

Anne Brontë

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

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, unless he is excited with wine. I looked at his face to see if that was the case now. His eyes met mine keenly but steadily: there was something about him I did not understand, but he seemed sober enough. Not choosing to engage with him, I referred him to Milicent.

"She plays badly," said he; "I want to match my skill with yours. Come now!—you can't pretend you are reluctant to lay down your work—I know you never take it up except to pass an idle hour, when there is nothing better you can do."

"But chess-players are so unsociable," I objected; "they are no company for any but themselves."

"There is no one here but Milicent, and she—"

"Oh, I shall be delighted to watch you!" cried our mutual friend. "Two such players—it will be quite a treat! I wonder which will conquer."

I consented.

"Now, Mrs. Huntingdon," said Hargrave, as he arranged the men on the board, speaking distinctly, and with a peculiar emphasis, as if he had a double meaning to all his words, "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, bold, and almost impudent; already half triumphant in his anticipated success.

"I hope not, Mr. Hargrave!" returned I, with vehemence that must have startled Milicent at least; but he only smiled and murmured—

"Time will show!"

We set to work: he, sufficiently interested in the game, but calm and fearless in the consciousness of superior skill; I, intensely eager to disappoint his expectations, for I considered this the type of a more serious contest—as I imagined he did—and I felt an almost superstitious dread of being beaten: at all events, I could ill endure that present success should add one tittle to his conscious power (his insolent self-confidence, I ought to say), or encourage for a moment 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, and manifestly baffled his projects. He put his hand to his brow and paused, in evident perplexity. I rejoiced in my advantage, but dared not glory in it yet. At length he lifted his head, and quietly making his move, looked at me and said, calmly—

"Now, you think you will win, don't you?"

"I hope so," replied I, taking his pawn that he had pushed into the way of my bishop with so careless an air that I thought it was an oversight, but was not generous enough, under the circumstances, to direct his attention to it, and too heedless, at the moment, to foresee the after consequences of my move.

"It is those bishops that trouble me," said he; "but the bold knight can overleap the reverend gentleman," 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. Look to your queen."

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 been watching us for some time. "Why, Mrs. Huntingdon, your hand trembles as if you had staked your all upon it! and Walter—you dog—you look as deep and cool as if you were certain of success, and as keen and cruel as if you would drain her heart's blood! But if I were you, I wouldn't beat her for very fear: she'll hate you if you do—she will, by Heaven! I see it in her eye."

"Hold your tongue, will you?" said I—his talk distracted me, for I was driven to extremities. 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 evident delight. He had suspended the utterance of that last fatal syllable the better to enjoy my dismay. I was foolishly disconcerted by the event. Hattersley laughed; Milicent was troubled to see me so disturbed. Hargrave placed his hand on mine that rested on the table, and squeezing it with a firm but gentle pressure, murmured, "Beaten—beaten!" but gazed into my face with a look where exultation was blended with an expression of ardour and tenderness yet more insulting.

"No, never, Mr. Hargrave!" exclaimed I, quickly withdrawing my hand.

"Do you deny?" replied he, smilingly pointing to the board.

"No, no," I answered, recollecting how strange my conduct must appear; "you have beaten me in that game."

"Will you try another, then?"

"No."

"You acknowledge my superiority?"

"Yes—as a chess-player."

I rose to resume my work.