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Chapter 3

Two days after, Mrs. Graham called at Linden-Car, contrary to the expectation of Rose, who entertained an idea that the mysterious occupant of Wildfell Hall would wholly disregard the common observances of civilized life, - in which opinion she was supported by the Wilsons, who testified that neither their call nor the Millwards' had been returned as yet. Now, however, the cause of that omission was explained, though not entirely to the satisfaction of Rose. Mrs. Graham had brought her child with her, and on my mother's expressing surprise that he could walk so far, she replied, - 'It is a long walk for him; but I must have either taken him with me, or relinquished the visit altogether; for I never leave him alone; and I think, Mrs. Markham, I must beg you to make my excuses to the Millwards and Mrs. Wilson, when you see them, as I fear I cannot do myself the pleasure of calling upon them till my little Arthur is able to accompany me.'

'But you have a servant,' said Rose; 'could you not leave him with her?'

'She has her own occupations to attend to; and besides, she is too old to run after a child, and he is too mercurial to be tied to an elderly woman.'

'But you left him to come to church.'

'Yes, once; but I would not have left him for any other purpose; and I think, in future, I must contrive to bring him with me, or stay at home.'

'Is he so mischievous?' asked my mother, considerably shocked.

'No,' replied the lady, sadly smiling, as she stroked the wavy locks of her son, who was seated on a low stool at her feet; 'but he is my only treasure, and I am his only friend; so we don't like to be separated.'

'But, my dear, I call that doting,' said my plain-spoken parent. 'You should try to suppress such foolish fondness, as well to save your son from ruin as yourself from ridicule.'

'Ruin! Mrs. Markham!'

'Yes; it is spoiling the child. Even at his age, he ought not to be always tied to his mother's apron-string; he should learn to be ashamed of it.'

'Mrs. Markham, I beg you will not say such things, in his presence, at least. I trust my son will never be ashamed to love his mother!' said Mrs. Graham, with a serious energy that startled the company.

My mother attempted to appease her by an explanation; but she seemed to think enough had been said on the subject, and abruptly turned the conversation.

'Just as I thought,' said I to myself: 'the lady's temper is none of the mildest, notwithstanding her sweet, pale face and lofty brow, where thought and suffering seem equally to have stamped their impress.'

All this time I was seated at a table on the other side of the room, apparently immersed in the perusal of a volume of the FARMER'S MAGAZINE, which I happened to have been reading at the moment of our visitor's arrival; and, not choosing to be over civil, I had merely bowed as she entered, and continued my occupation as before.

In a little while, however, I was sensible that some one was approaching me, with a light, but slow and hesitating tread. It was little Arthur, irresistibly attracted by my dog Sancho, that was lying at my feet. On looking up I beheld him standing about two yards off, with his clear blue eyes wistfully gazing on the dog, transfixed to the spot, not by fear of the animal, but by a timid disinclination to approach its master. A little encouragement, however, induced him to come forward. The child, though shy, was not sullen. In a minute he was kneeling on the carpet, with his arms round Sancho's neck, and, in a minute or two more, the little fellow was seated on my knee, surveying with eager interest the various specimens of horses, cattle, pigs, and model farms portrayed in the volume before me. I glanced at his mother now and then to see how she relished the new-sprung intimacy; and I saw, by the unquiet aspect of her eye, that for some reason or other she was uneasy at the child's position.

'Arthur,' said she, at length, 'come here. You are troublesome to Mr. Markham: he wishes to read.'

'By no means, Mrs. Graham; pray let him stay. I am as much amused as he is,' pleaded I. But still, with hand and eye, she silently called him to her side.

'No, mamma,' said the child; 'let me look at these pictures first; and then I'll come, and tell you all about them.'

'We are going to have a small party on Monday, the fifth of November,' said my mother; 'and I hope you will not refuse to make one, Mrs. Graham. You can bring your little boy with you, you know - I daresay we shall be able to amuse him; - and then you can make your own apologies to the Millwards and Wilsons - they will all be here, I expect.'

'Thank you, I never go to parties.'

'Oh! but this will be quite a family concern - early hours, and nobody here but ourselves, and just the Millwards and Wilsons, most of whom you already know, and Mr. Lawrence, your landlord, with whom you ought to make acquaintance.'

'I do know something of him - but you must excuse me this time; for the evenings, now, are dark and damp, and Arthur, I fear, is too delicate to risk exposure to their influence with impunity. We must defer the enjoyment of your hospitality till the return of longer days and warmer nights.'

Rose, now, at a hint from my mother, produced a decanter of wine, with accompaniments of glasses and cake, from the cupboard and the oak sideboard, and the refreshment was duly presented to the guests. They both partook of the cake, but obstinately refused the wine, in spite of their hostess's hospitable attempts to force it

upon them. Arthur, especially shrunk from the ruby nectar as if in terror and disgust, and was ready to cry when urged to take it.

'Never mind, Arthur,' said his mamma; 'Mrs. Markham thinks it will do you good, as you were tired with your walk; but she will not oblige you to take it! - I daresay you will do very well without. He detests the very sight of wine,' she added, 'and the smell of it almost makes him sick. I have been accustomed to make him swallow a little wine or weak spirits-and-water, by way of medicine, when he was sick, and, in fact, I have done what I could to make him hate them.'

Everybody laughed, except the young widow and her son.

'Well, Mrs. Graham,' said my mother, wiping the tears of merriment from her bright blue eyes - 'well, you surprise me! I really gave you credit for having more sense. - The poor child will be the veriest milksop that ever was sopped! Only think what a man you will make of him, if you persist in -'

'I think it a very excellent plan,' interrupted Mrs. Graham, with imperturbable gravity. 'By that means I hope to save him from one degrading vice at least. I wish I could render the incentives to every other equally innocuous in his case.'

'But by such means,' said I, 'you will never render him virtuous. - What is it that constitutes virtue, Mrs. Graham? Is it the circumstance of being able and willing to resist temptation; or that of having no temptations to resist? - Is he a strong man that overcomes great obstacles and performs surprising achievements, though by dint of great muscular exertion, and at the risk of some subsequent fatigue, or he that sits in his chair all day, with nothing to do more laborious than stirring the fire, and carrying his food to his mouth? If you would have your son to walk honourably through the world, you must not attempt to clear the stones from his path, but teach him to walk firmly over them - not insist upon leading him by the hand, but let him learn to go alone.'

'I will lead him by the hand, Mr. Markham, till he has strength to go alone; and I will clear as many stones from his path as I can, and teach him to avoid the rest - or walk firmly over them, as you say; - for when I have done my utmost, in the way of clearance, there will still be plenty left to exercise all the agility, steadiness, and circumspection he will ever have. - It is all very well to talk about noble resistance, and trials of virtue; but for fifty - or five hundred men that have yielded to temptation, show me one that has had virtue to resist. And why should I take it for granted that my son will be one in a thousand? - and not rather prepare for the worst, and suppose he will be like his - like the rest of mankind, unless I take care to prevent it?'

'You are very complimentary to us all,' I observed.

'I know nothing about you - I speak of those I do know - and when I see the whole race of mankind (with a few rare exceptions) stumbling and blundering along the path of life, sinking into every pitfall, and breaking their shins over every impediment that lies in their way, shall I not use all the means in my power to insure for him a smoother and a safer passage?'

'Yes, but the surest means will be to endeavour to fortify him against temptation, not to remove it out of his way.'

'I will do both, Mr. Markham. God knows he will have temptations enough to assail him, both from within and without, when I have done all I can to render vice as uninviting to him, as it is abominable in its own nature - I myself have had, indeed, but few incentives to what the world calls vice, but yet I have experienced temptations and trials of another kind, that have required, on many occasions, more watchfulness and firmness to resist than I have hitherto been able to muster against them. And this, I believe, is what most others would acknowledge who are accustomed to reflection, and wishful to strive against their natural corruptions.'

'Yes,' said my mother, but half apprehending her drift; 'but you would not judge of a boy by yourself - and, my dear Mrs. Graham, let me warn you in good time against the error - the fatal error, I may call it - of taking that boy's education upon yourself. Because you are clever in some things and well informed, you may fancy yourself equal to the task; but indeed you are not; and if you persist in the attempt, believe me you will bitterly repent it when the mischief is done.'

'I am to send him to school, I suppose, to learn to despise his mother's authority and affection!' said the lady, with rather a bitter smile.

'Oh, no! - But if you would have a boy to despise his mother, let her keep him at home, and spend her life in petting him up, and slaving to indulge his follies and caprices.'

'I perfectly agree with you, Mrs. Markham; but nothing can be further from my principles and practice than such criminal weakness as that.'

'Well, but you will treat him like a girl - you'll spoil 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; - he'll set it before you as plain as the day; - 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 - I suppose I was smiling at my mother's unbounded confidence in that worthy gentleman - 'Mr. Markham here thinks his powers of conviction at least equal to Mr. Millward's. If I hear not him, neither should I be convinced though one rose from the dead, he would tell you. Well, Mr. Markham, you that maintain that a boy should not be shielded from evil, but sent out to battle against it, alone and unassisted - not taught to avoid the snares of life, but boldly to rush into them, or over them, as he may - to seek danger, rather than shun 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, - or even wilfully to seek temptation for the sake of exercising his virtue by overcoming it; - 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 sapling in a hothouse, tending it carefully night and day, and shielding it from every breath of wind, you could not expect it to become a hardy tree, like that which has grown up on the mountain-side, exposed to all the action of the elements, and not even sheltered from the shock of the tempest.'

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

'Certainly not.'

'No; you would have her to 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 elicited by temptation; - and you think that a woman cannot be too little exposed to temptation, or too little acquainted with vice, or anything connected therewith. It must be either that you think she is essentially so vicious, or so feeble-minded, that she cannot withstand temptation, - and though she may be pure and innocent as long as she is kept in ignorance and restraint, yet, being destitute of real virtue, to teach her how to sin is at once 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 fortitude, 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 err, 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 acquaintance 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 to 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. Now I would have both so to benefit by the experience of others, and the precepts of a higher authority, that they should know beforehand to refuse the evil and choose the good, and require no experimental proofs to teach them the evil of transgression. I would not send a poor girl into the world, unarmed against her foes, and ignorant of the snares that beset her path; nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power or the will to watch and guard herself; - and as for my son - if I thought he would grow up to be what you call a man of the world - one that has "seen life," and glories in his experience, even though he should so far profit by it as to sober down, at length, into a useful and respected member of society - I would rather that he died to-morrow! - rather a thousand times!' she earnestly repeated, pressing her darling to her side and kissing his forehead with intense affection. He had already left his new companion, and been standing for some time beside his mother's knee, looking up into her face, and listening in silent wonder to her incomprehensible discourse.

'Well! you ladies must always have the last word, I suppose,' said I, observing her rise, and begin to take leave of my mother.

'You may have as many words as you please, - only I can't stay to hear them.'

'No; that is the way: you hear just as much of an argument as you please; and the rest may be spoken to the wind.'

'If you are anxious to say anything more on the subject,' replied she, as she shook hands with Rose, 'you must bring your sister to see me some fine day, and I'll listen, as patiently as you could wish, to whatever you please to say. I would rather be lectured by you than the vicar, because I should have less remorse in telling you, at the end of the discourse, that I preserve my own opinion precisely the same as at the beginning - as would be the case, I am persuaded, with regard to either logician.'

'Yes, of course,' replied I, determined to be as provoking as herself; 'for when a lady does consent to listen to an argument against her own opinions, she is always predetermined to withstand it - to listen only with her bodily ears, keeping the mental organs resolutely closed against the strongest reasoning.'

'Good-morning, Mr. Markham,' said my fair antagonist, with a pitying smile; and deigning no further rejoinder, she slightly bowed, and was about to withdraw; but her son, with childish impertinence, arrested her by exclaiming, - 'Mamma, you have not shaken hands with Mr. Markham!'

She laughingly turned round and held out her hand. I gave it a spiteful squeeze, for I was annoyed at the continual injustice she had done me from the very dawn of our acquaintance. Without knowing anything about my real disposition and principles, she was evidently prejudiced against me, and seemed bent upon showing me that her opinions respecting me, on every particular, fell far below those I entertained of myself. I was naturally touchy, or it would not have vexed me so much. Perhaps, too, I was a little bit spoiled by my mother and sister, and some other ladies of my acquaintance; - and yet I was by no means a fop - of that I am fully convinced, whether you are or not.