

## Chapter XVII

Yesterday was bright, calm, and frosty. I went to the Heights as I proposed: my housekeeper entreated me to bear a little note from her to her young lady, and I did not refuse, for the worthy woman was not conscious of anything odd in her request.

The front door stood open, but the jealous gate was fastened, as at my last visit; I knocked and invoked Earnshaw from among the garden-beds; he unchained it, and I entered. The fellow is as handsome a rustic as need be seen. I took particular notice of him this time; but then he does his best apparently to make the least of his advantages.

I asked if Mr Heathcliff were at home? He answered, No; but he would be in at dinner-time. It was eleven o'clock, and I announced my intention of going in and waiting for him; at which he immediately flung down his tools and accompanied me, in the office of watchdog, not as a substitute for the host.

We entered together; Catherine was there, making herself useful in preparing some vegetables for the approaching meal; she looked more sulky and less spirited than when I had seen her first. She hardly raised her eyes to notice me, and continued her employment with the same disregard to common forms of politeness as before; never returning my bow and good-morning by the slightest acknowledgment.

‘She does not seem so amiable,’ I thought, ‘as Mrs Dean would persuade me to believe. She’s a beauty, it is true; but not an angel.’

Earnshaw surlily bid her remove her things to the kitchen.

‘Remove them yourself,’ she said, pushing them from her as soon as she had done; and retiring to a stool by the window, where she began to carve figures of birds and beasts out of the turnip-parings in her lap.

I approached her, pretending to desire a view of the garden; and, as I fancied, adroitly dropped Mrs Dean’s note on to her knee, unnoticed by Hareton - but she asked aloud -

‘What is that?’ And chucked it off.

‘A letter from your old acquaintance, the housekeeper at the Grange,’ I answered; annoyed at her exposing my kind deed, and fearful lest it should be imagined a missive of my own.

She would gladly have gathered it up at this information, but Hareton beat her; he seized and put it in his waistcoat, saying Mr Heathcliff should look at it first.

Thereat, Catherine silently turned her face from us, and, very stealthily, drew out her pocket-handkerchief and applied it to her eyes; and her cousin, after struggling awhile to keep down his softer

feelings, pulled out the letter and flung it on the floor beside her, as ungraciously as he could.

Catherine caught and perused it eagerly; then she put a few questions to me concerning the inmates, rational and irrational, of her former home; and gazing towards the hills, murmured in soliloquy:

'I should like to be riding Minny down there! I should like to be climbing up there! Oh! I'm tired - I'm *stalled*, Hareton!'

And she leant her pretty head back against the sill, with half a yawn and half a sigh, and lapsed into an aspect of abstracted sadness: neither caring nor knowing whether we remarked her.

'Mrs Heathcliff,' I said, after sitting some time mute, 'you are not aware that I am an acquaintance of yours? so intimate that I think it strange you won't come and speak to me. My housekeeper never wearies of talking about and praising you; and she'll be greatly disappointed if I return with no news of or from you, except that you received her letter and said nothing!'

She appeared to wonder at this speech, and asked, -

'Does Ellen like you?'

'Yes, very well,' I replied, hesitatingly.

'You must tell her,' she continued, 'that I would answer her letter, but I have no materials for writing - not even a book from which I might tear a leaf.'

'No books!' I exclaimed. 'How do you contrive to live here without them? if I may take the liberty to inquire. Though provided with a large library, I'm frequently very dull at the Grange; take my books away, and I should be desperate!'

'I was always reading, when I had them,' said Catherine; 'and Mr Heathcliff never reads; so he took it into his head to destroy my books. I have not had a glimpse of one for weeks. Only once, I searched through Joseph's store of theology, to his great irritation: and once, Hareton, I came upon a secret stock in your room.... some Latin and Greek, and some tales and poetry; all old friends - I brought the last here - and you gathered them, as a magpie gathers silver spoons, for the mere love of stealing! They are of no use to you - or else you concealed them in the bad spirit that, as you cannot enjoy them, nobody else shall. Perhaps *your* envy counselled Mr Heathcliff to rob me of my treasures? But I've most of them written on my brain and printed in my heart, and you cannot deprive me of those!'

Earnshaw blushed crimson when his cousin made this revelation of his private literary accumulations, and stammered an indignant denial of her accusations.

'Mr Hareton is desirous of increasing his amount of knowledge,' I said, coming to his rescue. 'He is not *envious*, but *emulous* of your attainments. He'll be a clever scholar in a few years.'

'And he wants *me* to sink into a dunce, meantime,' answered Catherine. 'Yes, I hear him trying to spell and read to himself, and pretty blunders he makes! I wish you would repeat Chevy Chase as you did yesterday: it was extremely funny. I heard you... and I heard you turning over the dictionary to seek out the hard words, and then cursing because you couldn't read their explanations!'

The young man evidently thought it too bad that he should be laughed at for his ignorance, and then laughed at for trying to remove it. I had a similar notion; and, remembering Mrs Dean's anecdote of his first attempt at enlightening the darkness in which he had been reared, I observed,

'But, Mrs Heathcliff, we have each had a commencement, and each stumbled and tottered on the threshold; had our teachers scorned instead of aiding us, we should stumble and totter yet.'

'Oh!' she replied, 'I don't wish to limit his acquirements: still, he has no right to appropriate what is mine, and make it ridiculous to me with his vile mistakes and mispronunciations! Those books, both prose and verse, are consecrated to me by other associations; and I hate to have them debased and profaned in his mouth! Besides, of all,

he has selected my favourite pieces that I love the most to repeat, as if out of deliberate malice.'

Hareton's chest heaved in silence a minute: he laboured under a severe sense of mortification and wrath, which it was no easy task to suppress.

I rose, and, from a gentlemanly idea of relieving his embarrassment, took up my station in the doorway, surveying the external prospect as I stood.

He followed my example, and left the room; but presently reappeared, bearing half a dozen volumes in his hands, which he threw into Catherine's lap, exclaiming,

'Take them! I never want to hear, or read, or think of them again!'

'I won't have them now,' she answered. 'I shall connect them with you, and hate them.'

She opened one that had obviously been often turned over, and read a portion in the drawling tone of a beginner; then laughed, and threw it from her.

'And listen,' she continued, provokingly, commencing a verse of an old ballad in the same fashion.

But his self-love would endure no further torment: I heard, and not altogether disapprovingly, a manual cheek given to her saucy tongue.

The little wretch had done her utmost to hurt her cousin's sensitive though uncultivated feelings, and a physical argument was the only mode he had of balancing the account, and repaying its effects on the inflictor.

He afterwards gathered the books and hurled them on the fire. I read in his countenance what anguish it was to offer that sacrifice to spleen - I fancied that as they consumed, he recalled the pleasure they had already imparted, and the triumph and ever-increasing pleasure he had anticipated from them; and I fancied I guessed the incitement to his secret studies also. He had been content with daily labour and rough animal enjoyments, till Catherine crossed his path. Shame at her scorn, and hope of her approval, were his first prompters to higher pursuits; and instead of guarding him from one and winning him to the other, his endeavours to raise himself had produced just the contrary result.

'Yes that's all the good that such a brute as you can get from them!' cried Catherine, sucking her damaged lip, and watching the conflagration with indignant eyes.

'You'd *better* hold your tongue, now,' he answered fiercely.

And his agitation precluded further speech; he advanced hastily to the entrance, where I made way for him to pass. But ere he had crossed the door-stones, Mr Heathcliff, coming up the causeway, encountered him, and laying hold of his shoulder asked, -

‘What's to do now, my lad?’

‘Naught, naught,’ he said, and broke away to enjoy his grief and anger in solitude.

Heathcliff gazed after him, and sighed.

‘It will be odd if I thwart myself,’ he muttered, unconscious that I was behind him. ‘But when I look for his father in his face, I find *her* every day more! How the devil is he so like? I can hardly bear to see him.’

He bent his eyes to the ground, and walked moodily in. There was a restless, anxious expression in his countenance. I had never remarked there before; and he looked sparer in person.

His daughter-in-law, on perceiving him through the window, immediately escaped to the kitchen, so that I remained alone.

‘I'm glad to see you out of doors again, Mr Lockwood,’ he said, in reply to my greeting; ‘from selfish motives partly: I don't think I could readily supply your loss in this desolation. I've wondered more than once what brought you here.’

‘An idle whim, I fear, sir,’ was my answer; ‘or else an idle whim is going to spirit me away - I shall set out for London next week; and I must give you warning that I feel no disposition to retain Thrushcross Grange beyond the twelve months I agreed to rent it. I believe I shall not live there any more.’



‘Oh, indeed; you're tired of being banished from the world, are you?’ he said. ‘But if you be coming to plead off paying for a place you won't occupy, your journey is useless: I never relent in exacting my due from any one.’

‘I'm coming to plead off nothing about it,’ I exclaimed, considerably irritated. ‘Should you wish it, I'll settle with you now,’ and I drew my note-book from my pocket.

‘No, no,’ he replied, coolly; ‘you'll leave sufficient behind to cover your debts, if you fail to return... I'm not in such a hurry - sit down and take your dinner with us; a guest that is safe from repeating his visit can generally be made welcome. Catherine bring the things in: where are you?’

Catherine reappeared, bearing a tray of knives and forks.

‘You may get your dinner with Joseph,’ muttered Heathcliff, aside, ‘and remain in the kitchen till he is gone.’

She obeyed his directions very punctually: perhaps she had no temptation to transgress. Living among clowns and misanthropists, she probably cannot appreciate a better class of people when she meets them.

With Mr Heathcliff, grim and saturnine, on the one hand, and Hareton, absolutely dumb, on the other, I made a somewhat cheerless meal, and bade adieu early. I would have departed by the back way, to

get a last glimpse of Catherine and annoy old Joseph; but Hareton received orders to lead up my horse, and my host himself escorted me to the door, so I could not fulfil my wish.

‘How dreary life gets over in that house!’ I reflected, while riding down the road. ‘What a realisation of something more romantic than a fairy tale it would have been for Mrs Linton Heathcliff, had she and I struck up an attachment, as her good nurse desired, and migrated together into the stirring atmosphere of the town!’