

4 THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL

took our seats at the table, in obedience to the thrice-repeated summons of Rose.

"Now take your tea," said she; "and I'll tell you what I've been doing. I've been to call on the Wilsons; and it's a thousand pities you didn't go with me, Gilbert, for Eliza Millward was there!"

"Well! what of her?"

"Oh, nothing!—I'm not going to tell you about her;—only that she's a nice, amusing little thing, when she is in a merry humour, and I shouldn't mind calling her——"

"Hush, hush, my dear! your brother has no such idea!" whispered my mother earnestly, holding up her finger.

"Well," resumed Rose; "I was going to tell you an important piece of news I heard there—I've been bursting with it ever since. You know it was reported a month ago, that somebody was going to take Wildfell Hall—and—what do you think? It has actually been inhabited above a week!—and we never knew!"

"Impossible!" cried my mother.

"Preposterous!!!" shrieked Fergus.

"It has indeed!—and by a single lady!"

"Good gracious, my dear! The place is in ruins!"

"She has had two or three rooms made habitable; and there she lives, all alone—except an old woman for a servant!"

"Oh dear!—that spoils it—I'd hoped she was a witch," observed Fergus, while carving his inch-thick slice of bread and butter.

"Nonsense, Fergus! But isn't it strange, mamma?"

"Strange! I can hardly believe it."

"But you may believe it; for Jane Wilson has seen her. She went with her mother, who, of course, when she heard of a stranger being in the neighbourhood, would be on pins and needles till she had seen her and got all she could out of her. She is called Mrs Graham, and she is in mourning—not widow's weeds, but slightish mourning—and she is quite young, they say—not above five or six and twenty—but so reserved! They tried