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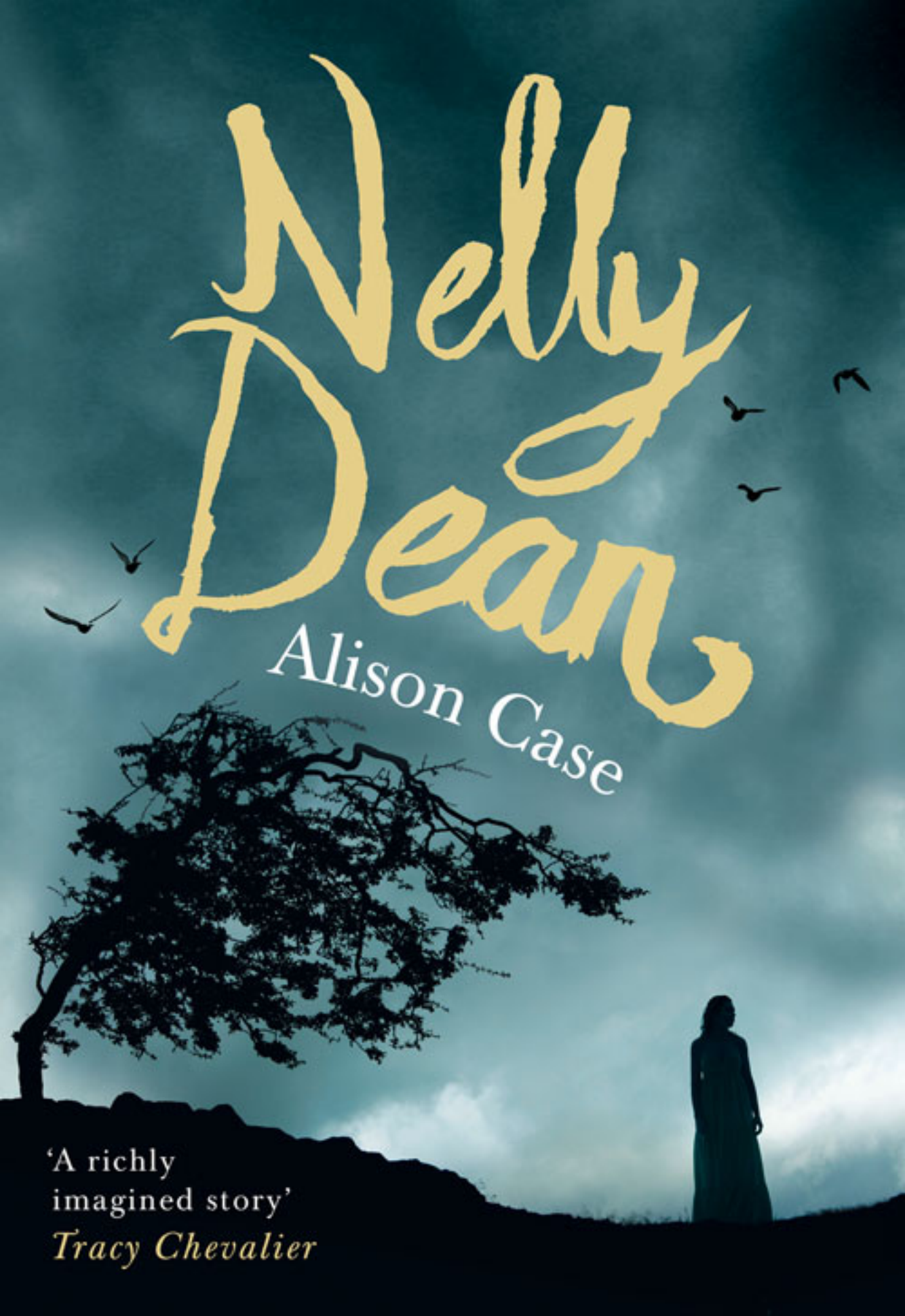
Nelly Dean

Written by Alison Case

Published by The Borough Press

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Nelly Dean
Alison Case
'A richly imagined story'
Tracy Chevalier

Nelly Dean

Alison Case



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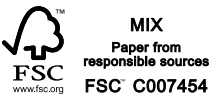
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ONE

Dear Mr Lockwood,

I don't suppose you'll be expecting to hear from me, not since I sent you the few bits of things you left behind on your last visit – you'll remember, the handkerchiefs and your carved walking stick that turned up after you left. I'm not writing about anything like that now – I am sorry to say that we never did find your other pair of spectacles. I think they must have fallen from your overcoat pocket when you were floundering in the snow that night, and got trodden into the mud after it thawed in spring. I turned the house here inside out last month, when we were getting ready for the wedding: every drawer and cupboard emptied, and the carpets and cushions and bedding all taken out to be aired and beaten. I'm sure we would have found them then if they were to be found. And that covers everything that you wrote to me was missing.

There, I said I wasn't writing about your things, and I have gone and done it anyway. It's an old habit with me, to get the chores finished off before settling down to a bit of time for myself, and those spectacles of yours have been weighing on my mind like a half-sewn shirt or a half-swept floor. Or a half-told tale.

It's that I'm writing to you about, Mr Lockwood: the story I told you over those long, dark nights. And about the story I didn't tell. Don't mistake me, please, I told you no lies, or not what you would call lies. Or at least – well, we'll come to that. But there were things I didn't say, things I couldn't say, then, and perhaps shouldn't now. But they've weighed on me since, and my mind has kept returning to you listening, and me talking, and I've imagined myself again and again telling you all those other things, and you taking an interest in them, as a story, you know, as you did that other tale I told. I half fancied that you might pass this way again, to pay a visit and see for yourself how Hareton and Cathy were coming on, and perhaps you might sit with me by the fire in the sitting room, and I would tell you another story altogether, a homespun grey yarn woven in among the bright-dyed and glossy dark threads of the Earnshaws and Lintons.

So when your letter came about the things you missed, and you wrote that you were to be settling in Italy for your health, I saw that that would never be. And to be honest, even if you had, I could never have told you such a story to your face. But it pleased me to think of it, and as I've said, it bothered me a bit, some of the things left out of that other story, till it came to where I sat myself down and started to write. So here I am.

It was a strange thing, telling you that story, hour after hour, pulling myself back into all those times, and sorting and choosing among my memories what to tell and what not. You asked me to tell you everything, to leave out nothing, but of course no one can do that, tell all they've seen and heard and felt, and all they've known and thought, wondered, and suspected too. And I was so afraid of wearying you! You thought it was a simple thing: you asked for Heathcliff's story, and I

knew it and told it to you, same as I might have told you any current story about the doings of a neighbour here, or one of the tales of folk from the other world that we tell on dark nights. And if somewhere in the middle you'd grown weary and wanted to hear no more of it, why that would be that. Yet the story would be there with me, just the same, though untold. But the story wasn't there until I told it to you. It wasn't a story to tell, just a jumble of memories, like pictures in my mind: young Heathcliff tossing his dirty mane from his eyes like a wild moor pony; the two of them standing side by side, sullen and defiant, under one of Joseph's lectures; or later, Catherine glittering and primping in her new finery; or Heathcliff with that set, frozen look he'd get under one of Hindley's savage beatings, so that I didn't know which was the more awful: the baffled rage in Hindley's red face, that all his wild flailing with strap or stick could wring no cry nor plea from the boy, or the still hatred in Heathcliff's white one, that promised I didn't know what – all that came after, it seems to me now.

See, that's how it is when you tell a story. You can't help changing things, seeing the future lying curled in the past like a half-grown chick in an egg. But it's not so. Putting myself back there, looking at him then, Heathcliff's face promised nothing, foreboded nothing, and I felt only sickness and horror looking on it, loving them both, in my own way, as I did, and powerless to stop them. In the midst of scenes like that, Mr Lockwood – and may God grant that you never learn the truth of this yourself – there are no stories, because there is no past and no future, only now. And afterwards, it seemed best to forget them, if I could. Until you asked about the folks at Wuthering Heights, and then I thought, 'Maybe this is where you come in, Nelly Dean, after all.'

It seemed so strange that all that remained of the family I grew up with at the Heights, and my own two beloved bairns as well, should be shut up together just a short way down the road – each, as it seemed, set only on making misery for the others – and I, the one person on earth that loved them all, barred from giving any help at all. And then you arrived, a handsome gentleman of independent means, 'taking solitude as a cure' – though for what ailment you wouldn't say. But it was soon plain enough you were hungry for excitement, and could no more bear being alone than the tabby cat here, that turns up her nose and stalks away from my offered caresses, but then comes and jumps in my lap the moment I'm settled by the fire to sew. So off you went to the Heights the first fine day, and came back singed and smarting from your reception, but interested too, and curious. And you'd seen my little Cathy, as lovely and loving a girl as any man could wish, to my mind, locked up there like a princess in a tower, and only needing to be rescued.

A good servant ought to keep her mouth shut about her employers' doings, or tell only what is already generally known in the neighbourhood. But as you must have guessed by now, I am a good deal less, and more, than a good servant. When I told you that story, I wanted it to do what stories in books had so often done to me – caught me up in them until they seemed more real than the everyday world around me, and made me long to walk in them as my own sober self, to warn fools against foolishness and enlighten the deceived, to talk sense to the wicked and comfort the afflicted. To forestall disaster. To make peace. There have been times I could have flung a book against the wall, in sheer frustration that it could make me care so and yet leave me helpless to act. I thought if I could only tell the story like that, to make you feel that way, why for you there would be no barrier, nothing more than a

stroll down the lane between you and the chance to make happiness out of the living tragedy. Well, it wasn't to be, though whether the fault was in the teller or the hearer – or the tale itself, for it was a strange one – is not for me to say. And it all worked out for the best.

I was always a great one for reading. I well remember when I first saw the library at Thrushcross Grange; I'd never seen so many books in one room before, or a whole room given over just to books. Mr Linton was kind enough to let me borrow books from it as often as I wished – he was glad to see a servant wishing to improve her mind, he said. At the Heights, I had to steal the books and the time to read them both, once I began work in earnest – until then I had my lessons with Cathy and Hindley. But I was as clever as any of them – I get that from my mother. Cleverer than many, between ourselves, especially the wives. Not Cathy, she didn't lack for brains, any more than for spirit, I'll give her that. But Mrs Earnshaw was a sad, silly thing, who'd made a right mess of the housekeeping at Wuthering Heights before she had my mother in to help her, and as for Frances, that Mr Hindley brought home for a wife, as far as I could tell she could scarcely read or write. I never saw her pick up a book without putting it down a minute afterwards, declaring it 'tiresome'. It was no better with ciphering: she knew that as mistress she ought to keep the household accounts, and so once a month or so she would get out the account book and all the bills and receipts, and make a great show and bustle of laying them out on the table. Then she would sit down with a pen and stare at them in a state of puzzlement, before handing them over to me with the excuse that she had a 'headache'.

They all thought he was lost in love for her – I know I told you so, Mr Lockwood, and anyone here would have told you

the same. Indeed you would have thought the same yourself, had you seen them, with all the fuss and show he put on about her. And I'll not say he didn't love her. But sometimes, if I was by, and her back to me, in the midst of his fussing he would send me a long, keen look, as if all this show was for my benefit, and then he would find something to complain of, to mark the difference between us: 'Nelly, fetch more cushions for this sofa,' or 'Nelly, this tea's like dirty dishwater! My wife is used to better things. Make up a fresh pot, and don't stint the tea this time. You can drink this stuff yourself, if you like it so.' Now the mistress, she would protest this at first. She was a friendly enough little thing, really, and wanted to be loved by all, so it was always 'don't take the trouble' or 'I like it just as it is, thank you' in her mouth. It was thanks to that we didn't have to fit up a lady's sitting room for her at the start, as Hindley wished us to do.

But she soon saw where the wind lay: Hindley would frown and look dark at any friendly words from her to me, but he petted and kissed her for complaining of me and ordering me about. And to tell the truth, I did little to encourage her friendliness myself. She would have liked to make a confidante of me, I could see, and small wonder: she had no one else to talk to, poor child, with Cathy wild and scornful, and no visiting in the neighbourhood. But I was having none of it. I gave her no more than 'yes, ma'am' and 'no, ma'am' and 'if you please, ma'am', though I could see it hurt her to be put off so. You see, Mr Lockwood, when Hindley brought her back, and flaunted her in front of me as his fine lady bride, I vowed to myself that from then on I'd work for my wages, and no more. 'Never again,' I said to them all in my head, 'will I split myself in two for you, to be kin one day, and slave the next, as you see need.' And as far as she went, I kept my word, and I was

well pleased with myself for keeping it. Now, though, looking back, I think how lonely she must have been, for I think, silly as she was, she saw through all Hindley's petting and praise, that his heart was elsewhere, though she little guessed who had had the keeping of it.

Yes, Mr Lockwood, if you'd come to Wuthering Heights then, you'd have seen Hindley a doting husband, and me, a bustling and solicitous servant, and Frances, fluttering and laughing as if all the world loved her. And you'd have thought the only thing amiss in the family was a brooding, dark-faced boy and a wild mischievous girl, and their endless skirmishing with Hindley and Joseph. But all the time, Hindley was using her to strike at me, and I was using her to strike at him, and she, poor thing, was battered between us, and died of it. Of all the ghosts at Wuthering Heights, hers is the one I fear, for I wronged her, and God knows she meant me no harm.

TWO

But this will not do: I am meandering about like a puppy on the moors, following after one scent and then another in every direction at once. I must make a proper start, and tell you my story in a more collected fashion.

Heathcliff's arrival was the end of my childhood.

I had lived at the Heights as long as I could remember. My mother had been nurse to Hindley when we were both babes-in-arms, so we had been nearly always together. After we were weaned, my mother returned home to the cottage she shared with my father, coming to the Heights only one or two days a week to help with the churning and other tasks too heavy for the mistress and too skilled to be left to maids. But she chose, for reasons of her own, that I should stay on with the Earnshaws, to live in the nursery and, in time, have lessons with Hindley and Cathy.

I knew that I was not really one of the family. I knew that my own parents were poor, and that when I grew older I should have to work for my bread, as they did. I knew that I was only permitted to live and be educated at the Heights because of Mrs Earnshaw's old friendship with my mother, and her gratitude for my mother's services to the family, and that it

was expected of me that I would be a pleasing companion to the children and a help to Mrs Earnshaw – and to my mother too, when she came over. I knew all this, I say, because I had been told it, but it was not a truth I had before me in my day-to-day life. Mrs Earnshaw was an indulgent mistress – if anything, kinder to me than to her own children, though perhaps that was only because I tried her patience less. Mr Earnshaw was a good deal sterner than his wife, but again, not more so to me than to his own, and with him too, I felt myself to be something of a favourite. It is true that I was often called from my lessons to do chores in the kitchen, but Hindley was almost equally called upon out-of-doors, his father thinking it best to give him an early introduction to the labours required by the estate he was to inherit. For the rest, I ate, slept, studied and played with Hindley and Cathy, shared in their treats and their punishments, and participated as an equal in their games. I knew, if I thought about it, that my future prospects were widely different from theirs, but what child can think about that, when the sun is shining and the bees are humming over the blooming heather, and she and her nursery-mates have just been granted an unexpected holiday from lessons in honour of the first sunny day in a week? And looking back on it now, my childhood seems composed only of such holidays. But all that changed when Heathcliff came.

We were little prepared for such a change that evening. We had all been eagerly anticipating the master's return from his trip to Liverpool, and our minds were dwelling much on the good things that were to arrive with him. You must not think, though, that we were greedy children, always looking after gifts and treats, or that we were much attached to toys and other possessions. This was an exceptional occasion, for the master had never been gone so far or so long from the house before.

In those days, Gimmerton was the outermost limit of our known world, and Liverpool seemed scarcely less distant and magical than Paris or Constantinople. Then, too, the gifts Mr Earnshaw had engaged to bring back for us held a significance far beyond their price. For Hindley, who had asked for a fiddle, his father's cheerful promise to bring him one had come like a peace offering, for he endured much criticism for preferring all forms of play and merrymaking – which his father termed indolence – to schoolwork or farm business. Cathy, too, had been often scolded for being too wild and too much out-of-doors, when she ought to be sitting in the house with her sampler, or helping her mother. Emboldened by Hindley's success, she had asked for a whip – and took her father's smiling acquiescence in the request as tacit permission for many a future gallop across the moors on her little pony. I myself, when asked, had not ventured to request anything more extravagant than 'an apple', whereupon he called me a good girl and promised me a whole pocketful.

As the hour of his expected return approached, our excitement reached a pitch that made any pretence of rational employment impossible. Hindley, in anticipation of his fiddle, was holding an invisible one stiffly to his shoulder with his head bent sideways, and sawing the air over it with the grimmest possible expression on his face, while his feet danced merrily under him as if disconnected from the top, in perfect imitation of our best local fiddler – a performance that had even the mistress in fits of laughter. Cathy, not to be outdone, was cantering around the outside of the room as if she were pony and rider both, and, by judicious application of her imaginary whip (signalled by shouting '*Thwack*!' as she moved her arm), leaping every obstacle in her path with ease. I, with nothing more exciting to expect than apples, was trying to

prove my superior virtue by sitting quietly with some plain sewing, but Hindley's glee was infectious, and I soon jumped up to improvise a dance to his imaginary tune – earning me a gallant bow from the pretending fiddler – while Mrs Earnshaw clapped the time, and Cathy galloped about to the same rhythm.

In all the riot we half forgot the object of our anticipation, so that the master's weary 'Halloo' from outside, announcing his arrival at the gate, came like a magical signal ending the revels all in a flash, as we scurried to our seats, still flushed and laughing, to compose ourselves for a more seemly welcome. In addition to the promised gifts, we had formed hopes of getting some marvellous sweets, for Mr Earnshaw never went to town without bringing us back a few small indulgences of that kind, and, with childish logic, we thought that this much longer trip, to a much larger town, would yield treats proportionately more magnificent.

But even our more reasonable expectations were disappointed, when the master appeared with nothing more to offer than that queer, filthy little child who would be named Heathcliff. Hindley could not forbear weeping when his father drew forth the shards of the broken kit, and Cathy wailed outright when her father's assiduous searching and patting of pockets yielded only the news that her whip was lost.

All this was but a poor recommendation of young Heathcliff to our affections, as you may imagine, and it was not helped by the master's too-evident disgust that his children should weigh the loss of mere 'trifling toys', as he put it, above the salvation of a human being. But the mistress's dismay at the new arrival was hardly less than their own, and as might have been expected, they all fed off each other's: the children taking umbrage on their mother's behalf, and the mistress on the children's – and all of them directing their anger first and

foremost at the child, as being a safer object for it than their lord and master.

As for me, of course I never tasted my apples – yet I was thrust out of the garden all the same. I have told you how I left the child out on the landing, that night, after being told to put him to bed, and how, upon the master discovering it, I was sent away in disgrace. I made light of it to you, but to my childish mind at the time it really seemed hardly less of a catastrophe than the expulsion of our first parents – and no less permanent. He had thundered at me in the manner of an Old Testament prophet, concluding with the terrible words, 'Leave this house, Ellen Dean, and never return.'

Well, I stumbled out of there, I don't know how, and set out towards home. For the first half-mile I could scarcely walk for grief, so finally I set myself down in a small hollow and gave over entirely to sobbing. I had rarely seen Mr Earnshaw so angry, and never so with me, and it seemed a terrible thing to have lost his good opinion, as I thought, for ever. But when I had exhausted the first burst of grief, the chill wind sent me on my way again. Then walking warmed and woke me, and my mind began to dwell more on what lay before me than on what was behind.

My reflections were not comfortable ones. I knew that it was at my mother's wish that I remained at the Heights, and I couldn't think that she would be pleased to see me cast out of there by my own fault. As for my father, on the rare occasions that I saw him he could scarcely look at me without raising his hand to strike me. Terrified of him as I was, I didn't like to think of what he might do if he thought I'd given him good cause for displeasure. However, the more I dawdled on the way, the less chance I had of making it home before he returned from work, and I preferred to encounter my mother's anger

alone first, reasoning that it would be the less dangerous of the two, and further, that once she had got over the worst of it herself she would be likelier to take my part in defence against my father, should that prove necessary.

So I mended my pace, and began thinking how I might present myself in the best light to my mother. 'After all,' I said to myself, 'what have I done but what the whole family (the master excepted) wished me to do? Am I not bound to do as I'm bid by them, and did not Hindley and Cathy refuse to have the child in the nursery with them? The master, weary from his journey, was in bed already, and the mistress was going on at a great pace herself about how she "couldn't think what Mr Earnshaw thought he was about, bringing such a creature into the family, when who knows what nasty habits the child will have picked up in the street – most likely he'd steal all the valuables in the house, or maybe murder us all in our beds!" ("I'll murder him first!" was Hindley's reply) – so what was I to do?'

With such reflections, I had worked myself, by the time I came within sight of my parents' cottage, into feeling rather aggrieved at my expulsion than otherwise, and I almost looked forward to telling my wrongs to my mother – until the sight of her in the flesh, standing in the doorway and looking more worried than pleased to see me, drove all my fine words from my head.

'Nelly! Whatever brings you here at this time? Has something happened at the Heights? Are they all well?'

I managed to stumble out a reassurance on this point, before sobs overtook me. 'I have been sent away,' I wailed, 'never to return, because I did wrong by the orphan boy, and would have brought God's curse down on the house by turning him from the door.'

My reception was not at all what I expected. Instead of being angry at me, or sympathizing with my sorrow, she began cross-questioning me about matters that had little to do with what was uppermost in my mind, which was the fault I'd committed and the punishment I was to bear for it.

'What orphan boy was this?'

'The one the master brought home from Liverpool yesterday.'

'Liverpool! When did he go there? I saw him in church only last Sunday.'

'Aye, he left just after dinner Sunday.'

'Travelling of a Sunday! That's unlike him. And he must have half-killed his horse, to go there and back in this time. Or did he take the coach from Gimmerton?'

'Neither one. He walked all the way, and it's his feet that were half killed, as I saw myself when I brought him a basin and towel to wash them. All swollen they were, and rubbed raw and bleeding in many places. It is not wrong to walk on a Sunday, is it?' I added, a bit concerned about this point. 'How could it be, when we all walk to church and back?'

'To be sure not – though if he'd waited until Monday he could still have got there quicker by coach. Very strange that he should walk all that way. And why should he go at all?'

'He said he had business there.'

'What business could he possibly have in Liverpool?'

'Probably something about the wool, I should think.'

'No, he deals with a wool stapler in Gimmerton, and any business he had further afield than that would be handled by his solicitor.'

'Well I'm sure I don't know,' I said, beginning, perversely enough, to feel rather slighted by her focus on Mr Earnshaw's doings. 'He doesn't tell me his business. But I don't know why he'd make such a journey if he didn't need to.'

'No . . . And you say he picked up the child there? How did he come by it?'

'He said he found it in the street, half-starved, and no one to take charge of it.'

'And so he brought it all that way home? And on foot too? Strange.'

'Well, he couldn't leave him there to die, could he?' I said, now feeling rather defensive on Mr Earnshaw's part. 'Are we not bid to care for orphans and widows?'

'We are. But we needn't walk sixty miles to Liverpool to find them, when there's misery enough within a day's walk to keep the charity of ten Earnshaws occupied.'

'But he was there anyway, on business,' I reminded her, 'and he found the child there, and no one would own it, and he couldn't leave it to starve, and so . . .'

'Aye. So you said. What does the child look like?'

'Dark all over. Partly from dirt, I guess – I don't think he had ever been bathed before. But his skin was dark even after bathing.'

'How old?'

'Two or three years by size, but he seems older by his manner.'

'Can he not speak for himself?'

'Only some queer gibberish. Nothing we can understand.'

'Stranger and stranger! How does he act towards Mr Earnshaw? Does he seem to know him?'

'He looks to him all the time, and seems less frightened of him than of the rest of us,' I said – choosing not to mention that this was no doubt because Hindley and Cathy pinched him whenever they could, and I made faces at him, while even Mrs Earnshaw made no secret of her dislike. 'But he doesn't seem to understand him any better than the rest of us.'

'Hmm.' She sank into a chair, looking puzzled.