

Mrs Graham, a new neighbour who lives alone with her son, is visiting Mrs Markham, who is shocked to hear that she educates her son alone. Mr Markham thinks that she over-protects him and that she should teach him to master difficulties instead of avoiding them, because virtue is the capacity to resist temptations, not the ignorance of them.



'Well, but you will treat him like a girl - you'll spoil¹ his spirit, and make a mere Miss Nancy of him - you will, indeed, Mrs. Graham, whatever you may think. But I'll get Mr. Millward to talk to you about it:- he'll tell you the consequences and tell you what you ought to do, and all about it; - and, I don't doubt, he'll be able to convince you in a minute.'

'No occasion to trouble the vicar,' said Mrs. Graham, glancing at me 'Mr. Markham here thinks his powers of conviction at least equal to Mr. Millward's. Well, Mr. Markham, you that maintain that a boy should not be shielded² from evil, but sent out to battle against it, alone and unassisted - not taught to avoid the snares³ of life, but boldly⁴ to rush into them, or over them, as he may - to seek danger, rather than shun⁵ it, and feed his virtue by temptation, - would you...?'

'I beg your pardon, Mrs. Graham - but you get on too fast. I have not yet 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 and enfeeble the foe; - and if you were to rear an oak sapling⁶ in a hothouse, tending⁷ it carefully night and day, and

shielding it from every breath of wind, you could not expect it to become a hardy⁸ tree, like that which has grown up on the mountain-side, exposed to all the action of the elements, and not even sheltered⁹ from the shock of the tempest.'

'Granted; - but would you use the same argument with regard to¹⁰ a girl?'

'Certainly not.'

'No; you would have her to¹¹ be tenderly and delicately nurtured, like a hot-house plant - taught to cling to others for direction and support, and guarded, as much as possible, from the very knowledge of evil. But will you be so good as to inform me why you make this distinction? Is it that you think she has no virtue?'

'Assuredly not.'

'Well, but you affirm that virtue is only elicited¹² by temptation; - and you think that a woman cannot be too little exposed to temptation, or too little acquainted with vice, or anything connected therewith¹³. It must be either that you think she is essentially so vicious, or so feeble-minded, that she cannot withstand¹⁴ temptation, - and though she may be pure and innocent as long as she is kept in ignorance and restraint, yet, being¹⁵ destitute of real virtue, to teach her how to sin is at once¹⁶ to make her a sinner, and the greater her knowledge, the wider her liberty, the deeper will be her depravity, - whereas, in the nobler sex, there is a natural tendency to goodness, guarded by a superior fortitude¹⁷, which, the more it is exercised by trials and dangers, is only the further developed - '

'Heaven forbid that I should think so!' I interrupted her at last.

'Well, then, it must be that you think they are both weak and prone to err¹⁸, and the slightest error, the merest shadow of pollution, will ruin the one, while the character of the other will be strengthened and embellished - his education properly finished by a little practical acquaintance¹⁹ with forbidden things.

Such experience, to him (to use a trite simile), will be like the storm to the oak, which, though it may scatter the leaves, and snap the smaller branches, serves but to²⁰ rivet the roots, and to harden and condense the fibres of the tree. 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.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, by Acton Bell (1848)

Read the book at: <http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/abronte/bl-abronte-ten-1.htm>

¹ You will alter / destroy

² Protected

³ Dangers

⁴ Courageously

⁵ Avoid

⁶ A young oak

⁷ Taking care of it

⁸ Strong

⁹ Protected

¹⁰ About

¹¹ You would want her to

¹² Created

¹³ With it

¹⁴ Resist

¹⁵ Because she is

¹⁶ immediately

¹⁷ resistance

¹⁸ Have a tendency to make mistakes

¹⁹ Familiarity

²⁰ Only to

Reading Guide

- Describe the dangers of a boy being educated by his mother according to Mrs Markham.
- Explain Mr Markham's opinion as far as the education of boys is concerned. What simile does he use to describe the boys?
- What is his opinion regarding girls' education?
- Describe the qualities of boys according to the Markhams.
- What simile is used by Mrs Graham to describe girls? Explain how it is different from the simile used for boys.
- List the qualities implied by this simile.

React to this passage:

- Do you agree with the Markham's vision of boys and girls?
- Do you think that boys and girls should be educated differently?
- Is the situation different nowadays?

Going further:

→ Was this book written by a man or by a woman in your opinion? Explain.

