse him. He was a man of good family and large possessions, but the naughty girl maintained he was old as Adam, ugly as sin, and hateful as – one who shall be nameless.

'But I had a hard time of it,' said she: 'mamma was very greatly disappointed, and very, very angry at my obstinacy, and is so still; but I can't help it. And Walter, too, is so seriously displeased at my perversity and absurd caprice, as he calls it, that I fear he will never forgive me. I did not think he could be so unkind. But Milicent begged me not to yield, and I'm sure, Mrs. Huntingdon, if you had seen the man they wanted to palm upon me, you would have advised me not to take him too.'

'I should have done so whether I had seen him or not,' said I. 'It is enough that you dislike him.'

'I knew you would say so; though mamma affirmed you would be quite shocked at my undutiful conduct. You can't imagine how she lectures me: I am disobedient and ungrateful; I am thwarting her wishes, and making myself a burden on her hands. I sometimes fear she'll overcome me after all. When she says such bitter things, it provokes me so much that I feel inclined to do as she bids me, and then break my heart and say, "There, mamma, it's all your fault!"'

'Pray don't!' said I. 'Stand firm, and your mamma will soon stop her persecution; and the gentleman will cease to pester you with his addresses if he finds them steadily rejected.'

'Oh, no! Mamma has told Mr. Oldfield that I have refused his offer merely because I am giddy and young, and cannot at present reconcile myself to thoughts of marriage; but by next season, she has no doubt I shall have more sense, and my girlish fancies will be worn away. So she has brought me home to school me into a proper sense of my duty, until the time comes round. Indeed, I believe she will not take me up to London again unless I surrender: she cannot afford to take me to town for pleasure and nonsense, she says, and it is not every rich gentleman that will consent to take me without a fortune, whatever exalted ideas I may have of my own attractions.'

'Well, Esther, I pity you; but I repeat, stand firm. You might as well sell yourself to slavery at once, as marry a man you dislike. If your mother and brother are unkind to you, you may leave them, but remember you are bound to your husband for life.'

'But I cannot leave them unless I get married, and I cannot get married if nobody sees me. I saw one or two gentlemen in London that I might have liked, but they were younger

sons, and mamma would not let me get to know them – one especially, who I believe rather liked me – but she threw every possible obstacle in the way. Wasn't it provoking?"

"I have no doubt you felt it so. But when I tell you not to marry without love, I do not advise you to marry for love alone: there are many, many other things to be considered. Keep both heart and hand in your own possession, till you see good reason to part with them; and if that should never happen, comfort your mind with this reflection, that though in single life your joys may not be many, your sorrows, at least, will not be more than you can bear. Marriage may improve your circumstances for the better, but, in my private opinion, it is far more likely to do the opposite."

"So Milicent thinks; but if I thought myself doomed to old-maidhood, I should not value my life. The thoughts of living on, year after year, at the Grove – a hanger-on upon mamma and Walter, a mere encumbrance (for that's how they would regard me), is perfectly intolerable; I would rather run away with the butler."

"Yet have patience, love; do nothing rashly. Remember you are not yet nineteen, and many years are still to pass before anyone can set you down as an old maid. And meantime, you have a right to the protection and support of your mother and brother, however they may seem to grudge it."

"You are so grave, Mrs. Huntingdon," said Esther, after a pause. "When Milicent said the same thing about marriage, I asked if she was happy: she said she was; but I only half believed her; and now I must put the same question to you."

"It is a very impertinent question from a young girl," laughed I, "and I shall not answer it."

"Pardon me," said she, throwing herself into my arms, and kissing me with playful affection; but I felt a tear on my neck, as she dropped her head on my bosom and continued, with an odd mixture of sadness and levity, "I know you are not so happy as I mean to be, for you spend half your life alone at Grassdale, while Mr. Huntingdon goes about enjoying himself. I shall expect my husband to have no pleasures but what he shares with me; and if his greatest pleasure of all is not the enjoyment of my company, why, it will be the worse for him."

"If such are your expectations of matrimony, Esther, you must indeed, be careful whom you marry – or avoid it altogether."

## Chapter 42

September 1st.

No Mr. Huntingdon yet. Perhaps he will stay among his friends till Christmas; and then, next spring, he will be off again. If so, I shall be able to stay at Grassdale; even an occasional group of friends at the shooting season may be borne, if little Arthur becomes so well established in good sense and principles that I can keep him pure from their contaminations. Vain hope, I fear! but still, till such a time of trial comes I will not think about my quiet refuge in the beloved old hall.

Mr. and Mrs. Hattersley have been staying at the Grove a fortnight: and every day I see my two friends, Milicent and Esther, either there or here. On one occasion, when Mr. Hattersley had driven them over to Grassdale in the phaeton, I had a few minutes' conversation with that gentleman, while the ladies were amusing themselves with the children.

'Do you want to hear anything of your husband, Mrs. Huntingdon?' said he.

'No, unless you can tell me when to expect him home.'

'I can't. You don't want him, do you?' said Mr. Hattersley, with a broad grin.

'No.'

'Well, I think you're better without him. I'm downright weary of him. I told him I'd leave him if he didn't mend his manners. You see, I'm a better man than you think me; and, what's more, I have serious thoughts of washing my hands of him entirely, and the whole set of 'em, and starting to be decent and sober, as a Christian and the father of a family should be. What do you think of that?'

'It is a resolution you ought to have formed long ago.'

'Well, I'm not thirty yet; it isn't too late, is it?'

'No; it is never too late.'

'To tell you the truth, I've thought of it often before; but he's such devilish good company, is Huntingdon. You can't imagine what a jovial good fellow he is when he's not too drunk. We all have a bit of a liking for him at the bottom of our hearts, though we can't respect him.'

'But would you wish to be like him?'

'No, I'd rather be like myself, bad as I am.'

'You can't continue as bad as you are without getting worse every day, and more like him.' I could not help smiling at the comical, half-angry, half-confounded look he gave me at this bold remark. 'Never mind my plain speaking,' said I; 'it is from the best of motives. But tell me, would you want your sons to be like Mr. Huntingdon – or even like yourself?'

'Hang it! no.'

'Should you wish your daughter to despise you – or to feel no respect for you, and no affection that is not mingled with regret?'

'Oh, no! I couldn't stand that.'

‘And, finally, should you wish your wife to be ready to sink into the earth when she hears you mentioned; and to loathe the very sound of your voice, and shudder at your approach?’

‘She never will; she likes me whatever I do.’

‘Impossible, Mr. Hattersley! you mistake her quiet submission for affection.’

‘Fire and fury—’

‘Now don’t burst into a tempest. I don’t mean to say she doesn’t love you – she does, I know, a great deal better than you deserve; but I am quite sure that if you behave better, she will love you more, and if you behave worse, she will love you less and less, till all is lost in fear, if not in secret hatred and contempt. Would you wish to be the tyrant of her life – to take away all the sunshine from her existence, and make her thoroughly miserable?’

‘Of course not; and I don’t, and I’m not going to.’

‘You have done more towards it than you think.’

‘Pooh, pooh! she’s not the anxious creature you imagine: she’s a meek little peaceable body; apt to be sulky at times, but mostly quiet, and ready to take things as they come.’

‘Think of what she was five years ago, when you married her, and what she is now.’

‘I know she was a little plump lassie then, with a pretty face: now she’s fading away like a snow-wreath. But hang it! that’s not my fault. It’s her own delicate health – and the children, to be sure, that worry her to death between them.’

‘No, Mr. Hattersley, the children give her more pleasure than pain: they are fine, good-tempered children—’

‘I know they are, bless them!’

‘Then why lay the blame on them? I’ll tell you what it is: it’s silent fretting and constant anxiety on your account, mingled, I suspect, with fear. When you behave well, she can only rejoice with trembling; she has no security, no confidence in your principles, but is continually dreading the end of such short-lived happiness; when you behave badly, her terror and misery are more than anyone can tell. She endures it patiently and silently. Since you mistake her silence for indifference, come with me, and I’ll show you one or two of her letters – with no breach of confidence, I hope, since you are her other half.’

He followed me into the library. I found and handed over two of Milicent’s letters: one written from London, during one of his wildest seasons of reckless dissipation; the other in the country, during a lucid interval. The former was full of trouble and anguish; not accusing him, but deeply regretting his connection with his profligate companions, and throwing the blame of her husband’s misconduct on to other men’s shoulders. The latter was full of hope and joy, yet with a trembling consciousness that this happiness would not last; praising his goodness to the skies, but with a half-expressed wish that it were based on a surer foundation, and a half-prophetic dread of the fall of that house built on the sand – a fall which had shortly afterwards taken place, as Hattersley must have been conscious while he read.

When he began to read I saw him blush; but he immediately turned his back to me, and finished the perusal at the window. At the second letter, I saw him, once or twice, raise his hand, and hurriedly pass it across his face. Could it be to dash away a tear?

When he had done, he cleared his throat and stared out of the window, and then, after whistling a few bars of a favourite tune, he turned, gave me back the letters, and shook me by the hand.

‘I’ve been a cursed rascal, God knows,’ said he, ‘but I’ll make amends for it; d—n me if I don’t!’

‘Don’t curse yourself, Mr. Hattersley; if you intend to reform, call for God’s blessing, and His aid; not His curse.’

‘God help me, then, for I’m sure I need it. Where’s Milicent?’

‘She’s just coming in with her sister.’

He stepped out at the door, and went to meet them. I followed at a little distance. Somewhat to his wife’s astonishment, he lifted her off the ground, and saluted her with a hearty kiss and a strong embrace; then placing his hands on her shoulders, he gave her, I suppose, a brief account of the great things he meant to do, for she suddenly threw her arms round him, and burst into tears, exclaiming, ‘Do, do, Ralph – we shall be so happy! How very, very good you are!’

‘Nay, not I,’ said he, pushing her towards me. ‘Thank her; it’s her doing.’

Milicent flew to thank me. I told her I did not deserve thanks, for her husband was already deciding to amend his ways before I added my mite of encouragement, which was no more than she could have done herself.

‘Oh, no!’ cried she; ‘I couldn’t have influenced him – I should only have bothered him by my clumsy efforts.’

‘You never tried me, Milly,’ said he.

Shortly afterwards they took their leave. They are now on a visit to Hattersley’s father; after that they will return to their country home. I hope his good resolutions will not fall through, and poor Milicent will not again be disappointed. Her last letter was full of bliss, but no temptation has yet occurred to put his virtue to the test. Henceforth, however, she will doubtless be less timid and reserved, and he more kind and thoughtful. So I have one bright spot, at least, whereon to rest my thoughts.

## Chapter 43

October 10th.

Mr. Huntingdon returned about three weeks ago. His appearance, his words, and my feelings towards him, I shall not trouble to describe. The day after his arrival, however, he surprised me by announcing he would procure a governess for little Arthur. I told him it was unnecessary, because I could teach him myself for some years to come; the child's education was the only pleasure and business of my life; he might surely leave me that.

He said I was not fit to teach children, or to be with them: I had already reduced the boy to little better than an automaton. I had broken his fine spirit, and I would freeze all the sunshine out of his heart, and make him as gloomy as myself. Poor Rachel, too, came in for her share of abuse.

I calmly defended our qualifications as nurse and governess, but he cut me short by saying it was no use, for he had engaged a governess already, and she was coming next week. This was a rather startling piece of news. I inquired her name and address, and by whom she had been recommended.

'She is a very pious young person,' said he; 'you needn't be afraid. Her name is Myers, and she was recommended to me by a respectable old religious lady. I have not seen her myself, but if the old lady's eulogies are correct, you will find she has all desirable qualifications.'

All this was gravely and quietly spoken, but there was a laughing demon in his half-averted eye that boded no good. However, I made no objections.

When Miss Myers arrived, her appearance did not produce a favourable impression at first sight, and nor did her manners and conduct. Her attainments were limited, her intellect mediocre. She had a fine voice, and could sing like a nightingale, and accompany herself on the piano; but these were her only accomplishments. There was a look of guile and subtlety in her face, and a sound of it in her voice. She seemed afraid of me, and was respectful and even servile: she attempted to flatter me at first, but I soon stopped that.

Her fondness for her little pupil was overstrained, and I had to remonstrate with her for over-indulgence and injudicious praise; but she could not gain his heart. Her piety consisted in an occasional heaving of sighs, and uplifting of eyes to the ceiling, and the utterance of a few cant phrases. She told me she was a clergyman's daughter, left an orphan from her childhood, but had the good fortune to obtain a situation in a very pious family; and she spoke so gratefully of their kindness that I reproached myself for my uncharitable thoughts. But I had suspicions; and I knew it was my duty to scrutinize till those suspicions were either removed or confirmed.

I asked the name and residence of the kind and pious family. She mentioned a common name, and a distant place of abode, but told me they were now on the Continent, and their present address was unknown to her. I never saw her speak much to Mr. Huntingdon; but he would frequently look into the school-room to see how little Arthur got on with his new companion, when I was not there.

In the evening, she sat with us in the drawing-room, and would sing and play, and was very attentive to his wants, though she only talked to me; indeed, he was seldom in a

condition to be talked to. Had she been other than she was, I should have felt her presence a great relief, except, indeed, that I should have been thoroughly ashamed for any decent person to see Mr. Huntingdon as he often was.

I did not mention my suspicions to Rachel; but she told me from the first she was ‘down on that new governess,’ and I found she watched her as narrowly as I did. I was glad of it, for I longed to know the truth: the atmosphere of Grassdale seemed to stifle me, and I could only live by thinking of Wildfell Hall.

At last, one morning, Rachel entered my chamber with such news that my resolution was taken before she had ceased to speak. While she helped me dress, I explained my intentions and told her which of my things she was to pack up, and what was to be left behind for herself – for I had no other means of recompensing her for my sudden dismissal of her after her long and faithful service.

‘What will you do, Rachel?’ said I; ‘will you go home, or seek another place?’

‘I have no home, ma’am, but with you,’ she replied; ‘and I’ll never take another position.’

‘But I can’t afford to live like a lady now. I must be my own maid and my child’s nurse.’

‘You’ll want somebody to clean and wash, and cook, won’t you?’ replied she, in some excitement. ‘I can do all that; and never mind the wages: I’ve my bits o’ savings yet, and if you wouldn’t take me I should have to find my own board and lodging out of ’em somewhere, or else work among strangers.’ Her voice quavered as she spoke, and tears stood in her eyes.

‘I should like it above all things, Rachel, and I’d give you as much wages as I could afford: but don’t you see I should be dragging you down with me when you’ve done nothing to deserve it?’

‘Oh, fiddle!’ exclaimed she.

‘And, besides, my future way of living will be so widely different—’

‘Do you think, ma’am, I can’t bear what my missis can? Surely I’m not so proud and so dainty as that! And I’m not too old to stand hard work, to help and comfort them as I’ve loved like my own bairns: for all I’m too old to go alone amongst strangers myself.’

‘Then you shan’t, Rachel!’ cried I, embracing my faithful friend. ‘We’ll go together, and you shall see how the new life suits you.’

‘Bless you, honey!’ cried she, affectionately returning my embrace. ‘Only let us get shut of this wicked house, and we’ll do right enough, you’ll see.’

‘So think I,’ was my answer.

By that morning’s post I sent a few hasty lines to Frederick, beseeching him to prepare my refuge: for I should probably come to claim it a day after the receipt of that note: and telling him, in few words, the cause of my sudden resolution.

I then wrote three letters of adieu: the first to Esther Hargrave, in which I told her that I found it impossible to stay any longer at Grassdale, or to leave my son under his father’s protection; and, as it was of great importance that our future abode should be unknown to him, I should disclose it to no one but my brother, through whom I hoped still to correspond with my friends. I then gave her his address, begged her to write frequently, and bade her a fond farewell.

The second was to Milicent; much to the same effect, but a little more confidential.

The third was to my aunt: a much more difficult undertaking; but I must give her some explanation of the extraordinary step I had taken. I told her I was aware of my error: I did not complain of its punishment, and I was sorry to trouble my friends with its consequences; but in duty to my son I must submit no longer; it was absolutely necessary that he should be delivered from his father's corrupting influence. I would not disclose my place of refuge even to her, in order that she and my uncle might be able, with truth, to deny all knowledge of it; but she might write to me through my brother. I hoped she and my uncle would pardon me. If they knew all, I was sure they would not blame me; and I should be quite contented to spend my life in obscurity, devoting myself to the training of my child, and teaching him to avoid the errors of both his parents.

These things were done yesterday: I have two days to prepare for our departure. The packing of our things must be done with the utmost caution and secrecy, and there is no one but Rachel to assist me. I can ill afford to leave anything behind, since I have no money, except a few guineas; and besides, as Rachel observed, whatever I left would most likely become the property of Miss Myers, and I should not relish that.

What trouble I have had these two days, struggling to appear calm and collected as usual, and forcing myself to leave my little Arthur in the governess's hands for hours together! But I trust these trials are over now: I have laid him in my bed, for safety.

But shall we escape safely? Oh, if only the morning were come, and we were on our way at least! This evening, when I had given Rachel all the assistance I could, and had nothing left me but to wait, I became so greatly agitated that I knew not what to do. I went down to dinner, but I could not force myself to eat. Mr. Huntingdon remarked on it.

'What's to do with you now?' said he, on the removal of the second course.

'I am not well,' I replied: 'I think I must lie down a little; you won't miss me much?'

'Not the least: if you leave your chair,' he muttered, as I left the room, 'I can fancy somebody else fills it.'

'Somebody else may fill it tomorrow,' I thought, but did not say. 'There! I've seen the last of you, I hope,' I muttered, as I closed the door.

Rachel urged me to go to sleep, to recruit my strength for tomorrow's journey, as we must be gone before dawn; but in my state of nervous excitement that was entirely out of the question. It was equally out of the question to sit, or wander about my room, lest someone should discover and betray us after all. I took up a book and tried to read: but it was impossible. So I opened these pages once more, and wrote the above account – with difficulty, at first, but gradually my mind became more calm and steady. Thus several hours have passed away: the time is drawing near; and now my eyes feel heavy and my frame exhausted. I will commend my cause to God, and then lie down and gain an hour or two of sleep; and then!—

Little Arthur sleeps soundly. All the house is still: there can be no one watching. The boxes were tied up by Benson, and quietly carried down the back stairs after dusk, and sent away in a cart to the coach-office. The name upon the cards was Mrs. Graham, which name I mean henceforth to adopt. My mother's maiden name was Graham, and I prefer it to any other, except my own, which I dare not resume.

## Chapter 44

October 24th.

Thank heaven, I am free and safe at last. Early we rose, swiftly and quietly dressed, and stealthily descended to the hall, where Benson stood ready with a light, to open the door and fasten it after us. All the servants were only too well acquainted with their master's conduct, and Benson was a crony of Rachel's, and willing to help us. I only hope he may not get into trouble, and wish I could reward him. I slipped two guineas into his hand, by way of remembrance, as he stood in the doorway with a tear in his honest grey eye, and a host of good wishes on his solemn face. Alas! I could offer no more: I had barely sufficient remaining for the expenses of the journey.

What trembling joy it was when the gate closed behind us, as we left the park! Then, for one moment, I paused to inhale that cool, bracing air, and venture one look back upon the house. All was dark and still: no light glimmered in the windows, no wreath of smoke obscured the stars.

As I bade farewell for ever to that place, the scene of so much guilt and misery, I felt glad that I had not left it before, for now there was no doubt about the propriety of such a step – no shadow of remorse for him I left behind. There was nothing to disturb my joy but the fear of detection; and every step removed us further from the chance of that.

We had left Grassdale many miles behind us before the red sun arose to welcome our deliverance; and if anyone had chanced to see us then, as we bowled along on the top of the coach, I scarcely think they would have recognised us. As I intend to be taken for a widow, I was wearing mourning: a plain black silk dress and mantle, a black veil (which I kept carefully over my face for the first thirty miles of the journey), and a black silk bonnet, which I had borrowed from Rachel, having none myself. It was not in the latest fashion, of course, but none the worse for that. Arthur was clad in his plainest clothes, and wrapped in a woollen shawl; and Rachel was muffled in a grey cloak and hood that had seen better days, and gave her more the appearance of an ordinary though decent old woman, than a lady's-maid.

Oh, what delight it was to be thus seated aloft, rumbling along the broad, sunshiny road, with the fresh morning breeze in my face, surrounded by an unknown country gloriously smiling in those early sunbeams; with my darling child in my arms, and my faithful friend beside me: a prison and despair behind me, receding further at every clatter of the horses' feet; and liberty and hope before! I could hardly refrain from praising God aloud for my deliverance.

But the journey was a very long one, and we were all weary before its end. It was far into the night when we reached the town of L—, and still we were seven miles from our destination. There was no conveyance to be had, except a common cart, and that with the greatest difficulty, for half the town was in bed. A dreary ride we had of it, that last stage of the journey, cold and weary as we were; sitting on our boxes, with nothing to cling to, nothing to lean against, slowly dragged and cruelly shaken over the rough, hilly roads. But Arthur was asleep in Rachel's lap, and between us we managed to shield him from the cold night air.

At last we began to ascend a terribly steep and stony lane, which, in spite of the darkness, Rachel said she remembered well. Since Arthur was now awake, we all got out and walked. We had not far to go; but what if Frederick should not have received my letter? or if he should not have had time to prepare the rooms for our reception?

At length the grim, dark pile appeared before us. The lane conducted us round by the back way. We entered the desolate court, and surveyed the ruinous mass anxiously. Was all in darkness? No; one faint red glimmer cheered us from a window. After knocking and waiting, we were admitted by an old woman into a snug little apartment, formerly the scullery of the mansion, which Frederick had now fitted up as a kitchen. Here she roused the fire to a cheerful blaze, and soon prepared a simple meal, while we took a hasty survey of our new abode.

Besides the kitchen, there were two bedrooms, a good-sized parlour, and another smaller one, which I destined for my studio. All were well aired and in good repair, but only partly furnished with a few old articles, chiefly of ponderous black oak.

The old woman brought our supper into the parlour, and told me that ‘the master desired his compliments to Mrs. Graham, and he had prepared the rooms as well as he could upon so short a notice; but he would call upon her tomorrow, to receive her further commands.’

I was glad to ascend the stone staircase, and lie down in the gloomy, old-fashioned bed, beside my little Arthur. He was asleep in a minute; but, weary as I was, my excited feelings kept me awake till dawn began to struggle with the darkness. But sleep was sweet when it came, and the waking was delightful beyond expression. It was little Arthur that roused me, with his gentle kisses. He was here, then, safely clasped in my arms, and many leagues away from his father!

Daylight lit up the apartment, for the sun was high. The scene, indeed, was not particularly cheerful. The large bare room, with its grim old furniture, the narrow, latticed windows revealing the desolate wilderness below – dark stone walls, an iron gate, a rank growth of grass and weeds where once had been a garden – might have struck me as gloomy at another time; but now, each object seemed to echo back my own exhilarating sense of hope and freedom. Surely in this lonely spot I might remain unknown; and I had my brother to cheer my solitude with his occasional visits.

He came that morning, and I have had several meetings with him since; but he is obliged to be very cautious when and how he comes. Not even his servants or his best friends must know of his visits to Wildfell – except on such occasions as a landlord might be expected to call upon a tenant – lest it should raise suspicion either of the truth or of some slanderous falsehood.

I have now been here nearly a fortnight, and, apart from the haunting dread of discovery, I am comfortably settled in my new home. Frederick has supplied me with furniture and painting materials: Rachel has sold most of my clothes for me in a distant town, and bought me others more suitable for my present position. I have a second-hand piano, and a tolerably well-stocked bookcase in my parlour; and my studio has assumed quite a professional appearance already. I am working hard to repay my brother for all his expenses on my account; not because I need to, but it pleases me to do so. I shall have so

much more pleasure in my labour and my frugal fare when I know that I am paying my way honestly, and that what little I possess is legitimately my own.

I have a few pictures already done, for I told Rachel to pack up all I had; and she completed her task too well – for she packed up a portrait of Mr. Huntingdon that I had painted in the first year of my marriage. It struck me with dismay when I took it from the box and beheld those eyes fixed upon me in their mocking mirth, as if deriding my efforts to escape.

How different had been my feelings in painting that portrait compared to now, in looking upon it! How I had toiled to produce something, as I thought, worthy of the original! What mingled pleasure and dissatisfaction I had had in the result! Pleasure for the likeness I had caught; dissatisfaction, because I had not made it handsome enough.

Now, I see no beauty in it; and yet it is far handsomer than he is now: for these six years have wrought almost as great a change upon him as on my feelings for him. The frame, however, is handsome enough; it will serve for another painting. The picture itself I have not destroyed, as I had first intended. I have put it aside, so that I may compare my son's features with it, as he grows up, and thus judge how much or how little he resembles his father – if I may be allowed to keep him with me still, and never see that father's face again.

It seems Mr. Huntingdon is making every effort to find me. He has been in person to Staningley, expecting to hear of his victims, if not to find them there – and has told so many lies, and with such unblushing coolness, that my uncle more than half believes him. But my aunt knows better: she is too well acquainted with both my husband's character and my own to be imposed upon.

But he does not want me back; he wants my child; and tells my friends that if I prefer living apart from him, he will let me do so unmolested, and even settle a reasonable allowance on me, provided I will immediately deliver up his son. Heaven help me! I am not going to sell my child for gold, even to save us from starving. It would be better that he should die with me than that he should live with his father.

Frederick showed me a letter he had received from that gentleman, full of cool impudence. My brother gave me no account of his reply, except to tell me that he had not admitted to knowing my place of refuge. He had implied it was unknown to him, saying it was useless to ask him for information on the subject, as it appeared that I had concealed my retreat even from my best friends; but that if he had known it, Mr. Huntingdon would be the last person whom he would tell; and that he was sure that no consideration would induce me to deliver up my child.

30th.

Alas! my kind neighbours will not let me alone. I have had visits from three different families, all bent upon discovering who and what I am, whence I came, and why I have chosen such a home as this. Their curiosity annoys and alarms me: if I am too mysterious it will only invite conjecture, and rouse them to greater exertions – and perhaps be the means of spreading my fame from parish to parish, till it reaches the ears of someone who will carry it to Grassdale Manor.

I shall be expected to return their calls, but if any of them live too far away for Arthur to accompany me, they must expect in vain for a while, for I cannot bear to leave him, except to go to church – and I have not attempted that yet. I am in such constant dread of his being snatched away, that I am never easy when he is not by my side.

I mean, however, to go to church next Sunday, and make myself leave him with Rachel for a few hours. The vicar has been to scold me for my neglect of religion, and I had no sufficient excuse to offer. Besides, I know I should derive great comfort from an occasionally attending church, if I could only compose my thoughts, and forbid them to be always dwelling on my absent child, and on the dreadful possibility of finding him gone when I return. Surely God in His mercy will preserve me from so severe a trial: He will not suffer him to be torn away from me.

November 3rd.

I have made some further acquaintance with my neighbours. The fine gentleman and beau of the parish and its vicinity (in his own estimation, at least) is a young. . . .

\* \* \*

Here the journal ended. The rest was torn away. How cruel, just when she was going to mention me! though not very favourably, of course.

Well! I could readily forgive her prejudice against me, and her hard thoughts of our sex in general, after reading her experience of us.

However, if, at first, her opinion of me had been lower than I deserved, I was convinced that now it was too high; and perhaps the latter pages had been removed for fear of adding to to my self-conceit. I would have given much to have seen it all – to have witnessed the gradual change, the progress of friendship for me, and whatever warmer feeling she might have; to have seen how much love had grown upon her in spite of her virtuous resolutions – but no, I had no right to see it, and she had done well to keep it from me.

## Chapter 45

Well, Halford, what do you think of all this? I must admit, though it is not honourable of me, that the former half of the narrative was, to me, more painful than the latter. Not that I was unmoved by Mrs. Huntingdon's sufferings, but, I must confess, I felt a kind of selfish gratification in watching her husband's gradual decline in her good graces, and seeing how completely he extinguished her affection. It relieved my mind of an intolerable burden, and filled my heart with joy.

While I was reading my candle expired; so rather than disturb the house by fetching another, I sought my pillow. How much sleep I had, I leave you to imagine.

At the first sign of dawn, I rose, and brought the manuscript to the window, but it was impossible to read it yet. After dressing, I returned to it; and with intense and eager interest, devoured the rest of its contents.

When it was ended, I opened the window and put out my head to drink in the pure morning air. A splendid morning it was; half-frozen dew lay on the grass, the swallows were twittering round me, the rooks cawing, and cows lowing in the distance; and early frost and summer sunshine mingled their sweetness in the air.

But I did not think of that: a confusion of thoughts and emotions crowded upon me. Soon this chaos cleared away, giving place to two distinct emotions: joy unspeakable that my adored Helen was all I wished to think her – that her character shone bright and clear, and stainless as the sun; and shame and deep remorse for my own conduct.

Immediately after breakfast I hurried over to Wildfell Hall. Rachel had risen in my estimation since yesterday, and I was ready to greet her as an old friend; but she cast me a look of cold distrust on opening the door. Doubtless she saw in me another Mr. Hargrave, only the more dangerous in being more esteemed by her mistress.

'Missis can't see any one today, sir – she's poorly,' said she.

'But I must see her, Rachel,' said I, placing my hand on the door to prevent its being shut.

'Indeed, sir, you can't,' replied she, with still more iron frigidity than before. 'She's poorly, I tell you.'

Just in time to prevent me from rudely pushing forward, an inner door opened, and little Arthur appeared with his frolicsome dog. He seized my hand between both his, and smilingly drew me forward.

'Mamma says you're to come in, Mr. Markham,' said he, 'and I am to go out and play with Rover.'

Rachel retired with a sigh, and I stepped into the parlour. There, before the fire-place, stood the tall, graceful figure, wasted with many sorrows. I put the manuscript on the table, and looked in her pale, anxious face. Her clear, dark eyes were fixed on mine with a gaze so intensely earnest that they bound me like a spell.

'Have you looked it over?' she murmured.

'I've read it through,' said I, advancing, 'and I want to know if you'll forgive me – if you can forgive me?'

She did not answer, but her eyes glistened. She abruptly turned away, and went to the window. It was not in anger, I was sure, but only to conceal her emotion. I therefore followed, to stand beside her – but not to speak. She gave me her hand, and murmured in a voice she tried to steady, ‘Can you forgive me?’

It might be deemed a breach of trust, I thought, to put that hand to my lips, so I only gently pressed it, and smilingly replied, ‘I hardly can. You should have told me this before. It shows a lack of confidence—’

‘Oh, no,’ cried she, eagerly interrupting me; ‘it was not that. It was no lack of confidence in you; but I shrank from the disclosure, till I was obliged to make it. I have done very wrong, I know; but, as usual, I have reaped the bitter fruits of my own error, and must reap them to the end.’

Bitter, indeed, was her anguished tone. Now, I raised her hand to my lips, and fervently kissed it again and again; for tears prevented any other reply. She allowed these wild caresses; then, suddenly turning from me, she paced the room, wringing her hands, her lips tightly compressed. At length she paused before the empty fire-place, and turning to me, said calmly, if with a great effort, ‘Now, Gilbert, you must leave me – not this moment, but soon – and you must never come again.’

‘Never again, Helen? When I love you more than ever?’

‘For that very reason, we should not meet again. I thought this interview was necessary so that we might ask and receive each other’s pardon for the past; but there can be no excuse for another meeting. I shall leave this place, as soon as I can seek another refuge; but our friendship must end here.’

‘End here!’ echoed I.

‘You must not come again.’ There was a slight tremor in her voice, but I thought her whole manner was provokingly composed, considering the dreadful sentence she pronounced. ‘You know why I tell you so, and you must see that it is better to part at once: you ought to help me.’ She paused. I did not answer. ‘Will you promise not to come? If you won’t promise, you will drive me away before I have another place of refuge.’

‘Helen,’ said I impatiently, ‘I cannot discuss eternal separation as calmly as you can. It is no question of mere expedience with me; it is a question of life and death!’

She was silent. Her pale lips quivered, and her fingers trembled with agitation, as she nervously entwined them in the chain attached to her small gold watch – the only thing of value she had kept. I had said an unjust and cruel thing; but I must needs follow it up with something worse.

‘But, Helen!’ I began in a soft, low tone, ‘that man is not your husband: in the sight of heaven he has forfeited all claim—’

She seized my arm with a grasp of startling energy.

‘Gilbert, don’t!’ she cried, passionately. ‘For God’s sake, don’t you attempt these arguments! No fiend could torture me like this!’

‘I won’t, I won’t!’ said I, gently laying my hand on hers; almost as much alarmed at her vehemence as ashamed of my own misconduct.

‘Instead of acting like a true friend,’ continued she, breaking from me, and throwing herself into the old arm-chair, ‘and helping me, you leave all the burden to me; and not

satisfied with that, you do your utmost to fight against me – when you know—’ She paused, and hid her face in her handkerchief.

‘Forgive me, Helen!’ I pleaded. ‘I will never utter another word on the subject. But may we not still meet as friends?’

‘It will not work,’ she replied, mournfully shaking her head.

‘Then what must we do?’ cried I. But immediately I added in a quieter tone, ‘I’ll do whatever you want; only don’t say that this meeting is to be our last.’

‘And why not? Don’t you know that every time we meet, the final parting will become more painful? Don’t you feel that every meeting makes us dearer to each other than the last?’

Her voice was hurried and low, and the downcast eyes and burning blush too plainly showed that she, at least, had felt it. She added, ‘I have power to bid you go now: another time it might be different.’

‘But we may write,’ I timidly suggested. ‘You will not deny me that consolation?’

‘We can hear of each other through my brother.’

‘Your brother!’ A pang of remorse and shame shot through me. She had not heard of the injury he had sustained at my hands; and I had not the courage to tell her. ‘Your brother will not help us,’ I said: ‘he would want all communion between us to be entirely at an end.’

‘And he would be right, I suppose. Every friend would tell us it was our duty to forget each other. But don’t be afraid, Gilbert,’ she added, smiling sadly, ‘there is little chance of my forgetting you. I meant only that Frederick should be the means of transmitting messages between us, so that we might know of the other’s welfare. More than this ought not to be: for you are young, Gilbert, and you ought to marry – and will some time, though you may think it impossible now. And though I can hardly say I wish you to forget me, I know it is right that you should, both for your own happiness, and that of your future wife.’

‘You are young too, Helen,’ I boldly replied; ‘and when that profligate scoundrel has run through his career, you will give your hand to me. I’ll wait till then.’

But she would not agree. Quite apart from the moral evil of basing our hopes upon the death of another, she maintained it to be madness: many men of Mr. Huntingdon’s habits had lived to a ripe though miserable old age.

‘And if I,’ said she, ‘am young in years, I am old in sorrow. Think, if he reached only fifty years or so, would you wait twenty or fifteen – through all the prime of youth and manhood – and marry at last a woman as faded as I shall be, without ever having seen me from this day to that? You would not,’ she continued, interrupting my earnest protestations, ‘or if you would, you should not. Trust me, Gilbert. You think me cold and stony-hearted—’

‘I don’t, Helen.’

‘Well, never mind: but I am not speaking now on impulse. I have thought of all these matters again and again, and, believe me, I am right. Trust my words rather than your own feelings, and in a few years you will see that I was right – though at present I can hardly see it myself,’ she murmured with a sigh, resting her head on her hand. ‘And don’t argue against me any more: all you can say has been already said by my own heart and

refuted by my reason. It was hard enough to combat those suggestions in my mind; in your mouth they are ten times worse, and if you knew how much pain they give me you would cease at once, I know.'

'I will go, if that can relieve you – and never return!' said I, with bitter emphasis. 'But, if we may never meet, is it a crime to exchange our thoughts by letter? May not kindred spirits meet, whatever be their earthly circumstances?'

'They may, they may!' cried she, with a momentary burst of glad enthusiasm. 'I thought of that too, Gilbert, but I feared to mention it. I fear any kind friend would tell us we are deluding ourselves with the idea of keeping up a spiritual communication without fostering vain regrets and hopes. No letters can pass between us here without giving fresh food for scandal. I did not intend to tell you of my new address, and I thought you would be more tranquil if you did not know it. But listen,' said she, smilingly putting up her finger to check my impatient reply: 'in six months you shall hear from Frederick precisely where I am; and if you still wish to write to me, and think you can do so without passion, then write, and I will answer you.'

'Six months!'

'Yes, to give your ardour time to cool, and test the constancy of your soul's love for mine. And now, enough has been said. Why can't we part at once?' exclaimed she, almost wildly, as she suddenly rose from her chair. I thought it was my duty to go without delay; and I approached and extended my hand as if to take leave – she grasped it in silence.

But this thought of final separation was too intolerable: it seemed to squeeze the blood out of my heart; and my feet were glued to the floor.

'And must we never meet again?' I murmured, in anguish.

'We shall meet in heaven. Let us think of that,' said she in a tone of desperate calmness; but her face was deadly pale.

'But not as we are now,' I could not help replying. 'It gives me little consolation to think I shall next behold you as a disembodied spirit – with a heart, perhaps, entirely estranged from me.'

'No, Gilbert, there is perfect love in heaven! Whatever I am, you will be the same, and, therefore, cannot possibly regret it; and whatever that change may be, we know it must be for the better.'

'But if I am to be so changed that I shall cease to adore you with my whole heart and soul, and love you beyond every other creature, I shall not be myself. My earthly nature cannot rejoice in the anticipation of such blessedness, from which itself must be excluded.'

'Is your love all earthly, then?' asked she.

'No, but I am supposing we shall have no more intimate communion with each other than with the rest of the world. Can you, Helen, contemplate with delight this prospect of losing me in a sea of glory?'

'I admit I cannot; but we do not know if it will be so. And I do know that to regret the exchange of earthly pleasures for the joys of heaven, is as if the grovelling caterpillar should lament that it must one day soar aloft as a butterfly. Listen: we are children now; we feel as children, and we understand as children; and when we are told that men and

women do not play with toys, we cannot help being saddened at the thought, because we cannot conceive that as we grow up our minds will become elevated beyond the trifling objects we now so fondly cherish.

‘But, Gilbert, can you really derive no consolation from the thought that we may meet together where there is no more pain and sorrow, no more striving against sin; where both will behold the same glorious truths, and drink supreme felicity from the same fountain of light and goodness – that Being whom both will worship with the same intensity of holy ardour? If you cannot, never write to me!’

‘Helen, I can!’ I cried. ‘And you shall not have the pain of another effort to dismiss me. I will go at once; but—’

I did not put my request in words: she understood it instinctively. One moment I stood and looked into her face, the next I held her to my heart, and we seemed to grow together in a close embrace from which no physical or mental force could rend us.

A whispered ‘God bless you!’ and ‘Go – go!’ was all she said; but while she spoke she held me so fast that I could not obey. At length, however, by a heroic effort, we tore ourselves apart, and I rushed from the house.

I have a confused memory of seeing little Arthur running up the garden-walk to meet me, and of bolting over the wall to avoid him – and subsequently running down the steep fields, till I got completely out of sight of the old hall; and then of long hours spent in tears and melancholy musings in the lonely valley, with the eternal music of the west wind in my ears, and the brook babbling along its stony bed; but my heart was away up the hill in that dark room where she was weeping, desolate and alone.

There was little business done that day. The farm was abandoned to the labourers. But one duty must be attended to; I had not forgotten my assault upon Frederick Lawrence, and I needed to apologise. I would have put it off until the morrow; but what if he should denounce me to his sister in the meantime? No, no! I must ask his pardon today.

I deferred it, however, till the evening, when I was more composed, and when – oh, wonderful perversity of human nature! – some faint indefinite hopes were beginning to rise in my mind; not that I intended to cherish them, but there they must lie for a while, till I learnt to live without them.

Arriving at the young squire’s house, I found it difficult to obtain admission. The servant that opened the door told me his master was very ill; he was feverish, and must not be disturbed.

‘I shall not disturb him long,’ said I; ‘but I must see him for a moment. It is on business of importance.’

‘I’ll tell him, sir,’ said the man. And I advanced further into the hall and followed him nearly to the door of the apartment where his master was – for he was not in bed. The servant entered and returned, to ask me to leave a message, as Mr. Lawrence could attend to no business at present.

‘He may as well see me as you,’ said I; and, stepping past the astonished footman, I boldly rapped at the door, entered, and closed it behind me.

The room was spacious and handsomely furnished. A fire was burning in the polished grate: an old greyhound lay basking before it on the thick, soft rug, while beside the sofa sat a smart young spaniel, looking wistfully up in its master's face.

The invalid lay reclining there, in his elegant dressing-gown. His usually pale face was flushed and feverish; his eyes were half closed, until he became aware of my presence – and then he opened them wide. He had been reading a book, which he dropped in indignant surprise as I advanced and stood before him. He raised himself on his pillows, gazing upon me with equal degrees of nervous horror, anger, and amazement.

‘Mr. Markham, I scarcely expected this!’ he said.

‘I know you didn't,’ answered I; ‘but be quiet a minute, and I'll tell you what I came for.’ Unthinkingly, I advanced a step or two nearer. He winced in aversion and instinctive fear; so I stepped back.

‘Make your story a short one,’ said he, putting his hand on the small bell that stood on the table beside him, ‘or I shall call for assistance. I am in no state to bear your brutalities, or your presence.’ And in truth he was perspiring.

Such a reception hardly made my task easier. It must be performed however; and so I plunged into it at once, and floundered through it as I could.

‘The truth is, Lawrence, I have not acted quite correctly towards you lately – especially on this last occasion; and I'm come to – to express my regret, and to beg your pardon. If you don't choose to grant it,’ I added hastily, not liking the expression on his face, ‘it's no matter; only I've done my duty, that's all.’

‘It's easily done,’ replied he, with a faint smile bordering on a sneer, ‘to abuse your friend and hit him without any cause, and then tell him it was not quite correct, but it's no matter whether he pardons it or not.’

‘It was because of a mistake,’ I muttered. ‘I should have made a very handsome apology, but you provoked me so confoundedly with your– Well, I suppose it's my fault. The fact is, I didn't know that you were Mrs. Graham's brother, and I saw and heard some things about your conduct which awoke unpleasant suspicions, that a little candour on your part might have removed.’

‘How came you to know that I was her brother?’ he asked anxiously.

‘She told me herself. She told me all. She knew I might be trusted. But you needn't disturb yourself, Mr. Lawrence, for I've seen the last of her!’

‘The last! Is she gone, then?’

‘No; but she has said farewell to me, and I have promised never to go near that house again while she inhabits it.’ I could have groaned aloud at the thought, but I only clenched my hands. My companion, however, was evidently relieved.

‘You have done right,’ he said, his face brightening. ‘As for the mistake, I am sorry for both our sakes that it occurred. Perhaps you can forgive my lack of candour, and remember how little encouragement to friendly confidence you gave me.’

‘Yes, yes – I remember it all: nobody can blame me more than I blame myself. Nobody can regret more sincerely than I do the result of my brutality, as you rightly call it.’

‘Never mind that,’ said he, faintly smiling; ‘let us forget all unpleasantness on both sides. Will you take my hand?’ It trembled through weakness as he held it out; I caught it and gave it a hearty squeeze, which he had not the strength to return.

‘Your hand is burning, Lawrence,’ said I. ‘You are really ill, and I have made you worse by all this talk.’

‘Oh, it is nothing; only a cold got by the rain.’

‘My doing, too.’

‘Never mind that. But tell me, did you mention this matter to my sister?’

‘To confess the truth, I had not the courage to do so; but when you tell her, will you just say that I deeply regret it—’

‘Oh, never fear! I shall say nothing against you, as long as you keep your good resolution of staying away from her. She has not heard of my illness, then?’

‘I think not.’

‘I’m glad of that, for I have been tormenting myself with the fear that somebody would tell her I was dying. I must let her know something about it, if I can,’ continued he, reflectively, ‘or she will be hearing some such story. Many would be glad to tell her such news, just to see how she would take it.’

‘I wish I had told her,’ said I. ‘If it were not for my promise, I would tell her now.’

‘By no means! But if I were to write a short note, now, just giving her a slight account of my illness, to excuse my not coming to see her, and to put her on her guard against any exaggerated reports – would you slip it into the post-office as you pass?’

Willingly I consented. The poor fellow seemed to have considerable difficulty in writing at all. When the note was written, I took my leave, after asking if there was anything I could do to alleviate his sufferings, and repair the injury I had done.

‘No,’ said he; ‘you have already done much: for you have relieved my mind of two great burdens – anxiety on my sister’s account, and deep regret upon your own. I do believe these two worries have made me more feverish than anything else; and I am sure I shall soon recover now. There is one more thing you can do for me: come and see me now and then – for I am very lonely here, and I promise you shall not be kept out again.’

I promised to do so, and after shaking hands, departed. I posted the letter on my way home, most manfully resisting the temptation of dropping in a word from myself at the same time.

## Chapter 46

I felt strongly tempted, at times, to enlighten my mother and sister about the real circumstances of the persecuted tenant of Wildfell Hall, and I regretted having not asked that lady's permission to do so; but, on reflection, I considered that I told them, it could not long remain a secret to the Millwards and Wilsons. If Eliza Millward got a clue to the story, I feared she would soon find a way to enlighten Mr. Huntingdon about the place of his wife's retreat.

I would therefore wait patiently till these weary six months were over, and then, when the fugitive had found another home, and I was permitted to write to her, I would beg to be allowed to clear her name from these vile calumnies. At present I must content myself with simply asserting that I knew them to be false, and that I would prove it some day, to the shame of those who slandered her.

I don't think anybody believed me, but they soon learned to avoid insinuating against her, or even mentioning her name in my presence. They thought I was so madly infatuated that I was determined to support her in the face of reason; and meantime I grew morose, imagining that everyone I met was harbouring unworthy thoughts of her. My poor mother was quite distressed about me; but I couldn't help it – at least I thought I couldn't, though sometimes I felt a pang of remorse for my behaviour to her, and made an effort to amend it, with partial success. Indeed I was generally more humanised in my manner to her than to any one else.

Mrs. Huntingdon did not leave Wildfell Hall till two months after our farewell. During that time she never appeared at church, and I never went near the house: I only knew she was still there by her brother's brief answers to my many inquiries. I was a constant visitor to him throughout his illness and convalescence; not only from my desire to cheer him up and make amends for my former brutality, but from my growing attachment to him, and the increasing pleasure I found in his society – chiefly on account of his close connection with my adored Helen. I took a secret delight in watching his fair, pale features, and observing the intonations of his voice, detecting resemblances which had never struck me before. He provoked me at times by his reluctance to talk about his sister.

His recovery was not so rapid as he had expected. He was not able to mount his pony till a fortnight after our reconciliation; and the first use he made of his returning strength was to ride over by night to Wildfell Hall, to see his sister. It was hazardous for both of them, but he thought it necessary to consult with her about her departure; and the result was a slight relapse of his illness. When I came to see him the next day, and observed he was not well, he merely said he had caught cold by being out too late in the evening.

'You'll never be able to see your sister, if you don't take care of yourself,' said I.

'I've seen her already,' said he, quietly.

'And how was she?' I eagerly asked.

'As usual,' was the sad reply. 'She is not positively ill, and she will recover her spirits in a while – but so many trials have been almost too much for her.'

'Did she – did your sister mention me?'

‘She asked if I had seen you lately.’

‘And what else did she say?’

‘I cannot tell you all she said,’ replied he, with a slight smile; ‘for we talked a good deal, chiefly on the subject of her departure, which I begged her to delay till I was better able to assist her.’

‘But did she say no more about me?’

‘She did not say much about you, Markham. She only asked a few questions about you, and seemed satisfied with my brief answers, wherein she showed herself wiser than you. And I may tell you, too, that she seemed to be far more anxious that you should think too much about her, than lest you should forget her.’

‘She was right.’

‘But I fear you are anxious about being forgotten.’

‘No, I wish her to be happy; but I don’t wish her to forget me altogether. I can scarcely imagine she will make herself very unhappy about me, because I know I am not worthy of it, except in my appreciation of her.’

‘You are neither of you worthy of a broken heart, nor of all the sighs and tears that have been wasted upon you both; but my sister’s feelings are as keen as yours, and I believe more constant. However, she has the good sense to strive against them, and I wish you would make similar exertions,’ said he.

‘You think she is determined to forget me?’

‘Yes, Markham! Why not?’

‘Oh, well!’ was my only audible reply; but I internally answered, ‘No, Lawrence, you’re wrong there. It would be wrong of her to forget one so deeply devoted to her, and it would be wrong in me to forget so divine a piece of God’s creation, when I have truly loved and known her.’

But I said no more about it. I started a new topic of conversation, and departed feeling less cordial towards him than usual. Perhaps I had no right to be annoyed at him, but I was, nevertheless.

A week later I met him returning from a visit to the Wilsons’; and I now resolved to do him a good turn, though at the risk of incurring his displeasure. Believe me, I was motivated by no wish for revenge for the occasional annoyances I had lately sustained from him, nor by any malevolence towards Miss Wilson; but purely by the fact that I could not endure that such a woman should be Mrs. Huntingdon’s sister, and I could not bear to think of his being deceived into a union with one so unworthy of him, and so utterly unfitted to be his partner. He had had uncomfortable suspicions on that head himself, I imagined; but such were the lady’s powers of attraction that they had not disturbed him long.

‘You’ve been to call on the Wilsons, Lawrence,’ said I, as I walked beside his pony.

‘Yes,’ replied he: ‘I thought it only civil to return their kind attentions throughout my illness.’

‘It’s all Miss Wilson’s doing.’

‘And if it is,’ returned he, with a perceptible blush, ‘is that any reason why I should not acknowledge it?’

‘It is a reason why you should not make the acknowledgment she looks for.’

‘Let us drop that subject, if you please,’ said he.

‘No, Lawrence; I’ll tell you something which you may believe or not as you choose – only please remember that it is not my custom to speak falsely, and I can have no motive for lying—’

‘Well, Markham, what now?’

‘Miss Wilson hates your sister. It may be natural that, in her ignorance of the relationship, she should feel some enmity against her, but no good or amiable woman would be capable of showing that cold-blooded, designing malice towards a supposed rival that I have observed in her.’

‘Markham!’

‘Yes. It is my belief that Eliza Millward and she, if not the originators of the slanderous reports that have been spread, were the chief disseminators of them. She delighted to blacken your sister’s character to the utmost of her power, without risking the exposure of her own ill-will!’

‘I cannot believe it,’ interrupted my companion, his face burning with indignation.

‘Well, I cannot prove it, but it is so to the best of my belief. As you would not willingly marry Miss Wilson if it were so, you will do well to be cautious till you have proved it to be otherwise.’

‘I never told you, Markham, that I intended to marry Miss Wilson,’ said he, proudly.

‘No, but she intends to marry you.’

‘Did she tell you so?’

‘No, but—’

‘Then you have no right to make such an assertion.’ He slightly quickened his pony’s pace, but I laid my hand on its mane.

‘Wait a moment, Lawrence, and let me explain; and don’t be so very – I don’t know what to call it – inaccessible. I know what you think of Jane Wilson; you think she is singularly charming, elegant, sensible, and refined: you are not aware that she is selfish, cold-hearted, ambitious, artful, shallow—’

‘Enough, Markham!’

‘No; let me finish. If you married her, your home would be comfortless; it would break your heart to find yourself united to one so wholly incapable of sharing your tastes, feelings, and ideas – so utterly destitute of good feeling, and true nobility of soul.’

‘Have you done?’ asked my companion quietly.

‘Yes. I know you hate me for my impertinence, but I don’t care, if it preserves you from that fatal mistake.’

‘Well!’ returned he, with a rather wintry smile. ‘I’m glad you have overcome your own afflictions so far as to be able to study the affairs of others, and worry so unnecessarily about such possible calamities.’

We parted somewhat coldly: but we did not cease to be friends; and my well-meant warning, though it might have been better delivered, was not wholly unproductive. His visit to the Wilsons was not repeated. I have reason to believe he pondered my words, eagerly sought information about the lady from other quarters, and finally concluded that, all things considered, she had much better remain Miss Wilson of Ryecote Farm than become Mrs. Lawrence of Woodford Hall.

I believe, too, that he soon learned to contemplate his former preference with secret amazement, and to congratulate himself on his lucky escape; but he never confessed it to me, or hinted any acknowledgment of the part I had played.

As for Jane Wilson, she, of course, was disappointed by the sudden cold neglect of her former admirer. Had I done wrong to blight her cherished hopes? I think not; and certainly my conscience has never accused me of any evil design in the matter, from that day to this.

## Chapter 47

One morning, about the beginning of November, while I was writing some business letters after breakfast, Eliza Millward came to call upon my sister. When she arrived, there was no one in the room but Fergus and myself. However, I was not going to exert myself for her amusement, so I merely gave her a careless salutation and exchanged a few words, and then went on with my writing. But she wanted to tease me.

‘What a pleasure it is to find you at home, Mr. Markham!’ said she, with a disingenuously malicious smile. ‘I so seldom see you now, for you never come to the vicarage. Papa, is quite offended, I can tell you,’ she added playfully, with an impertinent laugh, as she seated herself close to my desk.

‘I have had a good deal to do of late,’ said I, without looking up from my letter.

‘Have you, indeed! Somebody said you had been strangely neglecting your business these last few months.’

‘Somebody said wrong, for these last two months especially, I have been particularly plodding and diligent.’

‘Ah! well, there’s nothing like active employment, I suppose, to console the afflicted; and, excuse me, Mr. Markham, but you look so very far from well, and have been, by all accounts, so moody and thoughtful of late, I could almost think some secret care is preying on your spirits. Formerly, I could have asked you what it was, and what I could do to comfort you: I dare not ask you now.’

‘You’re very kind, Miss Eliza. When I think you can do anything to comfort me, I’ll tell you.’

‘Pray do! I suppose I mayn’t guess what it is that troubles you?’

‘There’s no need, for I’ll tell you plainly. The thing that troubles me the most at present is a young lady sitting at my elbow, and preventing me from finishing my letter.’

Before she could reply to this ungallant speech, Rose entered the room; and they both sat near the fire, where that idle lad Fergus was standing, leaning against the chimney-piece with his legs crossed and his hands in his pockets.

‘Now, Rose, I’ll tell you a piece of news – I hope you have not heard it before: for one always likes to be the first to tell. It’s about that sad Mrs. Graham—’

‘Hush-sh-sh!’ whispered Fergus, in a solemn tone. ‘We never mention her.’ And glancing up, I caught him with his eye on me, and his finger pointed to his forehead; then, winking at her with a doleful shake of the head, he whispered, ‘A monomania – but don’t mention it.’

‘I should be sorry to injure anyone’s feelings,’ murmured she. ‘Another time, perhaps.’

‘Speak out, Miss Eliza!’ said I, not deigning to notice his buffooneries: ‘you needn’t fear to say anything in my presence.’

‘Well,’ answered she, ‘perhaps you know already that Mrs. Graham’s husband is not really dead, and that she had run away from him?’ I started, and felt my face glow; but I bent over my letter, folding it up as she proceeded. ‘But perhaps you did not know that

she is now gone back to him again, and that a perfect reconciliation has taken place? Only think,' she continued, turning to the confounded Rose, 'what a fool the man must be!'

'And who gave you this piece of news, Miss Eliza?' said I, interrupting my sister's exclamations.

'I had it from a very authentic source.'

'From whom, may I ask?'

'From one of the servants at Woodford, who told it in confidence to our maid Sarah, and Sarah told it to me.'

'In confidence, I suppose? And you tell it in confidence to us? But I can tell you that it is but a lame story after all, and scarcely one-half of it true.'

While I spoke I completed sealing my letters, with a somewhat unsteady hand, in spite of my efforts to retain my composure. While I was convinced the story was a lame one – that Mrs. Graham had certainly not gone back to her husband, but had more likely simply gone away – it was just possible that someone might have betrayed her, and she had been taken away by force.

Determined to know the worst, I hastily pocketed my letters, and muttering something about being too late for the post, left the room, rushed into the yard, and called for my horse. No one being there, I dragged him out of the stable myself, saddled and mounted him, and speedily galloped away to Woodford. I found its owner pensively strolling in the grounds.

'Is your sister gone?' were my first words as I grasped his hand.

'Yes, she's gone,' he answered, so calmly that my terror was removed.

'I suppose I mayn't know where she is?' said I, as I dismounted, and handed my horse to the gardener.

My companion gravely took my arm, and leading me away, said, 'She is at Grassdale Manor.'

'What?' cried I, with a start. 'Who betrayed her?'

'She went of her own accord.'

'Impossible, Lawrence!' I exclaimed, vehemently grasping his arm.

'She did,' he persisted in the same grave, collected manner; 'and not without reason. Mr. Huntingdon is ill.'

'And so she went to nurse him?'

'Yes.'

'Fool!' I could not help exclaiming, and Lawrence looked up with a reproachful glance. 'Is he dying, then?'

'I think not, Markham.'

'And how many other nurses has he?'

'None; he was alone, or she would not have gone.'

'Oh, confound it! This is intolerable!'

'What is? That he should be alone?'

I made no reply, but paced the walk in silent anguish, with my hand pressed to my forehead. Pausing and turning to my companion, I impatiently exclaimed, 'Why did she take this infatuated step? What fiend persuaded her to it?'

'Nothing persuaded her but her own sense of duty.'

‘Humbug!’

‘I was half inclined to say so myself, Markham, at first. I assure you it was not by my advice that she went, for I detest that man as fervently as you. All I did was to inform her of his illness (the consequence of a fall from his horse in hunting), and told her that the unhappy Miss Myers had left him some time ago.’

‘It was ill done! Now, he’ll make all manner of lying speeches and false, fair promises, and she’ll believe him, and then her condition will be ten times worse than before.’

‘That does not seem likely,’ said he, producing a letter from his pocket. ‘From the account I received this morning, I should say—’

It was her writing! ‘Let me see it,’ I exclaimed, and while he hesitated I snatched it from his hand. Recollecting myself, however, the minute after, I held it out. ‘Here, take it,’ said I, ‘if you don’t want me to read it.’

‘No, you may read it if you like.’

So I read:

\* \* \*

Grassdale, Nov. 4th.

Dear Frederick,

I know you will be anxious to hear from me, and I will tell you all I can. Mr. Huntingdon is very ill, but not in any immediate danger; and he is rather better than he was when I came. I found the house in sad confusion: Mrs. Greaves, Benson, every decent servant had left, and those that were come to fill their places were a negligent, disorderly set. I must change them again, if I stay.

A professional nurse, a grim, hard old woman, had been hired to attend him. He suffers much, and has no fortitude to bear him through. The injuries he sustained from the accident were not severe, and would, the doctor says, have been trifling to a man of temperate habits, but with him it is very different. On the night of my arrival, when I first entered his room, he was lying in a kind of half delirium. He did not notice me till I spoke, and then he mistook me for another.

‘Is it you, Alice, come again?’ he murmured. ‘Why did you leave me?’

‘It is Helen, your wife,’ I replied.

‘My wife!’ cried he. ‘For heaven’s sake, don’t mention her. Devil take her, and you, too! What did you do it for?’

I said no more; but observing that he kept gazing towards the foot of the bed, I went and sat there with the lamp, for I thought he might be dying, and I wanted him to know me. For a long time he lay silently looking at me, first with a vacant stare, then with a fixed gaze of strange growing intensity. At last he startled me by suddenly raising himself on his elbow and demanding in a horrified whisper, ‘Who is it?’

‘It is Helen Huntingdon,’ said I.

‘I must be going mad,’ cried he. ‘Leave me, whoever you are. I can’t bear that white face, and those eyes. For God’s sake go, and send me somebody that doesn’t look like that!’

I went at once, and sent the hired nurse to him; but next morning I entered his chamber again, and taking the nurse's place by his bedside, I watched him and waited on him for several hours, showing myself as little as possible, and only speaking when necessary.

At first he addressed me as the nurse, but, on my crossing the room to draw up the window-blinds, he said, 'No, it isn't nurse; it's Alice. Stay with me, do! That old hag will be the death of me.'

'I mean to stay with you,' said I. After that he would call me Alice, or some other name equally repugnant to my feelings. I endured it for a while; but when, having asked for a glass of water, he murmured, 'Thanks, dearest!' I could not help observing, 'You would not say so if you knew me.'

He merely muttered an incoherent reply, so I dropped the subject again till later, when I was bathing his forehead to relieve the pain in his head. After looking earnestly at me for some minutes, he observed, 'I have such strange fancies – I can't get rid of them; and the most singular of them is your face and voice – they seem just like hers. I could swear that she was by my side.'

'She is,' said I.

'That feels comfortable,' continued he, without noticing my words; 'and while you bathe my head, the other fancies fade – but this one strengthens. Go on – go on, till it vanishes, too!'

'It never will vanish,' said I, 'for it is the truth!'

'The truth!' he cried, starting up as if stung. 'You don't mean that you are really she?'

'I do; but you needn't shrink away: I am come to take care of you, and do what none of them would do.'

'For God's sake, don't torment me now!' he cried in pitiable agitation. Then he began to mutter curses against me, while I put down the sponge and basin, and resumed my seat at the bed-side.

'Where are they?' said he: 'have they all left me?'

'There are servants within call if you want them, but you had better lie down and be quiet. None of them could attend you as carefully as I shall do.'

'I can't understand it at all,' said he, in perplexity. 'Was it a dream that—' and he covered his eyes with his hands, as if trying to unravel the mystery.

'No, Arthur, it was not a dream. Your conduct obliged me to leave you; but I heard that you were ill and alone, and I came back to nurse you. You can trust me: tell me your wants, and I will try to satisfy them. There is no one else to care for you, and I shall not upbraid you now.'

'Oh! I see,' said he, with a bitter smile; 'it's an act of Christian charity, whereby you hope to gain a higher seat in heaven, and scoop a deeper pit in hell for me.'

'No; I came to offer you comfort and assistance. If I could benefit your soul as well as your body—'

'Oh, yes; if you could overwhelm me with remorse, now's the time. What have you done with my son?'

‘He is well, and you may see him some time, if you will compose yourself, but not now.’

‘Where is he?’

‘He is safe.’

‘Is he here?’

‘Wherever he is, you will not see him till you have promised to leave him entirely under my care and protection, and to let me take him away whenever and wherever I please, if I should judge it necessary. But we will talk of that tomorrow: you must be quiet now.’

‘No, let me see him now, I promise, if it must be so.’

‘No—’

‘I swear it, as God is in heaven! Now, let me see him.’

‘But I cannot trust your oaths and promises: I must have a written agreement, and you must sign it in presence of a witness: but tomorrow.’

‘No, today; now,’ he persisted. He was in such a state of feverish excitement that I thought it better to grant it at once, as I saw he would not rest till I did.

So, having clearly written out the promise I wished Mr. Huntingdon to give upon a slip of paper, I read it over to him, and told him to sign it in Rachel’s presence. He begged I would not insist upon this, because it showed the servant my lack of faith in his word. I told him I was sorry, but since he had forfeited my confidence, he must take the consequence.

Next he said he could not hold the pen. ‘Then we will wait until you can,’ said I. Upon which he said he would try; but he could not see to write. I placed my finger where the signature was to be.

But he had not power to form the letters. ‘In that case, you must be too ill to see the child,’ said I. He finally managed to sign the agreement; and I bade Rachel fetch the boy.

All this may strike you as harsh, but I felt I must not sacrifice my son’s future welfare to any mistaken tenderness for this man’s feelings. Little Arthur had not forgotten his father, but thirteen months of absence had made him somewhat shy; and when he was led into the darkened room where the sick man lay, so altered, with fiercely flushed face and wildly-gleaming eyes – he instinctively clung to me, and stood looking at his father with more awe than pleasure.

‘Come here, Arthur,’ said his father, extending his hand. The child went, and timidly touched that burning hand, but almost started in alarm when his father suddenly clutched his arm and drew him to his side.

‘Do you know me?’ asked Mr. Huntingdon.

‘Yes.’

‘Who am I?’

‘Papa.’

‘Are you glad to see me?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re not!’ replied the disappointed parent, relaxing his hold, and darting a vindictive glance at me.

Arthur, thus released, crept back to me and put his hand in mine. His father swore I had made the child hate him, and abused me bitterly. The instant he began I sent our son out of the room; and when he paused to breathe, I calmly assured him that he was entirely mistaken; I had never once attempted to prejudice his child against him.

‘I did indeed wish him to forget you,’ I said, ‘and especially to forget the lessons you taught him; and so I have not encouraged him to talk about you; but no one can blame me for that, I think.’

The invalid only replied by groaning aloud, and rolling his head impatiently on the pillow.

‘I am in hell, already!’ cried he. ‘This cursed thirst is burning my heart to ashes! Will nobody—’

Before he could finish the sentence I had poured out a glass of a cooling drink that was on the table, and brought it to him. He drank greedily. I asked if there was anything else I could do.

‘Yes; I’ll give you another chance of showing your Christian magnanimity,’ sneered he: ‘set my pillow straight, and these confounded bed-clothes.’ I did so. ‘There: now get me another glass of that slop.’ I complied. ‘This is delightful, isn’t it?’ said he with a malicious grin, as I held it to his lips; ‘you never hoped for such a glorious opportunity.’

‘Now, shall I stay with you?’ said I, as I replaced the glass on the table: ‘or will you be more quiet if I go, and send in the nurse?’

‘Oh, yes, you’re wondrous gentle and obliging! But you’ve driven me mad with it all!’ responded he.

‘I’ll leave you, then,’ said I; and I withdrew, and did not trouble him with my presence again that day, except for a minute or two at a time, just to see how he was.

Next morning the doctor ordered him to be bled; and after that he was more subdued and tranquil. I passed half the day in his room, at intervals. My presence did not agitate him as before, and he accepted my services quietly, without any bitter remarks: indeed, he scarcely spoke at all. But on the morrow, as he recovered from his exhaustion and stupefaction, his ill-nature revived.

‘Oh, this sweet revenge!’ cried he, when I had been doing all I could to make him comfortable. ‘And you can enjoy it with such a quiet conscience too, because it’s all in the way of duty.’

‘It is well for me that I am doing my duty,’ said I, with a bitterness I could not repress, ‘for it is the only comfort I have; and the satisfaction of my own conscience is the only reward I can look for!’

He looked rather surprised. ‘What reward did you look for?’ he asked.

‘You will think me a liar if I tell you; but I did hope to benefit you: to better your mind as well as to alleviate your sufferings; but it appears I am to do neither. Your own bad spirit will not let me. As far as you are concerned, I have sacrificed my own feelings to no purpose; and every little thing I do for you is ascribed to self-righteous malice and revenge!’

‘It’s all very fine, I daresay,’ said he, eyeing me with stupid amazement; ‘and of course I ought to be melted to tears of admiration at the sight of so much generosity and superhuman goodness; but I can’t manage it. However, pray do me all the good you can,

for you can see I am almost as miserable just now as you could wish. Since you came, I confess, the servants have attended to me better, for they neglected me shamefully before, and all my old friends seem to have forsaken me. I've had a dreadful time, I assure you: I sometimes thought I should have died. Do you think there's any chance of that?"

'There's always a chance of death; and it is always well to live with such a chance in view.'

'Yes, yes! but do you think there's any likelihood that this illness will be fatal?'

'I cannot tell. Supposing it should, how are you prepared to meet it?'

'Why, the doctor told me I wasn't to think about it, for I was sure to get better if I stuck to his regimen and prescriptions.'

'I hope you may, Arthur; but neither the doctor nor I can speak with certainty; there is internal injury, and it is difficult to know to what extent.'

'There now! you want to scare me to death.'

'No; but I don't want to lull you to false security. If a consciousness of the uncertainty of life leads you to serious and useful thoughts, I would not deprive you of the benefit of such reflections. Does the idea of death appal you very much?'

'It's the only thing I can't bear to think of; so if you've any—'

'But it must come some time,' interrupted I, 'even if it is years from now – and no doubt it will be as unwelcome then as now, unless—'

'Oh, hang it! don't torment me with your preachments, unless you want to kill me outright. I can't stand it, I tell you. I've sufferings enough without that. If you think there's danger, save me from it; and then I'll hear whatever you like to say.'

I accordingly dropped the topic. And now, Frederick, I will bring my letter to a close. Let me hear from you soon, and I will write again to tell you how we get on; but now that my presence is tolerated, and even required, in the sick-room, I shall have little time to spare between my husband and my son – for I must not leave my child always with Rachel, and I dare not leave him with any of the other servants. If his father gets worse, I shall ask Esther Hargrave to take charge of him for a time; but I greatly prefer keeping him under my own eye.

I find myself in rather a singular position. I am doing my best to promote the recovery and reformation of my husband, and if I succeed, what shall I do? My duty, of course – but how?

No matter; I can perform the task that is before me now, and God will give me strength to do whatever He requires hereafter.

Good-bye, dear Frederick.

Helen Huntingdon.

\* \* \*

'What do you think of it?' said Lawrence, as I silently refolded the letter.

'It seems to me,' I replied, 'that she is casting her pearls before swine. But I shall say no more against her: she had the best and noblest motives; and if the act is not wise, may heaven protect her from its consequences! May I keep this letter, Lawrence? She has never mentioned me throughout, so there can be no impropriety in it.'

‘Why should you wish to keep it?’

‘Were not these words written by her hand? And conceived in her mind, and many of them spoken by her lips?’

‘Very well,’ said he.

‘When you write,’ said I, ‘will you please ask her if I may enlighten my mother and sister on her real history and circumstances, just so far as is necessary to make the neighbourhood aware of the shameful injustice they have done her? I want no tender messages, but just ask her that. You see I know the address, and I might write to her myself, but I’ll refrain.’

‘Well, I’ll do that for you, Markham.’

‘And as soon as you receive an answer, you’ll let me know?’

‘If all be well, I’ll come myself and tell you.’

## Chapter 48

Five or six days after this Mr. Lawrence called. When he and I were alone together – which I contrived by bringing him out to look at my cornstacks – he showed me another letter from his sister. He was quite willing for me to read it: but the only answer it gave to my message was this:—

‘Mr. Markham is at liberty to make such revelations concerning me as he judges necessary. He will know that I wish little to be said on the subject. I hope he is well; but tell him he must not think of me.’

I can give you a few extracts from the rest of the letter, for I was permitted to keep this one too – perhaps as an antidote to my hopes.

\* \* \*

He is decidedly better, (wrote Helen), but very low from the depressing effects of his severe illness and the strict regimen he has to observe – so opposite to all his previous habits. It is deplorable to see how badly his past life has affected his constitution. But the doctor says he may now be considered out of danger, if he will only continue to observe the necessary restrictions. Some alcoholic cordials he must have, but diluted and sparingly used; and I find it very difficult to keep him to this. At first, his extreme dread of death made the task easy; but as he feels his suffering abating, and sees the danger receding, the more intractable he becomes.

Now, also, his appetite for food is returning; and here, too, his long habits of self-indulgence are greatly against him. I watch and restrain him as well as I can, and get abused for my severity; and sometimes he manages to elude my vigilance, and acts against my will.

But in general he is never satisfied when I am not by his side. I am obliged to be a little stiff with him sometimes, or he would make a complete slave of me; and I have the servants to supervise, and my little Arthur to attend to – and my own health too, which would be entirely neglected were I to satisfy his exorbitant demands. I do not generally sit up at night, for the nurse does that; but I seldom enjoy an unbroken night’s rest, for my patient makes no scruple of calling me whenever he wants my presence.

But he is obviously afraid of my displeasure; and if at one time he tries my patience by his unreasonable exaction and fretful complaints, at another time he depresses me by his abject submission and self-abasement when he fears he has gone too far. All this I can readily pardon, for it is chiefly the result of his feebleness and disordered nerves. What annoys me most is his occasional attempt at an affectionate fondness that I can neither believe nor return. It is not that I hate him: his sufferings and my own laborious care have given him some claim to my affection, if he would only be quiet and sincere, and let things remain as they are; but the more he tries to conciliate me, the more I shrink from him and from the future.

‘Helen, what do you mean to do when I get well?’ he asked this morning. ‘Will you run away again?’

‘It entirely depends upon your own conduct.’

‘Oh, I’ll be very good.’

‘But if I find it necessary to leave you, Arthur, I shall not “run away”: you know I have your own promise that I may go whenever I please, and take my son with me.’

‘Oh, but you shall have no cause.’ And then followed a variety of promises, which I rather coldly checked.

‘Will you not forgive me, then?’ said he.

‘Yes – I have forgiven you: but I know you cannot love me as you once did – and I should be sorry if you were to, for I could not pretend to return it: so let us drop the subject. I owe a higher duty to my son than to you: higher, because he never forfeited his claims, and because I hope to do him more good to him than I can ever do for you. If you wish me to feel kindly towards you, it is deeds not words which must purchase my esteem.’

His sole reply to this was a slight grimace, and a shrug. Alas, unhappy man! Words, with him, are so much cheaper than deeds. And then he sighed a querulous, self-pitying sigh, as if in pure regret that he, the loved of so many worshippers, should be now abandoned to the mercy of a harsh, exacting, cold-hearted woman.

‘It’s a pity, isn’t it?’ said I; and the remark must have chimed with his thoughts, for he answered, ‘It can’t be helped,’ with a rueful smile.

I have seen Esther Hargrave twice. She is a charming creature, but her blithe spirit is almost broken, and her sweet temper almost spoiled, by the continual persecutions of her mother on behalf of her rejected suitor – not violent, but wearisome and unremitting.

‘Mamma does all she can,’ said she, ‘to make me feel myself a burden to the family, and the most ungrateful, selfish, and undutiful daughter that ever was born; and Walter, too, is as stern and haughty as if he hated me. I believe I should have yielded at the start if I had known what resistance would have cost me; but now, for very obstinacy’s sake, I will stand fast!’

‘A bad motive for a good resolve,’ I answered. ‘But I know you have better motives for your perseverance: keep them in view.’

‘Trust me, I will. I threaten mamma sometimes that I’ll run away, and disgrace the family by earning my own livelihood, if she torments me any more; and that frightens her a little. But I will do it, if they don’t take care.’

‘Be quiet and patient a while,’ said I, ‘and better times will come.’

Poor girl! I wish somebody that was worthy of her would take her away – don’t you, Frederick?

\* \* \*

If this letter filled me with dismay for Helen’s future life and mine, there was one great source of consolation: it was now in my power to clear her name from every foul aspersion. The Millwards and the Wilsons should see with their own eyes the bright sun bursting from the cloud; and my own friends too should see it. A few words to my mother and sister, I knew, would suffice to spread the news throughout the whole neighbourhood, without any further exertion on my part.

Rose was delighted; and as soon as I had told her all I thought proper, she flew with alacrity to put on her bonnet and shawl, and hastened to carry the glad tidings to the Millwards and Wilsons – glad tidings, I suspect, to none but herself and Mary Millward, that steady, sensible girl, whose worth had been so quickly perceived by the supposed Mrs. Graham.

As I may never have occasion to mention her again, I may as well tell you here that she was at this time privately engaged to Richard Wilson. He was now at Cambridge, where his exemplary conduct and diligence eventually brought him hard-earned honours. In due time he became Mr. Millward's curate – for that gentleman's duties at last became a little too much for him.

This was what the patient, faithful lovers had quietly planned and waited for; and in due time they were united, to the astonishment of the little world they lived in, that had affirmed it impossible that the pale, retiring bookworm should ever be able to obtain a wife, and equally impossible that the plain-looking, unconciliating Miss Millward should ever find a husband. They continued to live at the vicarage, the lady dividing her time between her father, her husband, their poor parishioners, and her rising family.

If you are interested in the fate of that lady's sister Eliza, I can only tell you that some twelve or thirteen years ago she relieved the happy couple of her presence by marrying a dull but wealthy tradesman; and I don't envy him. I fear she leads him an uncomfortable life. I have little to do with her myself: we have not met for many years; but, I am assured, she has not yet forgotten or forgiven me.

As for Richard Wilson's sister, having been wholly unable to recapture Mr. Lawrence, or obtain any partner rich and elegant enough to suit her ideas, she is still in single blessedness. Shortly after the death of her mother she withdrew the light of her presence from Ryecote Farm, finding it impossible any longer to endure the unsophisticated habits of her honest brother Robert and his worthy wife, or the idea of being identified with such vulgar people. She took lodgings in a county town, where she lives in close-fisted, uncomfortable gentility, doing no good to others, and little to herself; referring frequently to her 'brother the vicar,' but never to her brother the farmer; seeing as much company as she can without too much expense, but loving no one and beloved by none – a cold-hearted, supercilious old maid.

## Chapter 49

Though Mr. Lawrence's health was now re-established, my visits to Woodford continued. We seldom talked about Mrs. Huntingdon; yet we never met without mentioning her.

If he did not refer to her, I would casually ask, 'Have you heard from your sister lately?' If he said 'No,' the matter was dropped: if he said 'Yes,' I would inquire, 'How is she?' but never 'How is her husband?' though I was burning to know. I fear I must plead guilty to not wishing for his recovery; but you must hear my justification – or at least, the excuses with which I sought to pacify my conscience.

In the first place, you see, his life did harm to others, and evidently no good to himself; and though I would not have hastened its end, I wished with all my heart that it might please heaven to remove him to a better world. If he were unfit to answer the summons now, after a warning sickness, it seemed all too certain that he never would be – that, on the contrary, returning health would bring returning lust and villainy, and his feelings would become more callous, his heart more flinty – but God knew best. Meantime, I was anxious, knowing that while he lived Helen must be miserable.

For a fortnight my inquiries about any news were answered in the negative. At length there came a welcome 'yes', and Lawrence put his sister's letter into my hand.

I silently read it, and restored it to him without comment. This procedure suited him so well that thereafter he always showed me her letters at once – it was so much less trouble than to tell me their contents; and I received such confidences quietly and discreetly.

But I devoured those precious letters with my eyes, and their contents were stamped upon my mind; when I got home, the most important passages were entered in my diary.

The first of these letters brought news of a serious relapse in Mr. Huntingdon's illness, entirely the result of his self-indulgence in drink. In vain had she remonstrated, in vain she had mingled his wine with water: her interference was so intolerable that, at length, on finding she had secretly diluted the port, he threw the bottle out of the window, and ordered the butler, on pain of dismissal, to bring a bottle of the strongest wine in the cellar. He swore that he should have been well long ago if he had been allowed to have his own way, but she wanted to keep him weak and under her thumb. With that, he seized the bottle, and did not rest till he had drunk it dry.

This resulted in alarming symptoms, which had since increased; and this was the cause of her delay in writing to her brother. Every former feature of his malady had returned with greater virulence: the slight external wound, half healed, had broken out afresh; there was internal inflammation. Of course, the wretched sufferer's temper was not improved by this calamity, though his kind nurse did not complain; but she said she had been obliged at last to give her son into the charge of Esther Hargrave, as she herself was constantly required in the sick-room. Though the child had begged to be allowed to stay and help her to nurse his papa, she could not subject his tender feelings to the sight of so much suffering, or allow him to witness his father's impatience or hear the dreadful language he used in his pain and irritation.

\* \* \*

Mr. Huntingdon (continued she) most deeply regrets the step that caused his relapse; but, as usual, he throws the blame upon me. If I had reasoned with him like a rational creature, he says, it never would have happened; but to be treated like a baby or a fool was enough to put any man past his patience. He forgets how often I had reasoned him 'past his patience' before. He appears to be aware of his danger; but nothing can induce him to behold it in the proper light. The other night, just as I had brought him a drink to assuage his burning thirst, he observed, with a return of his former sarcastic bitterness, 'Yes, you're mighty attentive now! I suppose there's nothing you wouldn't do for me now?'

'You know,' said I, a little surprised, 'that I am willing to do anything I can to relieve you.'

'Yes, now, my immaculate angel; but when once you find yourself safe in heaven, and me howling in hell-fire, catch you lifting a finger to serve me then! No, you'll look complacently on, and not so much as dip the tip of your finger in water to cool my tongue!'

'If so, it will be because of the great gulf over which I cannot pass. But are you determined, Arthur, that I shall not meet you in heaven?'

'Humph! What should I do there, I should like to know?'

'Indeed, I cannot tell; and I fear your tastes and feelings must be widely altered before you can have any enjoyment there. But do you prefer sinking into the state of torment you picture to yourself?'

'Oh, it's all a fable,' said he, contemptuously.

'Are you sure, Arthur? Because, if there is any doubt, and if you should find yourself mistaken when it is too late—'

'It would be rather awkward, to be sure,' said he; 'but don't bother me now – I'm not going to die yet. I can't and won't,' he added vehemently. 'Helen, you must save me!' And he earnestly seized my hand, and looked into my face with such imploring eagerness that my heart bled for him, and I could not speak for tears.

\* \* \*

The next letter brought news that the malady was fast increasing; and the poor sufferer's horror of death was still more distressing than his bodily pain. His friends had not all forsaken him, for Mr. Hattersley, hearing of his danger, had come to see him. His wife had accompanied him, as much for the pleasure of seeing her dear friend as to visit her mother and sister. Mrs. Huntingdon wrote that she was glad to see Milicent, and to behold her so happy and well.

\* \* \*

She is now at the Grove, (continued the letter,) but she often calls to see me. Mr. Hattersley spends much of his time at Arthur's bed-side. With more good feeling than I

gave him credit for, he shows considerable sympathy for his unhappy friend, and tries to joke and laugh with him, but that will not do. Often he endeavours to cheer him with talk about old times – this sometimes diverts the sufferer from his own sad thoughts; at other times, it will only plunge him into deeper melancholy.

Then Hattersley is confounded, and knows not what to say, unless to suggest timidly that the clergyman might be sent for. But Arthur will never consent to that: he has scoffed at the clergyman before, and cannot dream of turning to him for consolation now.

Mr. Hattersley sometimes offers his services instead of mine, but Arthur will not let me go: that strange whim still increases, to have me always by his side. I hardly ever leave him, except to go into the next room, where I might snatch an hour or so of sleep when he is quiet; but even then the door is left ajar, so that he may know I am within call.

I am with him now, while I write, and I fear my occupation annoys him; though I frequently break off to attend to him, and Mr. Hattersley is also by his side. That gentleman came to suggest that I might have a drive in the park, this fine frosty morning, with Milicent and Esther and little Arthur. Our poor invalid evidently felt it was a heartless proposition, so I said I would only go and speak to them a minute, and then come back.

I exchanged a few words with them, just outside the portico, and then, resisting the earnest entreaties of all three to stay outside a little longer, I returned to my patient. I had not been absent five minutes, but he reproached me bitterly for my neglect.

‘Nay, nay, Huntingdon,’ said Mr. Hattersley, ‘you’re too hard upon her; she must have food and sleep, and a mouthful of fresh air now and then. Look at her, man! she’s worn to a shadow already.’

‘What are her sufferings to mine?’ said the poor invalid. ‘You don’t grudge me these attentions, do you, Helen?’

‘No, Arthur, if they really help you. I would give my life to save you, if I might.’

‘Would you, indeed? No!’

‘Most willingly I would.’

‘Ah! that’s because you think yourself more fit to die!’

There was a painful pause. He was plunged in gloomy reflections; but while I pondered on what to say next, Hattersley broke the silence.

‘I say, Huntingdon, I could send for a parson: if you didn’t like the vicar, you know, you could have his curate, or somebody else.’

‘No; none of them can help me if she can’t,’ was the answer. And the tears gushed from his eyes as he earnestly exclaimed, ‘Oh, Helen, if I had listened to you, it never would have come to this! and if I had heard you long ago – oh, God! how different it would have been!’

‘Hear me now, then, Arthur,’ said I, gently pressing his hand.

‘It’s too late now,’ said he despondingly. And after that another paroxysm of pain came on; and his mind began to wander, and we feared death was approaching. An opiate was administered: his sufferings abated, he gradually became more composed, and at length sank into a kind of slumber.

Now Hattersley has left him, expressing a hope that he shall find him better when he calls tomorrow.

‘Perhaps I may recover,’ he replied; ‘who knows? This may have been the crisis. What do you think, Helen?’ I gave the most cheering answer I could, but still recommended him to prepare for the possibility of what I feared was all too certain. But he was determined to hope. Shortly after he relapsed into a kind of doze, but now he groans again.

There is a change. Suddenly he called me to his side, with such a strange, excited manner, that I feared he was delirious, but he was not.

‘That was the crisis, Helen!’ said he, delightedly. ‘I had an infernal pain here – it is quite gone now. Quite gone, by heaven!’ and he clasped and kissed my hand in the fullness of his heart; but finding I did not share his joy, he quickly flung it from him, and cursed my coldness.

How could I reply? Kneeling beside him, I took his hand and fondly pressed it to my lips – for the first time since our separation – and told him, through my tears, that it was not coldness that kept me silent: it was the fear that this sudden cessation of pain was not so favourable a symptom as he supposed. I sent for the doctor: we are now anxiously awaiting him. I will tell you what he says. There is still the same deadness to all sensation where the suffering was most acute.

My worst fears are realised: mortification has commenced. The doctor has told him there is no hope. No words can describe his anguish. I can write no more.

\* \* \*

The next letter was still more distressing. The sufferer was fast approaching death – dragged almost to the verge of that awful chasm he trembled to contemplate. Nothing could comfort him now; Hattersley’s rough attempts at consolation were utterly in vain. The world was nothing to him: life and all its interests, its petty cares and pleasures, were a cruel mockery. To talk of the past was to torture him; to refer to the future was to increase his anguish; and yet to be silent was to leave him a prey to his own apprehensions. Often he dwelt with shuddering minuteness on the fate of his physical body – the shroud, the coffin, the dark, lonely grave, and all the horrors of corruption.

‘If I try,’ said his afflicted wife, ‘to divert him from these things – to raise his thoughts to higher themes, it is no better.

“‘Worse and worse!’” he groans. “‘If there be really life beyond the tomb, and judgement after death, how can I face it?’” I cannot do him any good; he will neither be enlightened, nor comforted by anything I say; and yet he clings to me with a kind of childish desperation, as if I could save him from the fate he dreads. He keeps me night and day beside him. He is holding my left hand now, while I write; he has held it thus for hours: sometimes quietly, sometimes clutching it with violence. If I withdraw my hand for a moment it distresses him.

“‘Stay with me, Helen,’” he says; “‘let me hold you: it seems as if harm could not reach me while you are here. But death will come – it is coming now – fast, fast! – and oh, if I could believe there was nothing after!’”

“Don’t try to believe it, Arthur; there is joy and glory after, if you will but try to reach it!”

“What, for me?” he said, with something like a laugh. “Are we not to be judged according to our deeds? Can a man spend his life just as he pleases, contrary to God’s decrees, and then go to heaven with the holiest saint, by merely saying, *I repent!*”

“But if you sincerely repent—”

“I can’t repent; I only fear.”

“You only regret the past for its consequences to yourself?”

“Just so – except that I’m sorry to have wronged you, Nell, because you’re so good to me.”

“Think of the goodness of God, and you must be grieved to have offended Him.”

“What is God? I cannot see or hear Him. God is only an idea.”

“God is Infinite Wisdom, and Power, and Goodness – and Love; but if this idea is too vast and overwhelming, fix your mind on Christ, who took our nature upon Him, who was raised to heaven in His glorified human body, in whom the fullness of the Godhead shines.”

‘But he only shook his head and sighed. Then, in another paroxysm of shuddering horror, he tightened his grasp on my hand, and, groaning, still clung to me with that wild, desperate earnestness so harrowing to my soul. I did my best to soothe him.

“Death is so terrible,” he cried, “I cannot bear it! You don’t know, Helen – you can’t imagine what it is! and when I’m buried, you’ll return to your old ways and be as happy as ever, and all the world will go on just as busy and merry as if I had never been; while I —” He burst into tears.

“You needn’t let that distress you,” I said; “we shall all follow you soon enough.”

“I wish to God I could take you with me now!” he exclaimed: “you could plead for me.”

“No man can make an agreement unto God about his brother,” I replied. “Let Christ plead for you.”

‘But I seem to speak in vain. He no longer laughs and scorns those blessed truths: but still he cannot trust, nor comprehend them. He cannot linger long. He suffers dreadfully; and so do those who look after him. But I will not harass you with further details: I have said enough, I think, to convince you that I did well to go to him.’

\* \* \*

Poor, poor Helen! dreadful indeed her trials must have been! And I could do nothing to lessen them – nay, I felt as if I had brought them upon her by my own secret desires; and it seemed almost like a judgment upon me for having cherished such a wish.

The next day but one there came another letter. That too was put into my hands without a remark. These are its contents:

\* \* \*

Dec. 5th.

He is gone at last. I sat beside him all night, with my hand locked in his, watching the changes of his features and listening to his failing breath. He had been silent a long time, and I thought he would never speak again, when he murmured, faintly but distinctly, 'Pray for me, Helen!'

'I do pray for you, every hour and every minute, Arthur; but you must pray for yourself.'

His lips moved, but emitted no sound. Then his looks became unsettled; and, from the incoherent, half-uttered words that escaped him from time to time, I supposed him to be now unconscious, and gently disengaged my hand from his, intending to steal away for a breath of air. But a convulsive movement of the fingers, and a faintly whispered 'Don't leave me!' immediately recalled me: I took his hand again, and held it till he was no more – and then I fainted. It was not grief; it was exhaustion.

Oh, Frederick! none can imagine the miseries, bodily and mental, of that death-bed! How could I endure to think that that poor trembling soul was hurried away to everlasting torment? It would drive me mad.

But, thank God, I have hope – not only from a vague possibility that penitence and pardon might have reached him at the last, but from the blessed confidence that, whatever fate awaits his erring spirit, still it is not lost, and God, who hateth nothing that He hath made, will bless it in the end!

His body will be consigned on Thursday to the grave he so much dreaded. If you will attend the funeral, come quickly, for I need help.

Helen Huntingdon.

## Chapter 50

On reading this I had no reason to disguise my joy and hope from Frederick Lawrence, for they were not shameful. I felt joy that his sister was at length released from her overwhelming toil – and hope that she would in time recover from its effects, and be allowed peace and quietness. I felt painful commiseration for her unhappy husband (though he had brought his sufferings upon himself,) and a profound sympathy for her afflictions.

‘You will go to her, Lawrence?’ said I.

‘Yes, immediately. The carriage is coming to the door now.’

He gave me a searching glance as we pressed each other’s hands; but whatever he sought in my face, he saw there nothing but the most becoming gravity – perhaps mingled with a little sternness in momentary resentment at what I suspected to be passing in his mind.

It was with a gloomy sense of the darkness of my prospects, the fallacy of my hopes, that I remounted my horse and slowly journeyed homewards.

Mrs. Huntingdon was free now; it was no longer a crime to think of her – but did she ever think of me? Or rather, would she, when this shock was over? In all her correspondence with her brother she had never mentioned me except once. Maybe this showed that I was already forgotten; or it might have been her sense of duty that had kept her silent: she might be trying to forget.

But what was worse, I had a gloomy conviction that the awful realities she had seen and felt, the dreadful sufferings and death of the man she had once loved, must efface from her mind all traces of her love for me. She might recover from these horrors so far as to be restored to her former health and tranquillity – but never to those feelings, which would appear to her as a fleeting fancy, a vain, illusive dream; especially as there was no one to remind her of my existence, now that we were so far apart.

And how could I engage her brother in my behalf? Perhaps he would disapprove of my attachment; perhaps he would think me too poor and lowly born. Yes, that was another barrier: the wide distinction between the rank of Mrs. Huntingdon, the lady of Grassdale Manor, and Mrs. Graham, the artist, the tenant of Wildfell Hall. It might be thought presumptuous of me to offer my hand to the former.

Finally, her deceased husband, with his usual selfishness, might have made his will so as to place restrictions upon her marrying again. So you see I had reasons enough for despair if I chose to indulge it.

Nevertheless, I looked forward impatiently to Mr. Lawrence’s return. He stayed away some ten or twelve days. All very right that he should remain to comfort her, but he might have written to tell me how she was; for he might have known I was suffering tortures of anxiety, and uncertainty for my future prospects.

And when he did return, all he told me was that she had been greatly exhausted by her unremitting exertions in behalf of that man who had been the scourge of her life, and was still much shaken and depressed by his melancholy end. There was no word of me; no hint that my name had ever passed her lips.

To be sure, I asked no questions on the subject, since I believed that Lawrence was averse to the idea of my union with his sister. I saw that he expected to be questioned further, and that he rather shrank from that scrutiny, and was pleased and surprised to find it did not come. Of course, I was burning with anger, but pride obliged me to suppress my feelings, and preserve a stoic calmness with him. It was well it did, for on reflection it would have been highly absurd to have quarrelled with him on such an occasion.

I must confess, too, that I wronged him: the truth was, he liked me very well, but he was fully aware that a union between Mrs. Huntingdon and me would be what the world calls a mesalliance – an unequal match; and it was not in his nature to set the world at defiance. Had he known how fervently I loved her, he would have acted differently; but seeing me so calm and cool, he did not disturb my tranquillity.

‘And he was right,’ you will say. Perhaps he was; at any rate, I had no business to feel so bitterly against him as I did; but I went away suffering pangs of wounded pride and injured friendship, in addition to the fear that I was forgotten, and the knowledge that she I loved was alone and in poor health and dejected spirits, while I was forbidden to console her: forbidden even to assure her of my sympathy.

But what should I do? I would wait, and see if she would notice me, which of course she would not, unless by some kind message entrusted to her brother, that he probably would not deliver to me – and then, dreadful thought! she would think me cooled and changed for not replying.

Or perhaps he had already told her that I had ceased to think of her. I would wait, however, till the six months after our parting were passed, and then I would send her a letter, modestly reminding her that I had her permission to write after that period, and expressing my heartfelt sorrow for her afflictions, and my hope that she would, some time, be permitted to enjoy that peaceful, happy life, which had been denied her so long. I would add a few words of kind remembrance to my little friend Arthur, and perhaps a few more words about delightful bygone hours. If she did not answer this, of course I should write no more.

Ten weeks was long to wait in such a miserable state of uncertainty; but courage! It must be endured! Meantime I saw Lawrence now and then, and I asked after his sister – how she was, but nothing more.

The answers I received were provokingly limited: she was much as usual: she made no complaints, but her last letter showed great depression of mind: then she said she was better: and, finally, she said she was well, and very busy with her son’s education, and the management of her late husband’s property. I did not know whether Mr. Huntingdon had died intestate, and I would sooner die than ask Lawrence.

February, however, was approaching. December was past; January, at length, was almost over – a few more weeks, and then, certain despair or renewal of hope would put an end to this long agony of suspense.

But alas! Just then she received another blow, in the death of her uncle – a worthless old fellow in himself, I daresay, but he had always shown more kindness to her than to any other creature, and she had been accustomed to regard him as a parent. She was with him when he died, and had helped her aunt to nurse him.

Her brother went to Staningley to attend the funeral, and, upon his return, told me that she was still there, trying to cheer her aunt, and likely to remain some time. This was bad news for me, for while she stayed there I could not write to her, as I would not ask him the address. But week followed week, and every time I inquired about her she was still at Staningley.

‘Where is Staningley?’ I asked at last.

‘In —shire,’ was the brief reply; given so coldly that I was deterred from requesting more details.

‘When will she return to Grassdale?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Confound it!’ I muttered.

‘Why, Markham?’ asked my companion, with an air of innocent surprise. But I did not deign to answer him, save by a look of sullen contempt, at which he turned away, and contemplated the carpet with a slight smile; but then looking up, he began to talk of other subjects, trying to draw me into friendly conversation. I was too much irritated to talk with him, and soon took my leave.

You see Lawrence and I somehow could not manage to get on very well together. The fact is, I believe, we were both of us a little too touchy. It is a troublesome thing, Halford, this susceptibility to affronts where none are intended. I have learned to be merry and wise now, to be more easy with myself and more indulgent to my neighbours, as you can bear witness.

Several weeks elapsed before I saw my friend again. One bright morning, early in June, he came into the field, where I was commencing my hay harvest.

‘It is a long time since I saw you, Markham,’ said he. ‘Do you never mean to come to Woodford again?’

‘I called once, and you were out.’

‘I hoped you would call again, and now I’ve called, and you were out, which you generally are; but being determined to see you, I have come over hedge and ditch to join you. I am about to leave Woodford for a while, and may not have the pleasure of seeing you again for a month or two.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘To Grassdale first,’ said he, with a half-smile.

‘To Grassdale! Is she there, then?’

‘Yes, but in a day or two she will leave, to accompany her aunt, Mrs. Maxwell, to F— for the benefit of the sea air, and I shall go with them.’

Lawrence seemed to expect me to entrust him with some sort of a message to his sister; and I believe he would have delivered it, if I had had the sense to ask him. But I could not bring myself to ask, and it was not till after he was gone, that I saw how good an opportunity I had lost. I deeply regretted my stupidity and foolish pride, but it was too late.

He did not return till the end of August. He wrote to me twice or thrice from F—, but his letters were provokingly unsatisfactory, dealing in trifles that I cared nothing about, saying next to nothing about his sister. I would wait, however, till he came back; perhaps I could get more out of him then. At all events, I would not write to her now, while she

was with him and her aunt, who doubtless would be hostile to my aspirations. When she was returned to the solitude of her own home, I would write.

When Lawrence came, however, he was as reserved as ever. He told me that his sister had derived considerable benefit from her stay at F—, that her son was quite well, and alas! that both of them were gone, with Mrs. Maxwell, back to Staningley.

But instead of boring you with my disappointments, my fluctuations of dull despondency and flickering hope, I will employ myself in settling the business of one or two of the characters introduced in this narrative, whom I may not have occasion to mention again.

Some time before Mr. Huntingdon's death, Lady Lowborough eloped with another gallant to the Continent, where, having lived a while in reckless gaiety and dissipation, they quarrelled and parted. She went dashing on for a season, but years came and money went: she sunk, at length, in debt, disgrace and misery; and died at last, as I have heard, in penury and utter wretchedness. But this might be only a report: she may be living yet for all her relatives can tell, for they lost sight of her years ago, and would forget her if they could.

Her husband, upon this second misdemeanour, immediately obtained a divorce, and, not long after, married again. Lord Lowborough, morose and moody as he seemed, was not the man for a bachelor's life. He had a son and a daughter, but they reminded him too painfully of their mother, and poor little Annabella was a source of perpetual bitterness to his soul. He forced himself not to hate her, and even, perhaps, to feel some degree of kindly regard for her, at last, in return for her artless attachment; but he was afflicted with self-condemnation for his inward feelings towards her, and was tempted to return to the vice of his youth, and seek oblivion for his misery.

The second object of his choice was widely different from the first. Some wondered at his taste; some even ridiculed it. The lady was about his own age – between thirty and forty – remarkable for no beauty, nor wealth, nor brilliant accomplishments; nor any other thing except genuine good sense, unswerving integrity, warm-hearted benevolence, and a fund of cheerful spirits. These qualities, as you may readily imagine, made her an excellent mother to the children, and an invaluable wife to his lordship. He thought her too good for him, and did his best to reciprocate the good she did him – so successfully that she was, and still is, one of the happiest and fondest wives in England.

If you are at all interested in the fate of that low scoundrel, Grimsby, I can only tell you that he went from bad to worse, sinking deeper into vice and villainy, consorting with the lowest dregs of society until at last he met his end in a drunken brawl; from the hands, it is said, of some brother scoundrel he had cheated at play.

As for Mr. Hattersley, the last illness and death of his once jolly friend Huntingdon so deeply impressed him with the evil of their former practices that he never needed another lesson. Avoiding the temptations of the town, he passes his life in the country, immersed in the pursuits of a hearty, active gentleman; farming, and breeding horses and cattle, a little hunting and shooting, enjoying the companionship of better friends than formerly, and the society of his happy little wife and his fine family of stalwart sons and blooming daughters.

## Chapter 51

We will now turn to a cold, cloudy afternoon in early December, when the first fall of snow lay thinly scattered over the blighted fields and frozen roads, or was stored more thickly in the hollows of the deep cart-ruts. I remember it well, for I was walking home from the vicarage with Miss Eliza Millward by my side.

I had been to call upon her father – entirely to please my mother, not myself, for I hated to go near the house; not merely on account of my antipathy to Eliza, but because I had not forgiven the old gentleman for his ill opinion of Mrs. Huntingdon. For he still maintained that she had done wrong to leave her husband; it was a violation of her sacred duties as a wife, and nothing short of bodily ill-usage could excuse such a step – and even then she ought to appeal to the law for protection.

As I was taking leave of the vicar, Eliza entered the room, dressed for a walk.

‘I was just coming to see your sister, Mr. Markham,’ said she; ‘and if you have no objection, I’ll accompany you home.’ So we left together.

‘Shall I find Rose at home, do you think?’ said she, as we set out towards Linden-Car.

‘I believe so.’

‘I trust so, for I’ve a bit of news for her – if you haven’t forestalled me.’

‘I?’

‘Yes: do you know what Mr. Lawrence is gone for?’

‘Is he gone?’ said I; and her face brightened.

‘Ah! then he hasn’t told you about his sister?’

‘What of her?’ I demanded in terror, lest some evil should have befallen her.

‘Oh, Mr. Markham, how you blush!’ cried she, with a tormenting laugh. ‘Ha, ha, you have not forgotten her yet. But you had better be quick about it, I can tell you, for alas! she’s going to be married next Thursday!’

‘No, Miss Eliza, that’s false.’

‘Do you charge me with a falsehood, sir?’

‘You are misinformed.’

‘Am I? Do you know better, then?’

‘I think I do.’

‘What makes you look so pale then?’ said she, smiling with delight. ‘I’m only telling you what I was told: I don’t promise the truth of it; but I don’t see what reason Sarah should have for deceiving me, or her informant for deceiving her; and that was what she said the footman told her: that Mrs. Huntingdon was going to be married on Thursday, and Mr. Lawrence was gone to the wedding. She did tell me the name of the gentleman, but I’ve forgotten. Is there not some one that lives near, that has long been attached to her? a Mr.–?’

‘Hargrave?’ suggested I, with a bitter smile.

‘You’re right,’ cried she; ‘that was the very name.’

‘Impossible, Miss Eliza!’ I exclaimed, in a tone that made her start.

‘Well, you know, that’s what they told me,’ said she. And then she broke out into a long shrill laugh. ‘Really you must excuse me,’ cried she. ‘I know it’s very rude, but ha, ha, ha! –did you think to marry her yourself? Dear, dear, what a pity! Ha, ha, ha! Gracious, Mr. Markham, are you going to faint? What can I do for you? Will you have some water – some brandy? I daresay they have some in the public-house down there.’

‘Have done with this nonsense!’ cried I, sternly. She looked confounded – almost frightened, for a moment. ‘You know I hate such jests,’ I continued.

‘I wasn’t jesting!’

‘You were laughing; and I don’t like to be laughed at,’ returned I, making a violent efforts to speak sensibly, with dignity and composure. ‘And since you are in such a merry mood, Miss Eliza, you must keep yourself company; for I have business elsewhere; so good-evening.’

With that I left her (smothering her malicious laughter) and turned aside into the fields, springing up the bank, and pushing through the nearest gap in the hedge. Determined at once to prove the truth – or rather the falsehood – of her story, I hastened to Woodford as fast as I could; over pasture-land and lane, clearing hedges and ditches and hurdles, till I came to the young squire’s gates.

Never till now had I known the full fervour of my love – the full strength of my hopes, never wholly crushed, always tenaciously clinging to the thought that one day she might be mine, or, if not, that at least that her memory of me would be for ever cherished in her heart. I marched up to the door, determined to question Lawrence boldly about his sister, to hesitate no longer, but know my fate at once.

‘Is Mr. Lawrence at home?’ I eagerly asked of the servant that opened the door.

‘No, sir, master went yesterday,’ replied he.

‘Went where?’

‘To Grassdale, sir – wasn’t you aware, sir? I suppose, sir—’

But I turned and left him, without waiting to hear what he supposed. What was to be done? Could it be possible that she had left me for that man? I could not believe it. She might forsake me, but not to give herself to him!

Well, I would know the truth; I would take the morning coach, and fly to Grassdale. I must be there before the marriage.

And why? Because a thought struck me that perhaps I might prevent it – that if I did not, she and I might both lament it all our lives. I thought that her brother might well have persuaded her that I was false and faithless, and had urged her, artfully, cruelly, on to this other marriage, in order to secure her from me. If this was the case, and if she should only discover her mistake too late – to what a miserable life of vain regret might we both be doomed! And to think my foolish scruples had induced it all!

Oh, I must see her – she must know my truth even if I told it at the church door! I might pass for a madman or an impertinent fool – she might tell me it was now too late. But if I could save her, if she might be mine! It was too rapturous a thought!

Winged by this hope, and goaded by these fears, I hurried homewards to prepare for my departure. I told my mother that urgent business called me away. I could not conceal my deep anxiety from her maternal eyes; and I had to try and calm her apprehensions of some disastrous mystery.

That night there came a heavy fall of snow, which so retarded the progress of the coaches on the following day that I was almost driven to distraction. I travelled all night, for this was Wednesday: tomorrow morning, doubtless, the marriage would take place. But the night was long and dark: the snow clogged the wheels and slowed the horses; the coachman was infuriatingly cautious, and the passengers apathetic and indifferent to our lack of speed. Instead of joining me in urging the coachmen forward, they merely stared and grinned at my impatience: and when, at the last stage, I would have taken the reins into my own hand, they with one accord opposed it.

It was broad daylight when we entered M— and drew up at the ‘Rose and Crown.’ I alighted and called for a post-chaise to Grassdale. There was none to be had: the only one in the town was under repair.

‘A gig, then – anything – only be quick!’ There was a gig, but no horse to spare. I sent into the town to seek one: but they were such an intolerable time about it that I could wait no longer – so I told them to send the gig on after me, and I set off on foot.

The distance was little more than six miles, but the road was strange, and I had to keep stopping to inquire my way at cottages; sometimes knocking up the lazy people from their beds, for where there was so little work, and perhaps so little food and fire to be had, they did not curtail their slumbers. I had no time to think of them, however; aching with weariness and desperation, I hurried on.

At length I entered the neighbourhood of Grassdale. I approached the little rural church – but there stood a train of carriages before it, bedecked with white favours. The merry voices of the village idlers assembled there told me that there was a wedding within. I demanded, with breathless eagerness, had the ceremony long commenced? They only gaped and stared.

In my desperation, I pushed past them, and was about to enter at the churchyard gate, when a group of ragged urchins, that had been hanging like bees by the window, suddenly made a rush for the porch, crying, ‘It’s over – they’re coming out!’

If Eliza Millward had seen me then she might indeed have been delighted. I grasped the gate-post for support, and stood intently gazing towards the door to take my last look on my soul’s delight. I did not wish to shock her with my presence now, but I had not power to move away.

Forth came the bride and bridegroom. Him I saw not; I had eyes for none but her. A long veil shrouded half her graceful form, but did not hide it; I could see that while she carried her head erect, her eyes were bent upon the ground, and her face and neck were suffused with a crimson blush; but every feature was radiant with smiles, and gleaming through the misty whiteness of her veil were clusters of golden ringlets! Oh, heavens! it was not my Helen!

It was a younger, slighter, rosier beauty – lovely indeed, but with far less dignity and depth of soul – without that indefinable grace, that gentle charm, that power to subjugate the heart – my heart at least. I looked at the bridegroom – it was Frederick Lawrence! I wiped away the cold drops that were trickling down my forehead, and stepped back as he approached; but his eyes fell upon me.

‘Is that you, Markham?’ said he, startled at my presence and perhaps, too, at the wildness of my looks.

‘Yes, Lawrence; is that you?’

He smiled and coloured, as if half-proud and half-ashamed; and if he had reason to be proud of the sweet lady on his arm, he had cause to be ashamed of having concealed his good fortune.

‘Allow me to introduce you to my bride,’ said he. ‘Esther, this is Mr. Markham; my friend Markham, Mrs. Lawrence, formerly Miss Hargrave.’

I bowed to the bride, and wrung the bridegroom’s hand.

‘Why did you not tell me of this?’ I said, reproachfully, pretending a resentment I did not feel (for in truth I was almost wild with joy to find myself so happily mistaken.)

‘I did tell you,’ said he, with an air of guilty confusion; ‘you received my letter?’

‘No.’

‘It must have crossed you on your way then; it should have reached you yesterday morning. It was rather late, I acknowledge. But then what brought you here?’

It was now my turn to be confounded; but the young lady came to my assistance by pinching her companion’s arm and whispering a suggestion that his friend should be invited to step into the carriage and go with them.

‘Markham, will you come?’ said he. ‘We are going to Paris, but we can drop you anywhere between here and Dover.’

‘No, thank you. Good-bye – I needn’t wish you a pleasant journey; but I shall expect a very handsome apology, mind, and scores of letters, before we meet again.’

He shook my hand, and took his place beside his lady. This was no time or place for explanation: I stood beside the carriage, and through its window saw my happy friend fondly encircle his companion’s waist with his arm, while she rested her glowing cheek on his shoulder in loving, trusting bliss.

‘What is this?’ he murmured. ‘Why, Esther, you’re crying!’

‘Oh, it’s nothing – only too much happiness – and I wish,’ sobbed she, ‘that our dear Helen were as happy as ourselves.’

‘Bless you for that wish!’ I answered inwardly, as the carriage rolled away.

But I thought a cloud had suddenly darkened her husband’s face as she spoke. Could he grudge such happiness to his dear sister and his friend as he now felt himself? The contrast between her fate and his must darken his bliss for a time.

Perhaps he regretted the part he had had in preventing our union, by omitting to help us. He had passively watched our two currents wandering through life’s arid wilderness, declining to clear away the obstructions that divided them, and secretly hoping that both would lose themselves in the sand before they could be joined in one.

Or perhaps his heart and head had been so full of his fair lady that he had had little thought to spare for others. Doubtless he had first met her during his three months’ stay by the sea, for I now recollected that he had casually hinted that his aunt and sister had a young friend staying with them at the time. Now I saw a reason for many little things that had slightly puzzled me; absences for which he never satisfactorily accounted, and about which he hated to be questioned. But why this strange reserve? Partly, perhaps, from tenderness to my feelings, or fear to disturb me by touching on the theme of love.

## Chapter 52

The tardy gig arrived at last. I told the driver to take me to Grassdale Manor. I would see Mrs. Huntingdon; there could be no impropriety in that, now that her husband had been dead above a year. By her reaction on seeing me I could tell whether her heart was truly mine. But my companion would not leave me to my thoughts.

‘There they go!’ said he, as the carriages filed away before us. ‘Know anything of the Hargrave family, sir?’

‘I know them by report.’

‘Humph! There’s the best of ’em gone, anyhow. And I suppose the old missis is a-going to take herself off, now that the young missis – at least the new ’un (she’s none so very young) – is coming down to live at the Grove.’

‘Is Mr. Hargrave married, then?’

‘Ay, sir, a few months since. He should a been wed afore, to a widow lady, but they couldn’t agree over the money, so they fell out. This one isn’t quite as rich, nor as handsome either. She’s very plain, they say, and getting on to forty, and so, you know, I guess she thought if she didn’t jump at this hopportunity, she’d never have a better. She got a handsome young husband, but she’ll rue her bargain afore long. They say she begins already to see that he isn’t that nice, generous, perlite gentleman she thought him. He’s being careless already, and she’ll find him harder and carelesser nor she thinks on.’

‘You seem to be well acquainted with him,’ I observed.

‘I am, sir; I’ve known him since he was quite young; and proud and wilful he was. I was servant yonder for several years, but I couldn’t stand their miserly ways; so I found another place. Here’s the park of Grassdale Manor, sir.’

My heart sank as I beheld that stately mansion in its expansive grounds. The park was beautiful in its wintry garb: its majestic sweep displayed to full advantage in that robe of dazzling snow, printless save for one long, winding track left by the trooping deer. The timber-trees with their heavy-laden branches gleaming white against the dull, grey sky; the deep, encircling woods; the broad expanse of water sleeping in frozen quiet – all presented a picture that was pleasing, but not encouraging. There was one comfort: all this was entailed upon little Arthur, and could not be his mother’s.

But how was she situated? I asked my companion if he knew whether her late husband had left a will. Oh, yes, he knew all about it; to her had been left the full control of the estate during her son’s minority, besides her own fortune (but I knew that her father had not given her much), and the small additional sum that had been settled upon her before marriage.

We drew up at the park-gates. Now for the trial. But when I inquired at the porter’s lodge, I was told that Mrs. Huntingdon was staying with her aunt; for she spent most of her time at Staningley, only occasionally coming to Grassdale.

‘Now then, my man, give me the reins,’ I said to the driver; ‘and we’ll return to the “Rose and Crown.”’

At the Rose and Crown I ate a hearty breakfast, and dispatched a short note to my mother to assure her that I was still in existence, and to excuse my absence. It was a long

journey to Staningley, but I stopped for refreshment on the road, and even a night's rest at an inn, choosing rather to delay a little than to present myself worn, wild, and weather-beaten before my mistress and her aunt.

Next morning, therefore, I gave more than usual time and care to my appearance; with well-brushed clothes, well-polished boots, and neat new gloves, I mounted the 'Lightning' coach, and resumed my journey. Having asked to be set down as near Staningley Hall, I had nothing to do but to sit and speculate upon the coming hour.

It was a clear, frosty morning. Sitting exalted aloft, surveying the snowy landscape and sunny sky, inhaling the pure, bracing air, and crunching away over the crisp frozen snow, was exhilarating in itself; but when I thought of her whom I hoped to meet, my heart swelled with unspeakable delight, and my spirits rose almost to madness. I made myself consider the difference between Helen's rank and mine; her long, unbroken silence; and her cool, cautious aunt. These considerations made my heart flutter with anxiety, and my chest heave with impatience; but they could not dim her image in my mind.

Towards the end of the journey, however, a couple of my fellow-passengers kindly came to my assistance, and brought me low enough.

'Fine land this,' said one of them, pointing with his umbrella to the wide fields; 'very fine land, if you saw it in the summer or spring.'

'Ay,' responded the other, a gruff elderly man. 'It's old Maxwell's, I suppose.'

'It was, sir; but he's dead now, and has left it all to his niece. Mansion-house and all! except a trifle to his nephew, and an annuity to his wife.'

'It's strange, sir!'

'It is, sir. But he had no near relations; and he always had a partiality for this one. And his wife wished this lady should have it.'

'Humph! She'll be a fine catch for somebody.'

'She will so. She's a widow, but quite young, and uncommon handsome, and only one child. I should think she'll marry none but a nobleman. Look ye, sir,' resumed he, pointing past me with his umbrella, 'that's the Hall: grand park, you see, and all them woods – plenty of timber there.'

The coach suddenly stopped at the park-gates.

'Gen'leman for Staningley Hall?' cried the coachman; and I rose and threw my carpet-bag on to the ground. The coachman drove away, leaving me but pacing to and fro before the gates, with eyes fixed on the ground, an overwhelming force of images and thoughts crowding on my mind, and nothing tangibly distinct but this: my love had been cherished in vain – my hope was gone; I must tear myself away at once, and banish all thoughts of her, like the remembrance of a wild, mad dream.

Gladly would I have lingered, but it must not be – I must not let her see me. For could I bear her to think I was presuming upon the acquaintance – the love, if you will – accidentally contracted when she was an unknown fugitive? Now, when she was reinstated in her proper sphere, how could I claim a share in her prosperity?

And when we had parted sixteen months ago, she had expressly forbidden me to hope for a re-union in this world, and never sent me a line or a message from that day to this. No! The very idea was intolerable.

And even if she should have a lingering affection for me still, ought I to disturb her peace by awakening those feelings? To subject her to the struggles of conflicting duty and inclination? To ask her to sacrifice her wishes to the feelings of her friends and her own sense of the fitness of things? No – and I would not! I would go at once, and she should never know that I had approached the place: her peace should not be broken by my presence.

‘Adieu then, dear Helen, forever!’

So said I – and yet I could not tear myself away. I looked back for one last view of her stately home, then walked a few steps further; and lost in melancholy musings, paused and leant against a rough old tree that grew beside the road.

## Chapter 53

While I stood thus, absorbed in my gloomy reverie, a gentleman's carriage came round the corner. I did not look at it; but a tiny voice from within roused me by exclaiming, 'Mamma, mamma, here's Mr. Markham!'

A clear melodious voice, whose tones thrilled through my nerves, exclaimed, 'Oh, aunt! here's Mr. Markham, Arthur's friend! Stop, Richard!'

There was such joyous though suppressed excitement in those few words – especially that tremulous, 'Oh, aunt!' – that it threw me almost off my guard. The carriage stopped immediately, and I looked up and met the eye of a grave, elderly lady surveying me from the window.

She bowed, and so did I, while Arthur screamed to the footman to let him out; but before the footman could descend from his box, a hand was put forth from the carriage window. I knew that hand, though a black glove concealed it, and quickly seizing it, I pressed it in my own – ardently for a moment, but instantly recollecting myself, I dropped it, and it was withdrawn.

'Were you coming to see us, or only passing by?' asked the low voice of its owner, who, I felt, was attentively surveying me from behind the thick black veil which concealed her face.

'I – I came to see the place,' I faltered.

'The place,' repeated she, in a tone of disappointment. 'Will you not enter it, then?'

'If you wish it.'

'Can you doubt it?'

'Yes, yes! he must come in,' cried Arthur, running round from the other door; and seizing my hand, he shook it heartily.

'Do you remember me, sir?' said he.

'Yes, very well, my little man,' replied I, surveying the slim young gentleman, with his mother's intelligent features, and bright locks clustering beneath his cap.

'Am I not grown?' said he, stretching himself up to his full height.

'Three inches, upon my word!'

'I was seven last birthday,' was the proud rejoinder.

'Arthur,' said his mother, 'tell him to come in. Drive on, Richard.'

There was a touch of sadness as well as coldness in her voice, but I knew not why. The carriage drove on and entered the gates before us. My little companion led me up the park, talking merrily all the way. At the hall-door, I paused on the steps and looked round me, trying to recover my composure, and to remember my new-formed resolutions. Arthur had been gently pulling my coat for some time before I at length accompanied him into the house, where the ladies awaited us.

As I entered Helen eyed me with a kind of gentle, serious scrutiny, and politely asked after Mrs. Markham and Rose. Mrs. Maxwell begged me to be seated.

'Here's Rachel, sir,' said Arthur, the only truly happy one amongst us. Rachel had just entered to take her mistress's things. She gave me an almost friendly smile of recognition.

When Helen took off her dark bonnet and veil and heavy winter cloak, she looked so like herself that I knew not how to bear it. I was particularly glad to see her beautiful black hair, unconcealed in its glossy luxuriance.

‘Mamma has left off her widow’s cap in honour of uncle’s marriage,’ observed Arthur, with a child’s simplicity. Mamma looked grave and Mrs. Maxwell shook her head. ‘And aunt Maxwell is never going to leave off hers,’ he persisted; but then he went to his aunt and silently put his arm round her neck, kissed her cheek, and withdrew to one of the great bay-windows with his dog.

Mrs. Maxwell gravely discussed with me the interesting topics of the weather, the season, and the roads. Her presence was a useful check upon my natural impulses. My tumultuous excitement would otherwise have carried me away; but I felt the restraint almost intolerable, and I had the greatest difficulty in forcing myself to answer her remarks with ordinary politeness; for I was aware that Helen was standing within a few feet of me. I dared not look at her, but I felt her eye upon me, and from one hasty, furtive glance, I thought her cheek was slightly flushed, and that her fingers, as she played with her watch-chain, were restless with agitation.

‘Tell me,’ said she, in the first pause in the conversation, and speaking with her eyes bent on the gold chain, ‘Tell me how you all are at Linden-hope – has nothing happened since I left you?’

‘I believe not.’

‘Nobody dead? nobody married?’

‘No.’

‘Or – or expecting to marry? No new ties formed? no old friends forgotten or supplanted?’

She dropped her voice low in the last sentence, and at the same time turned her eyes upon me with a dawning smile, most sweetly melancholy, and a look of timid though keen inquiry that made my cheeks tingle.

‘I believe not,’ I answered. ‘Certainly not, if others are as little changed as I.’ Her face glowed.

‘And you really did not mean to call?’ she exclaimed.

‘I feared to intrude.’

‘To intrude!’ cried she, with an impatient gesture. Then, as if suddenly recollecting her aunt’s presence, she turned to her, continuing, ‘Why, aunt, this man is my brother’s close friend, and was my own friend, (for a few short months at least), and professed a great attachment to my boy – and when he passes the house, so far from his home, he declines to look in for fear of intruding!’

‘Mr. Markham is over-modest,’ observed Mrs. Maxwell.

‘Over-ceremonious rather,’ said her niece. ‘Well, it’s no matter.’ And turning from me, she seated herself in a chair beside the table, and pulling a book over, began to turn the pages energetically.

‘If I had known,’ said I, ‘that you remembered me as a friend, I should not have denied myself the pleasure of calling upon you, but I thought you had forgotten me long ago.’

‘You judged of others by yourself,’ muttered she without raising her eyes from the book.

There was a pause, during which Arthur introduced his handsome young dog, and showed me how wonderfully it was grown, and asked after its father Sancho. Mrs. Maxwell withdrew to take off her things.

Helen immediately pushed the book away, and after silently surveying her son, asked him to fetch his last new book to show me. The child obeyed with alacrity, leaving the room; but I continued caressing the dog. In half a minute, my hostess impatiently rose, and standing on the hearth-rug, earnestly exclaimed—

‘Gilbert, what is the matter with you? Why are you so changed? It is a very indiscreet question, I know,’ she hastened to add: ‘perhaps a very rude one – but I hate mysteries and concealments.’

‘I am not changed, Helen. I am, unfortunately, as keen and passionate as ever. It is not I, it is circumstances that are changed.’

‘What circumstances? Do tell me!’ Her cheek was pale with anxiety – could it be with the fear that I had pledged my faith to another?

‘I will confess that I came here to see you (not without some misgivings at my own presumption,) but I did not know that this estate was yours until enlightened by two fellow-passengers in the last stage of my journey; and then I saw at once the folly of my hopes, and the madness of cherishing them a moment longer. Though I alighted at your gates, I determined not to enter them; I merely lingered a few minutes to see the place, before returning home.’

‘And if my aunt and I had not been just returning from our morning drive, I should have seen no more of you?’

‘I thought it would be better for both that we should not meet,’ replied I, as calmly as I could, but not daring to look in her face lest my firmness should forsake me altogether. ‘I thought an interview would only disturb your peace and madden me. But I am glad, now, of this opportunity of seeing you once more and knowing that you have not forgotten me, and of assuring you that I shall never cease to remember you.’

There was a moment’s pause. Mrs. Huntingdon moved away, and stood in the window. Did she regard this as a hint that modesty alone prevented me from asking her hand? and was she considering how to repulse me? Before I could speak, she suddenly turning towards me, observing—

‘You might have assured me of your kindly recollections, before now, if you had written to me.’

‘I would have done so, but I did not know your address, and did not like to ask your brother, because I thought he would object to my writing; this would not have deterred me if I could have believed that you expected to hear from me, but your silence naturally led me to think I was forgotten.’

‘Did you expect me to write to you, then?’

‘No, Helen – Mrs. Huntingdon,’ said I, ‘certainly not; but if you had sent me a message through your brother, or even asked him about me now and then—’

‘I did ask about you frequently.’

‘Your brother never told me that you had mentioned my name.’

‘Did you ever ask him?’

‘No; for I saw he did not wish to be questioned about you, or to afford the slightest encouragement to my attachment.’ Helen did not reply. ‘And he was perfectly right,’ added I. But she remained in silence, looking out upon the snowy lawn.

‘Oh, I will relieve her of my presence,’ thought I; and I rose to take my leave, with a most heroic resolution.

‘Are you going already?’ said she, taking the hand I offered.

‘Why should I stay any longer?’

‘Wait till Arthur comes, at least.’

Only too glad to obey, I leant against the opposite side of the window.

‘You told me you were not changed,’ said she: ‘you are, very much so.’

‘No, Mrs. Huntingdon, I only ought to be.’

‘Do you mean that you have the same regard for me that you had when last we met?’

‘I have; but it would be wrong to talk of it now.’

‘It was wrong to talk of it then, Gilbert; it would not be now – unless it was not truthful.’

I was too much agitated to speak; but, without waiting for an answer, she turned away crimson cheek, opened the window and looked out, whether to calm her own excited feelings, or just to pluck the beautiful Christmas-rose that grew upon the little shrub outside. She picked it and put it to her lips, then said:

‘This rose is not so fragrant as a summer flower, but it has stood through hardships none of them could bear: the bleak winds have not blanched or broken it, and the keen frost has not blighted it. Look, Gilbert, it is still fresh and blooming, with the cold snow on its petals. Will you have it?’

I held out my hand: I dared not speak lest my emotion should overmaster me. She laid the rose across my palm, but I had scarcely closed my fingers upon it, hesitating while I considered her meaning and what I ought to do, when she took my hesitation for indifference. Snatching the rose from my hand, she threw it out on to the snow, shut the window emphatically, and withdrew to the fire.

‘Helen, what does this means?’ I cried, startled and electrified.

‘You did not understand my gift,’ said she, ‘or worse, you despised it. I’m sorry I gave it you.’

‘You misunderstood me cruelly,’ I replied. Opening the window again, I leaped out, picked up the flower, brought it in and presented it to her, imploring her to give it me again, and I would keep it for ever for her sake.

‘And will this content you?’ said she, as she took it.

‘It shall,’ I answered.

‘There, then; take it.’

I pressed it earnestly to my lips, and put it in my bosom, Mrs. Huntingdon looking on with a half-sarcastic smile.

‘Now, are you going?’ said she.

‘I will if – if I must.’

‘You are changed. You are grown either very proud or very indifferent.’

‘I am neither, Helen – Mrs. Huntingdon.’

‘Why Mrs. Huntingdon? Why not Helen, as before?’

‘Helen, then – dear Helen!’ I murmured, in an agony of mingled love, hope, delight and suspense. ‘Would you give me your hand too, if I asked it?’

‘Have I not said enough?’ she answered, with a most enchanting smile. I seized her hand, and was about to kiss it. But I stopped and said,—

‘Have you considered the consequences?’

‘Hardly, I think, or I should not have offered myself to one too proud to take me, or too indifferent.’

Stupid blockhead that I was! I trembled to clasp her in my arms, but dared not believe in so much joy.

‘But if you should repent!’ I said.

‘I never shall, unless you bitterly disappoint me.’

‘My darling angel – my own Helen,’ I cried, now passionately kissing her hand, and throwing my other arm around her, ‘you never shall repent, if it depends on me alone. But have you thought of your aunt?’

‘My aunt must not know of it yet,’ said she. ‘She would think it a rash, wild step; but she must get to know you, and learn to like you. You must leave us, after lunch, and come again in spring, and make a longer stay, and I know you will like each other.’

‘And then you will be mine,’ said I, printing a kiss upon her lips, and another, and another; for I was as daring and impetuous now as I had been backward before.

‘No, in another year,’ she replied, gently freeing herself from my embrace, but still fondly clasping my hand.

‘Another year! Oh, Helen, I could not endure so long a separation!’

‘It would not be a separation: we will write every day: my spirit shall be always with you, and you shall see me sometimes. I won’t pretend that I want to wait so long myself, but as my marriage is to please myself alone, I ought to consult my friends about the timing of it.’

‘Your friends will disapprove.’

‘Not greatly, dear Gilbert,’ said she, earnestly kissing my hand; ‘they cannot, when they know you, or, if they do, they would not my true friends. Now are you satisfied?’ She looked tenderly up in my face.

‘How can I not be? And you do love me, Helen?’ said I, wishing to hear it confirmed by her.

‘If you loved as I do,’ she earnestly replied, ‘you would not have so nearly lost me. False delicacy and pride would never thus have troubled you; you would have seen that the greatest discrepancies of rank and birth are nothing when compared with the unity of truly loving, sympathising hearts and souls.’

‘This is too much happiness,’ said I; ‘I have not deserved it, Helen: and the longer I have to wait, the greater will be my dread that something will intervene. A thousand things may happen in a year! I shall be in a fever of impatience. And winter is such a dreary season.’

‘Yes. I would not be married in December; and therefore I said another year.’

‘Next spring?’

‘No, no – next autumn, perhaps.’

‘Summer, then?’

‘Well, the end of summer. There now!’

While she was speaking Arthur re-entered the room. ‘Mamma, I couldn’t find the book in either of the places you told me to look for it, but Rachel got it for me. Look, Mr. Markham, a natural history, with all kinds of birds and beasts in it, and such nice pictures!’

In great good humour I sat down to examine the book with the little fellow. I affectionately stroked his curling locks, and even kissed his ivory forehead: he was my own Helen’s son, and therefore mine; and as such I have ever since regarded him.

That pretty child is now a fine young man: he has realised his mother’s brightest expectations, and is at present residing in Grassdale Manor with his young wife – the merry little Helen Hattersley.

Soon Mrs. Maxwell appeared, to invite me into the other room for lunch. That lady’s cool, distant manners rather chilled me at first; but I did my best to propitiate her, and not entirely without success, I think, even in that first short visit; for she gradually became more cordial, and when I departed she bade me a gracious farewell.

‘But you must not go till you have seen the conservatory, my aunt’s winter garden,’ said Helen. I gladly agreed to this, and followed her into a large and beautiful conservatory, full of flowers – although I had little attention to spare for them.

‘My aunt is particularly fond of flowers,’ said Helen, ‘and she is fond of Staningley too: I brought you here to ask, on her behalf, that this may be her home as long as she lives, and that I may often see her and be with her; for I fear she will be sorry to lose me.’

‘By all means, dearest Helen! I should not dream of wishing your aunt to leave the place; and we will live either here or elsewhere as you decide, and you shall see her as often as you like. I love her for your sake, and her happiness shall be as dear to me as that of my own mother.’

‘Thank you, darling! you shall have a kiss for that. Good-bye. There now – Gilbert – let me go – here’s Arthur; don’t astonish him with your madness.’

\* \* \*

It is time to bring my narrative to a close. Anyone but you would say I had made it too long already. But for your satisfaction I will add a few words more.

I came again in spring, and did my best to cultivate Mrs. Maxwell’s acquaintance. She received me very kindly, having been, doubtless, already prepared to think highly of me by her niece’s too favourable report. We got along marvellously well together, and she reacted to my intentions more sensibly than I had ventured to hope. Her only remark on the subject was:

‘And so, Mr. Markham, you are going to rob me of my niece. Well! I hope God will prosper your union, and make my dear girl happy at last. I admit I would have been better satisfied were she to remain single; but if she must marry again, I know of no one to whom I would more willingly resign her than yourself, or who would be more likely to make her truly happy.’

Of course I was delighted, and hoped to show her that she was not mistaken.

‘I have, however, one request,’ continued she. ‘It seems I am still to look on Staningley as my home: I wish you to make it yours likewise, for Helen is attached to the place. Grassdale has painful associations, which she cannot easily overcome; and I shall not interfere with you here. I am a very quiet person, and shall keep to my own apartments, and attend to my own concerns, and only see you now and then.’

Of course I readily consented to this; and we lived in the greatest harmony with our dear aunt until her death a few years afterwards.

To return, however, to my own affairs. I was married in summer, on a glorious August morning. It took all Helen’s kindness and goodness to overcome my mother’s prejudices against my bride, and to reconcile her to the idea of my living so far away.

Yet she was gratified at her son’s good fortune after all, and proudly attributed it to my superior merits. I gave the farm to Fergus, with better hopes of its prosperity than I should have had a year before; for he had fallen in love with a vicar’s daughter, and he exerted himself most surprisingly to gain her esteem, and render himself worthy of her.

As for myself, I need not tell you how happily my Helen and I have lived together, and how blessed we still are in each other’s company, and in the children that are growing up around us. We are now looking forward to the arrival of you and Rose, for the time draws near when you must leave your dusty, smoky, noisy city for a season of relaxation and tranquillity with us.

Till then, farewell,  
Gilbert Markham.

**The End**