

Oliphant Margaret

The Days of My Life: An Autobiography



Маргарет Олифант

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Содержание

BOOK I.	5
THE FIRST DAY	5
THE SECOND DAY	13
THE THIRD DAY	21
THE FOURTH DAY	27
THE FIFTH DAY	33
THE SIXTH DAY	39
THE SEVENTH DAY	47
THE EIGHTH DAY	52
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	55

Mrs. Oliphant

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BOOK I.

THE DAYS OF MY LIFE

THE FIRST DAY

I WAS going home from the village, and it was an autumn evening, just after sunset, when every crop was cut and housed in our level country, and when the fields of stubble and browned grass had nothing on them, except here and there, a tree. They say our bare flats, in Cambridgeshire, are neither picturesque, nor beautiful. I cannot say for that – but I know no landscape has ever caught my eye like the long line of sunburnt, wiry grass, and the great, wide arch above, with all its shades of beautiful color. There were no hedgerows to skirt the path on which I was, and I saw nothing between me and the sky, save a solitary figure stalking along the highway, and in the other direction the clump of trees which surrounded Cottiswoode; the sky, in the west, was still full of the colors of the sunset, and from the horizon it rose upward in a multitude of tints and shades, the orange and red melting into a rosy flush which contrasted for a while, and then fell into the sweet, calm, peaceful tone of the full blue. In the time of the year, and the look of the night, there was alike that indescribable composure and satisfaction which are in the sunny evenings after harvest; the work was done, the day was fading, everything was going home; the rooks sailed over the sky, and the laborer trudged across the moor. Labor was over, and provision made, and the evening and the night, peace and refreshment, and rest were coming for every man. I do not suppose I noticed this at the time, but I have the strongest impression of it all in my remembrance now.

And I was passing along, as I always did, quickly and, perhaps, with a firmer and a steadier step than was usual to girls of my years, swinging in my hand a bit of briony, which, for the sake of its beautiful berries, I was carrying home, but which stood a good chance of being destroyed before we got there – not taking leisure to look much about me, thinking of nothing particular, with a little air of the superior, the lady of the manor, in my independent carriage – a little pride of proprietorship in my firm footstep.

I was going home – when there suddenly appeared two figures before me, advancing on my way. I say two figures, because in our country everything stands out so clear upon the great universal background of sky, that I could not so truly say it was a man and a boy, as two dark outlines, clearly marked and separated from the low, broad level of the country, and the arch of heaven, which now approached upon me. I cannot help an unconscious estimate of character from the tricks of gesture and carriage, which, perhaps, could not have been so visible anywhere else, as here, upon this flat, unbroken road. One of these figures was a stooping and pliant one, with a sort of sinuous twisting motion, noiseless and sidelong, as if his habit was to twist and glide through ways too narrow to admit the passage of a man; the other form was that of a boy – a slight figure, which, to my perfect health and girlish courage, looked timid and hesitating; the brightness of the sky behind cast the faces of the strangers into shadow – but my eye was caught by the unfamiliar outlines; they *were* strangers, that was sure.

We gradually approached nearer, for I was walking quickly, though their pace was slow; but before we met my thoughts had wandered off from them, and I was greatly astonished by the sudden

address which brought me to an abrupt pause before them. “Young lady,” the man said, with an awkward bow, “what is your name?”

I was a country girl, and utterly beyond the reach of fear from impertinence. I was my father’s daughter, moreover, and loftily persuaded that nothing disrespectful could approach *me*. I answered immediately with a little scorn of the question – for to be unknown in my own country was a new sensation – “I am Hester Southcote, of Cottiswoode,” and having said so, was about to pass on.

“Ah, indeed! it is just as I thought, then,” said the stranger, wheeling his young companion round, so as to place him side by side with me. “We are going back to Cottiswoode – we will have the pleasure of your company; I am quite happy we have met.”

But my girlish disdain did not annihilate the bold intruder; it only brought a disagreeable smile to his mouth which made him look still more like some dangerous unknown animal to me. I was not very well versed in society, nor much acquainted with the world, but I knew by intuition that this person, though quite as well dressed as any one I had ever seen, was not a gentleman; he was one of those nondescripts whom you could not respect either for wealth or poverty – one of those few people you could be disrespectful to, without blushing for yourself.

“Do you want any thing at Cottiswoode?” I asked accordingly, not at all endeavoring to conceal that I thought my new companion a very unsuitable visitor at my father’s house.

“Yes! we want a great deal at Cottiswoode,” said the stranger, significantly; and as I raised my head in wonder and indignation, I could not but observe how the boy lagged behind, and how his companion constantly attempted to drag him forward close to me.

With an impatient impulse, I gathered up the folds of my dress in my hand and drew another step apart. I was the only child of a haughty gentleman. I did not know what it was to be addressed in the tone of a superior, and I was fully more annoyed than angry – but with a young girl’s grand and innocent assumption, I held my head higher. “You are not aware whom you are speaking to,” I said, proudly; but I was very much confused and disconcerted when the stranger answered me by a laugh – and the laugh was still less pleasant than the smile, for there was irritation mingled with its sneer.

“I am perfectly aware whom I am speaking to, Miss,” he said, rather more coarsely than he had yet spoken; “better aware than the young lady is who tells me so, or than my lord himself among the trees yonder,” and he pointed at Cottiswoode, to which we were drawing near. “But you will find it best to be friends,” he continued, after a moment, in a tone intended to be light and easy, “look what I have brought you – here’s this pretty young gentleman is your cousin.”

“My cousin!” I said, with great astonishment, “I have no cousin.”

“Oh, no! I dare say!” said the man, with such a sneer of insinuation, that in my childish passion I could have struck him, almost. “I’d disown him, out and out, if I were you.”

“What do you mean, sir?” I said, stopping short and turning round upon him; then my eye caught the face of the boy, which was naturally pale, but now greatly flushed with shame and anger, as I thought; he looked shrinking, and timid, and weak, with his delicate blue-veined temples, his long, fair hair, and refined mild face. I felt myself so strong, so sunburnt, so ruddy, and with such a strength and wealth of life, in presence of this delicate and hesitating boy. “What does he mean,” I repeated, addressing him, “does he mean that I say what is not true?”

“I will tell you what I mean, my dear young lady,” said the man, suddenly changing his tone, “I mean what I have just been to tell your amiable father; though, of course, both yourself and the good gentleman have your own reasons for doubting me – I mean that this is your cousin, Mr. Edgar Southcote, the son of your father’s elder brother, Brian Southcote, who died in India ten years ago – that’s what I mean!”

The man had his eyes fixed upon me with a broad full gaze, as if he expected a contradiction; but, of course, after hearing this, I did not care in the least how the man looked, or what he had to do with it – I turned very eagerly to look at the boy.

“Are you really my cousin?” said I, “have you just come from India? why did we never know before? and your name is Edgar? – a great many of the Southcotes have been called Edgar – how old are you? – I never knew I had a cousin, or any near friends, and neither did papa; but I have heard every body talk of uncle Brian. Poor boy! you have no father – you are not so happy as I – ”

But to my great amazement, and just at the moment I was holding out my hand to him, and was about to say that my father would love him as he did me – my new cousin, a boy, a man – he ought to have had more spirit! – suddenly burst into a great fit of tears, and in the strangest passionate manner, cried out to the man, “I cannot bear it, Saville – Saville, take me away!”

I had no longer any curiosity or care about the man; but I was very much surprised at this, and could not understand it – and I was a little ashamed and indignant besides to see a boy cry.

“What is the matter?” I asked again, with some of my natural imperiousness, “why do you cry – is anything wrong? Is your name Edgar Southcote, and yet you cry like a child? Do you not know we are called the proudest house in the country; and what is this man doing, or what does he want here? why should he take you away? you ought to be at Cottiswoode if you are Edgar Southcote – what do you mean?”

“Cheer up, Master Edgar – your cousin is quite right, you ought to be at Cottiswoode, and nowhere else, my boy,” said the man, giving him such a blow on the shoulders, in encouragement, that the delicate boy trembled under it. “Why, where is your spirit! come, come, since the young lady’s owned you, we’ll go straight to the old gentleman again; and you’ll see what papa will say to you, Miss, when he sees what you bring him home.”

I did not answer, but turned away my head from this person, who filled me with disgust and annoyance: then their slow pace roused me to impatience. I was always a few steps before them, for Saville’s gliding pace was uniformly slow, and the pale boy, who was called my cousin, lingered still more than his companion. He never answered me – not a word, though I put so many questions to him, and he seemed so downcast and sad, so unlike a boy going home – so very, very unlike me, that I could not understand him. I was so very eager to return to tell my father, and to ask him if this was truly an Edgar Southcote, that our slow progress chafed me the more.

We were now drawing very near to Cottiswoode; every dark leaf of the trees was engraved on the flush of many colors which still showed in the sky the road where the sun had gone down – and among them rose my father’s house, the home of our race, with its turrets rising gray upon the sky like an old chateau of France or Scotland, without a hill in sight to harmonize that picturesque architecture: nothing but the elm trees and the olive shade of the great walnut, with the flat moors and sunburnt grass, running away in vast level lines into the sky. Cottiswoode, the house of all our ancestors, where every room was a chapter in the history of our name, and every Southcote of renown still lived upon the ancient walls – I could not fancy one of us approaching, without a flush and tremor, the family dwelling-place. But Edgar Southcote’s pale cheek was not warmed by the faintest color – I thought he looked as if he must faint or die – he no longer glanced at me or at his companion; and when I turned to him, I saw only the pale eyelids with their long lashes, the drooping head, and foot that faltered now at every step – a strange boy! could he be of our blood after all?

The front of Cottiswoode was somewhat gloomy, for there was only a carriage-road sweeping through the trees, and a small shrubbery thickly planted with evergreens before the great door. When we were near enough, I saw my father pacing up and down hurriedly through the avenue of elms which reaches up to the shrubbery. When I saw him, I became still more perplexed than before – my father was reserved, and never betrayed himself or his emotions to the common eye; I could not comprehend why he was here, showing an evident agitation, and disturbed entirely out of his usual calm.

And as quickly as I did, the stranger noticed him. This man fixed his eye upon my father with a sneer, which roused once more to the utmost, my girlish passion. I could not tell what it meant, but there was an insinuation in it, which stung me beyond bearing, especially when I saw the trouble on my father’s face, which was generally so calm. I hurried forward anxious to be first, yet involuntarily

waiting for my strange companions. The man too quickened his pace a little, but the boy lagged behind so drearily, and drooped his head with such a pertinacious sadness – though the very elm trees of Cottiswoode were rustling their leaves above him – that in my heat, and haste, and eagerness, I knew not what to do.

“Papa!” I said anxiously; my father heard me, and turned round with a sudden eager start, as though he was glad of my coming; but when he met my glance, and saw how I was accompanied, I cannot describe the flash of resentment, of haughty inquiry, and bitterness that shone from my father’s eye – I saw it, but was too much excited to ask for an explanation. “Papa,” I cried, again springing forward upon his arm, “this is Edgar Southcote, my cousin – did they tell you? I am sorry he does not seem to care for coming home, but he has been all his life in India, I suppose – Uncle Brian’s son, papa – and his name is Edgar! did you send him to meet me? tell him you are glad that he has come home; look at Cottiswoode, Edgar – dear Cottiswoode, where all the Southcotes lived and died. What ails him? I believe he will faint. Papa – papa, let the boy know he is welcome home!”

“Hester!” said my father in an ominous cold tone, “restrain your feelings – I have no reason to believe there is an Edgar Southcote in existence. I do not believe my brother Brian left a son – I cannot receive this boy as Edgar Southcote – he may be this man’s son for aught I know.”

The boy’s wan face woke up at these words; he shook his long hair slightly back upon the faint wind, and raised his eyes full of sudden light and courage. I understood nothing of my father’s reluctance to acknowledge the stranger. I pleaded his cause with all my heart.

“He is not this man’s son,” I exclaimed eagerly, “papa, he is a gentleman! Look, he has been so sad and downcast till now, but he wakes when you accuse him – he is an orphan, poor boy, poor boy! say he is welcome home.”

“You had best,” said Saville, and the contrast between my own voice of excitement, and these significant tones with their constant sneer and insinuation of evil, struck me very strangely, “the young lady is wise – it is your best policy, I can tell you, to receive him well in his own house.”

My father’s haughty face flushed with an intolerable sense of insult, and I saw Edgar shrink as if something had stung him. “Hester, my love, leave me!” said my father, “I will deal with this fellow alone. Go, keep your kind heart for your friends. I tell you these pretensions are false – do you hear me, child?”

I never doubted my father before; when I looked from his face which was full of passion, yet clouded with an indescribable shadow of doubt, to the insolent mocking of the man beside him, I grew bewildered and uncertain; did my father believe himself? Yet I neither could nor would put faith in the elder stranger. I had been so constantly with my father, and had so much licence given me, that I could not obey him; and I did what I have always done – I suddenly obeyed my own sudden impulse, and turned to the boy.

“I do not believe what he will say,” I said rapidly, “but I will trust you; are you Edgar Southcote? are you my cousin? you will not tell a lie.”

The boy paused, hesitated; but he had raised his eyes to mine, and he did not withdraw them. His face crimsoned over with a delicate yet deep flush, like a girl’s – then he grew pale – and then he said slowly —

“I cannot tell a lie – my father’s name was Brian Southcote, I am Edgar; I will not deny my name.”

I cried out triumphantly, “Now, papa!” but my father made an impatient gesture commanding me away; it was so distinctly a command now, that I was awed and dared not disobey him. I turned away very slowly through the thick evergreens, looking back and lingering as I went. I was just about to turn round by the great Portugal laurel, which would have hid from me these three figures standing together among the elm trees and against the sky, when my father called me to him again. I returned towards him gladly, for I had been very reluctant to go away.

“Hester, these *gentlemen* will accompany you,” he said, with a contemptuous emphasis, “show them to my library, and I will come to you.”

I cannot tell to what a pitch my anxiety and excitement had risen – it was so high, at least, that without question or remark, only very quickly and silently, I conducted my companions to the house, and introduced them to my father’s favorite room, the library. It was a very long, large room, rather gloomy in the greater part of it, but with one recessed and windowed corner as bright as day. My life had known no studies and few pleasures, that were not associated with this un-bright corner, with its cushioned window-seat and beautiful oriel. When we entered, it was almost twilight by my father’s writing-table, behind which was the great window with the fragrant walnut foliage overshadowing it like a miniature forest – but a clear, pale light, the evening blessing – light, as sweet and calm as heaven itself, shone in upon my little vase of faint, sweet roses – roses gathered from a tree that blossomed all the year through, but all the year through was sad and faint, and never came to the flush of June. Edgar Southcote sank wearily into a chair almost by the door of the library, but Saville, whom I almost began to hate, bustled about at once from one window to another, looking at everything.

“Fine old room – I’d make two of it,” said this fellow; “have down a modern architect, my boy, and make the place something like. Eh, Edgar! what, tired? you had better pluck up a spirit, or how am I to manage this worthy, disinterested uncle of yours?”

I could not let the man think I had heard him, but left the room to seek my father – what could he mean? I met my father at the door, and with a slight wave of his hand bidding me follow him, he went on before me to the dining parlor, the only other room we used; my excitement had deepened into painful anxiety – something was *wrong* – it was a new thought and a new emotion to me.

“What is the matter, papa?” I said, anxiously, “what is wrong? what has happened? do you think this is not my cousin, or are you angry that he has come? Father, you loved my uncle Brian, do you not love his son?”

“Hester!” said my father, turning away his troubled face from my gaze and the light, “I will not believe that this boy is my brother Brian’s son.”

“But he says he is, papa,” I answered, with eagerness; I did not believe in lying, and Edgar Southcote’s pale face was beyond the possibility of untruth.

“It is worth his while to say it,” my father exclaimed hurriedly; then a strange spasm of agitation crossed his face – he turned to me again as if with an irrestrainable impulse to confide his trouble to me. “Hester! Brian was my *elder* brother,” he said in a low, quick whisper, and almost stealthily. I did not comprehend him. I was only a child – the real cause of his distress never occurred to me.

“I know it would be very hard to take him home to Cottiswoode for a Southcote, and then to find out he was not uncle Brian’s son,” I said, looking up anxiously at my father, “and you know better than I, and remember my uncle; but papa — I believe him – see! I knew it – he is like that picture there!”

My father turned to the picture with a start of terror; it was an Edgar Southcote I was pointing to – a philosopher; one of the few of our house, who loved wisdom better than houses or lands, one who had died early after a sad short life. My father’s face burned as he looked at the picture; the refined visionary head drooping over a book, and the large delicate eyelids with their long lashes were so like, so very like! – it struck him in a moment. “Papa, I believe him,” I repeated very earnestly. My father started from me, and paced about the room in angry agitation.

“I have trained you to be mistress of Cottiswoode, Hester,” he said, when he returned to me. “I have taught you from your cradle to esteem above all things your name and your race – and now, and now, child, do you not understand me? if this boy is Brian’s son, Cottiswoode is *his!*”

It was like a flash of sudden lightning in the dark, revealing for an instant everything around, so terribly clear and visible – I could not speak at first. I felt as if the withering light had struck me, and I shivered and put forth all my strength to stand erect and still; then I felt my face burn as if my veins were bursting. “This was what he meant!”

“What, who meant? Who?” cried my father.

“You believe he is Edgar Southcote, papa?” said I, “you believe him as I do; I see it in your face – and the man sneers at you —*you*, father! because it is your interest to deny the boy. Let us go away, and leave him Cottiswoode if it is his; you would not do him wrong, you would not deny him his right – father, father, come away!”

And I saw him, a man whose calm was never broken by the usual excitements of life, a man so haughty and reserved that he never showed his emotions even to me – I saw him dash his clenched hand into the air with a fury and agony terrible to see. I could not move nor speak, I only stood and gazed at him, following his rapid movements as he went and came in his passion of excitement, pacing about the room; the every day good order and arrangement of every thing around us; the calm light of evening, which began to darken; the quiet house where there was no sound of disturbance, but only the softened hum of tranquil life – the trees rustling without, the grass growing, and night coming softly down out of the skies; nothing sympathized with his fiery passion, except his daughter who stood gazing at him, half a woman, half a child – and nothing at all in all the world sympathized with me.

Very gradually he calmed, and the paroxysm was over; then my father came to me, and put his hands on my shoulders, and looked into my strained eyes; I could not bear his gaze, though I had been gazing at him so long, and thick and heavy, my tears began to fall; then he stooped over me and kissed my brow. “My disinherited child!” that was all he said – and he left me and went away.

Then I sat down on the carpet by the low window, and cried – cried “as if my heart were breaking,” but hearts do not break that get relief in such a flood of child’s tears. I felt something in my hand as I put it up to my wet eyes. It was the bit of briony which I had carried unwittingly a long, long way, through all my first shock of trouble. Yes! there were the beautiful tinted berries in their clusters uninjured even by my hand – but the stem was crushed and broken, and could support them no longer; the sight of it roused me out of my vague but bitter distress – I spread it out upon my hand listlessly, and thought of the low hedge from which I had pulled it, a bank of flowers the whole summer through. It was our own land —*our own land*— was it ours no longer now?

In a very short time, I was disturbed by steps and voices, and my father came into the room with Edgar and his disagreeable companion; then came Whitehead, bringing in the urn and tea-tray, and I had to make tea for them. I did not speak at all, neither did my new cousin; and my father was polite, but very lofty and reserved, and behaved to Saville with such a grand courtesy, as a prince might have shown to a peasant; the man was overpowered and silenced by it, I saw, and could no longer be insolent, though he tried. My father took his cup of tea very slowly and deliberately, and then he rose and said, “I am quite at your service,” and Saville followed him out of the room.

We two were left together; my new cousin was about my own age I thought – though indeed he was older – but while I had the courage of health and high spirits, of an unreprieved and almost uncontrolled childhood, the boy was timid as a weak frame, a susceptible temper, and a lonely orphanhood could make him. We sat far apart from each other, in the large dark room, and did not speak a word; a strange sudden bitterness and resentment against this intruder had come to my heart. I looked with contempt and dislike at his slight form and pallid face. I raised my own head with a double pride and haughtiness – this was the heir of Cottiswoode and of the Southcotes, this lad whose eye never kindled at sight of the old house – and I was disinherited!

It grew gradually dark, but I sat brooding in my bitterness and anger, and never thought of getting lights. The trees were stirring without, in the faint night wind which sighed about Cottiswoode, and I could see the pensive stars coming out one by one on the vast breadth of sky – but nothing stirred within. Edgar was at one end of the room, I at the other – he did not disturb me, and I never spoke to him, but involuntarily all this time, I was watching him – he could not raise his hand to his head but I saw it; he could not move upon his chair without my instant observation; for all so dark as the room was, and so absorbed in my own thoughts as was I.

At length my heart beat to see him rise and approach towards me. I was tempted to spring up, to denounce and defy the intruder, and leave him so – but I did not – I only rose and waited for him,

leaning against the window. He came up with his soft step stealing through the darkness. “Cousin,” he said, in a low voice, which sounded very youthful, yet had a ring of manhood in it, too, “cousin, it is not Edgar Southcote who has come to Cottiswoode, but a great misfortune – what am I to do? – you took part with me, you believed me, Hester: tell me what I am to do to make myself something else than a calamity to my Uncle and to you?”

He spoke very earnestly, but his voice did not touch my heart, it only quickened my resentment. “Do nothing except justice,” said I, in my girlish, passionate way. “We are Southcotes, do you think we cannot bear a misfortune? but you do not know your race, nor what it is. If you are the heir of Cottiswoode do you think anything you could do, would make my father keep what is not his? No, you can do nothing except justice. My father is not a man to be pitied.”

“Nor do I mean to pity him,” said the boy, gently, “I respect my father’s brother, though my father’s brother doubts me. Will *you* throw me off then? you judge of me, perhaps, by my companion. Ah! that would be *just*; I do not care for justice, cousin Hester; I want that which you reject so bitterly – pity, compassion, love!”

“Pity is a cheat,” said I, quoting words which my father had often said, “and when you have justice you will not need pity.”

He stood looking at me for a moment, and though my pride would not give way, my heart relented. “When I have justice – is that when I have my father’s inheritance?” said Edgar, slowly, “that will not give me a father, or a mother, or a friend. I will need pity more, and not less, than now.”

He did not speak again, and I could not answer him; no, I could not answer his gentle words, nor open my heart to him again. A stranger, an unknown boy; and he was to take from my father his ancestral house, his lands, his very rank and degree! I clasped my hands and hardened my heart; let him have justice, I said within myself – justice – we would await it proudly, and obey it without a murmur; but we rejected the sympathy of our supplanter; let him, as we did, stand alone.

But I could not help a wistful look after him as Edgar went away with his most unsuitable companion along the level, dark, long road to the village inn. My father stood with me at the door gazing after them, with a strange, fascinated eye, and when they passed into the distance out of our sight, he drew a long breath of relief, and, in a faint voice, bade me come in. I followed him to the library where lights were burning. The large, dim room looked chill and desolate as we entered it, and I saw a chair thrust aside from the table, where Saville had been sitting opposite my father. I stood beside him now, for he held my hand and would not let me go. He had been quite dignified and self-possessed when we parted with the strangers, but now his face relaxed into a strange ease and weariness. We were alone in the world, my father and I, but his thoughts were not often such as could be told to a girl like me; and I think I had never felt such a thrill of affectionate delight as now, when I saw him yield before me to his new trouble – when he took his child into his confidence, and suffered no veil of appearance to interpose between us.

“Hester,” he said, holding my hand lightly in his own; “I have heard all this story; the man is a relation, he tells me, of Brian’s wife; and though I cannot understand how my brother should so have demeaned himself, yet the story, I cannot dispute, has much appearance of truth. I like to be prepared for the worst – Hester! I wish you to think of it. Do you understand at all what will happen to us if this be true?”

“Scarcely, papa,” said I.

“Cottiswoode will be ours no longer; the rank and consideration we have been accustomed to, will be ours no longer,” said my father, with a slight shudder. “Hester, do you hear what I say?”

“Yes, I am thinking, papa,” said I, “poverty, want – I know the words; but I do not know what they mean.”

“We shall not have poverty or want to undergo,” said my father quickly, with a little impatience, “we will have to endure *downfall*, Hester – overthrow, exile and banishment – worse things than want

or poverty. We shall have to endure – child, child, go to your child’s rest, and close those bright, questioning eyes of yours! You do not understand what this grievous calamity is to me!”

I withdrew from him a little, pained and cast down, while he rose once more, and paced the room with measured steps. I watched his lofty figure retiring into the darkness and returning to the light with reverence and awe. He was not a country gentleman dispossessed of his property to my overstrained imagination, but a king compelled to abdicate, a sovereign prince banished from his dominions; and his own feelings were as romantic, as exalted, I might say as exaggerated as mine.

After a little while he returned to me, restored to his usual composure.

“It is time to go to rest, Hester – good-night. In the morning I will know better what this is; and to-morrow – to-morrow,” he drew a long breath as he stooped over me, “to-morrow we will gird ourselves for our overthrow. Good-night!”

And this was now the night-fall on the first day which I can detach and separate from all the childhood and youthful years before it – the beginning of the days of my life.

THE SECOND DAY

IT was late in October, and winter was coming fast; in all the paths about Cottiswoode the fallen leaves lay thick, and every breath of air brought them down in showers. But though these breezes were so melancholy at night when they moaned about the house, as if in lamentation for us, who were going away, in the morning when the sun was out the chilled gale was only bracing and full of wild pleasure, as it blew full over the level of our moors, with nothing to break its force for miles.

My own pale monthly rose had its few faint blossoms always; but I do not like the flowers of autumn, those ragged dull chrysanthemums and grand dahlias which are more like shrubs than flowers. The jessamine that waved into my window was always wet, and constantly dropping a little dark melancholy leaflet upon the window-ledge – and darker than ever were the evergreens – those gloomy lifeless trees which have no sympathy with nature. Before this, every change of the seasons brought only a varied interest to me; but this year, I could see nothing but melancholy and discouragement in the waning autumn, the lengthening nights and the chilled days. I still took long rambles on the flat high roads, and through the dry stubble fields and sun-burnt moors – but I was restless and disconsolate; this morning I returned from a long walk, tired, as it is so unnatural to feel in the morning – impatient at the wind that caught my dress, and at the leaves that dropped down upon me as I came up the avenue – wondering where all the light and color had gone which used to flush with such a splendid animation the great world of sky, where everything now was cold blue and watery white – looking up at Cottiswoode, where all the upper windows were open, admitting a damp unfriendly breeze. Cottiswoode itself, for the first time, looked deserted and dreary; oh, these opened windows! how comfortless they looked, and how well I could perceive the air of weary excitement about the whole house – for we were to leave it to-day.

The table was spread for breakfast in the dining-parlor; but already a few things were away, an old-fashioned cabinet which had been my mother's and the little book-case where were all the books in their faded pretty bindings which had been given to her when she was a young lady and a bride – these were mine, and had always been called mine, and the wall looked very blank where they had stood; and my chair, with the embroidered cover of my mother's own working; I missed it whenever I came into the room. There were other things gone too, everything which was my father's own, and did not belong to Cottiswoode, and everybody knows how desolate a room looks which has nothing but the barely necessary furniture – the table and the chairs. To make it a little less miserable, a fire had been lighted; but it was only raw, and half kindled, and, I think, if possible, made this bare room look even less like home. My tears almost choked me when I came into it; but I was very haughty and proud in my downfall and *would* not cry, though I longed to do it. My father was still in the library, and I went to seek him there. He was sitting by his own table doing nothing, though he had writing materials by him, and a book at his hand. He was leaning his head upon both his hands, and looking full before him into the vacant air, with the fixed gaze of thought – I saw, that from his still and composed countenance, his proud will had banished every trace of emotion – yet I saw, nevertheless, how underneath this calm exterior, his heart was running over with the troubles and remembrances of his subdued and passionate life.

For I knew my father was passionate in everything, despite his habitual restraint and quietness – passionate in his few deep-seated and unchanging loves – and passionate in the strong, but always suppressed resentment which he kept under as a Christian, but never subdued as a man. I stood back as I looked, in reverence for the suffering it must have cost him to retrace, as I saw he was doing, all his life at Cottiswoode; but he heard the rustle of my dress, and, starting with an impatient exclamation, called me to him. “Breakfast, papa,” said I, hesitating, and with humility – a strange smile broke on his face.

“Surely, Hester, let us go to breakfast,” he said, rising slowly as if his very movements required deliberation to preserve their poise and balance – and then he took me by the hand, as he had done when I was a child, and we went from the one room to the other, and sat down at a corner of the long dining-table – for our pleasant round table at which we usually breakfasted, had, like the other things, been taken away.

My father made a poor pretence to eat – and kept up a wavering conversation with me about books and study. I tried to answer him as well as I was able; but it was strange to be talking of indifferent things the day we were to leave Cottiswoode, and my heart seemed to flutter at my throat and choked me, when I ventured a glance round the room. More than a month had passed since that visit of misfortune had brought a new claimant upon our undisturbed possession, and Edgar Southcote’s rights had been very clearly made out, and this was why we were to leave to-day.

We were still sitting at the breakfast-table, when the letters were brought in. My father opened one of them, glanced over it, and then tossed it to me. It was a letter from my cousin, such a one as he had several times received before, entreating him with the most urgent supplications to remain in Cottiswoode. It was a very simple boyish letter, but earnest and sincere enough to have merited better treatment at our hands – I have it still, and had almost cried over it, when I saw it the last time – though I read it with resentment this morning, and lifted my head haughtily, and exclaimed at the boy’s presumption: “I suppose he would like to give us *permission* to stay in Cottiswoode,” I said bitterly, and my father smiled at me as he rose and went back to the library – I knew him better than to disturb him again, so I hurried out of the room which was so miserable to look at, and went to my own chamber up-stairs.

My pretty room with its bright chintz hangings, and its muslin draperies which I did not care for, and yet loved! for I was not a young lady at this time, but only a courageous independent girl, brought up by a man, and more accustomed to a library than a boudoir; and feminine tastes were scarcely awakened in me. I was more a copy of my father than anything else; but still with a natural love of the beautiful, I liked my pretty curtains, and snowy festoons of muslin – I liked the delicacy and grace they gave – I liked the inferred reverence for my youth and womanhood which claimed these innocent adornments; and more than all I loved Alice, who provided them for me. Alice was my own attendant, my friend and guide and counsellor; she was a servant, yet she was the only woman whom I held in perfect respect, and trusted with all my heart. After my father, I loved Alice best of all the world; but with a very different love. In my intercourse with my father, he was the actor and I the looker-on, proud when he permitted me to sympathize with him, doubly proud when he opened his mind, and showed me what he felt and thought. To bring my little troubles and annoyances, my girlish outbreaks of indignation or of pleasure to disturb his calm, would have been desecration – but I poured them all in the fullest detail into the ear of Alice, and with every one of the constant claims I made upon her sympathy, I think Alice loved me better. When I was ill, I would rather have leaned upon her kind shoulder than on any pillow, and nothing ever happened to me or in my presence, but I was restless till Alice knew of it. I think, even, her inferior position gave a greater charm to our intercourse – I think an old attached and respected servant is the most delightful of confidants to a child; but, however that may be, Alice was my audience, my chorus, everything to me.

Alice was about forty at this time, I suppose; she had been my mother’s maid, and my nurse, always an important person in the house; she was tall, with rather a large face, and a sweet bright complexion, which always looked fresh and clear like a summer morning; she was not very remarkable for her taste in dress – her caps were always snow-white, her large white aprons so soft and spotless, that I liked to lay my cheek on them, and go to sleep there, as I did when I was a child; but the gown she usually wore was of dark green stuff, very cold and gloomy like the evergreens, and the little printed cashmere shawl on her shoulders would have been almost dingy, but for the white, white muslin kerchief that pressed out of it at the throat and breast. She had large hands, brown and wrinkled, but

with such a soft silken touch of kindness; – and this was my Alice as she stood folding up the pretty chintz curtains in my dismantled room.

“Oh, Alice! isn’t it miserable?” I cried while I stood by her side, looking round upon the gradual destruction – I did not want to cry; but it cost me a great effort to keep down the gathering tears.

“Sad enough, Miss Hester,” said Alice, “but, do you know, if you had been brought up in a town, you would not have minded a removal; and you shall soon see such a pretty room in Cambridge that you will not think of Cottiswoode – ”

“No place in the world can ever be like Cottiswoode to me,” said I with a little indignation that my great self-control should be so little appreciated. “Of course, I should not wish to stay here when it is not ours,” I went on, rubbing my eyes to get the tears away, “but I will always think Cottiswoode *home*– no other place will ever be home to me.”

“You are very young, my dear,” said Alice quietly. I was almost angry with Alice, and it provoked me so much to hear her treating my first grief so composedly that the tears which I had restrained, came fast and thick with anger and petulance in them.

“Indeed, it is very cruel of you, Alice!” I said as well as I was able, “do you think I do not mean it? – do you think I do not know what I say?”

“I only think you are very young, poor dear!” said Alice, looking down upon me under her arm, as she stretched up her hands to unfasten the last bit of curtain, “and I am an old woman, Miss Hester. I saw your poor mamma come away from *her* home to find a new one here; it was a great change to her, for all so much as her child likes Cottiswoode —*she* liked her own home very dearly, Miss Hester, and did not think this great house was to be compared to it – but she came away here of her own will after all – ”

“But that was because she was married, Alice,” said I hastily.

“Yes! it was because she was married, and because it is the common way of life,” said Alice; “but, the like of me, Miss Hester, that has parted with many a one dear to me, never to see them again, thinks little, darling, of parting with dead walls.”

“Alice, have you had a great deal of grief,” said I reverently; my attention was already diverted from the main subjects of my morning’s thoughts – for I was very young, as she said, and had a mind open to every interest, that grand privilege of youth.

“I have lost husband and children, father and mother, Miss Hester,” said Alice quietly; she had her back turned to me, but it was not to hide her weeping, for Alice had borne her griefs with her for many, many years. I knew very well that it was as she had said, for she had often told me of them all, and of her babies whom she never could be quite calm about – but she very seldom alluded to them in this way, and never dwelt upon her loss, but always upon themselves. I did not say anything, but I felt ashamed of my passion of grief for Cottiswoode. If I should lose Alice – or, still more frightful misfortune, lose my father, what would Cottiswoode be to me.

“But, my dear young lady was pity herself,” said Alice, after a short pause, “I think I can see her now, when I could not cry myself, how she cried for me; and I parted with her too, Miss Hester. I think she had the sweetest heart in the world; she could not see trouble, but she pitied it, and did her best to help.”

“Alice,” said I hastily, connecting these things by a sudden and involuntary conviction, “why is it that papa says: ‘pity is a cheat.’”

“It is a hard saying, Miss Hester,” said Alice, pausing to look at me; and then she went on with her work, as if this was all she had to say.

“He must have reason for it,” said I, “and when I think of *that* Edgar Southcote presuming to pity us, I confess it makes me very angry – I cannot bear to be pitied, Alice!”

But Alice went on with her work, and answered nothing; I was left to myself, and received no sympathy in my haughty dislike of anything which acknowledged the superiority of another. I was piqued for the moment. I would a great deal rather that Alice had said, “no one can pity you” – but

Alice said nothing of the kind, and after a very little interval my youthful curiosity conquered my pride.

“You have not answered me, but I am sure you know,” said I, “Alice, what does papa mean?”

Alice looked at me earnestly for a moment. “I am only a servant,” she said, as if she consulted with herself, “I have no right to meddle in their secrets – but I care for nothing in the world but them, and I have served *her* all her days. Yes, Miss Hester, I will tell you,” she concluded suddenly, “because you’ll be a woman soon, and should know what evil spirits there are in this weary, weary life.”

But though she said this, she was slow to begin an explanation – she put away the curtains first, carefully smoothed down and folded into a great chest which stood open beside us, and then she began to lift up my few books, and the simple furniture of my toilette-table, and packed them away for the removal. It was while she was thus engaged, softly coming and going, and wiping off specks of dust in a noiseless, deliberate way, that she told me the story of my father and mother.

“My young lady was an only child, like you, Miss Hester,” said Alice, “but her father’s land was all entailed, and it has passed to a distant cousin now, as you know. I think she was only about eighteen when the two young gentlemen from Cottiswoode began to visit at our house. Mr. Brian came as often as your father – they were always together, and I remember very well how I used to wonder if both of the brothers were in love with Miss Helen, or if the one only came for the other’s sake. Mr. Brian was a very different man from your papa, my dear – there was not such a charitable man in the whole country, and he never seemed to care for himself – but somehow, just because he was so good, he never seemed in earnest about anything he wished – you could not believe he cared for anything so much, but he would give it up if another asked it from him. It’s a very fine thing to be kind and generous, Miss Hester, but that was carrying it too far, you know. If I had been a lady I never would have married Mr. Brian Southcote, for I think he never would have loved me half so much as he would have loved the pleasure of giving me away.

“But you know how different your papa was; I used to think it would be a pleasure to trust anything to Mr. Howard, because whatever he had and cared for, he held as fast as life; and my young lady thought so too, Miss Hester. They *were* both in love with Miss Helen, and very glad *her* papa would have been had she chosen Mr. Brian, who was the heir of all. It used to be a strange sight to see them all, poor Mr. Brian so pleasant to everybody, and Mr. Howard so dark and passionate and miserable, and my sweet young lady terrified and unhappy – glad to be good friends with Mr. Brian, because she did not care for him; and so anxious about Mr. Howard, though she scarcely dared to be kind to him, because she thought so much of him in her heart. Your papa was very jealous, Miss Hester, it is his temper, and I am not sure, my dear, that it is not yours; and he knew Mr. Brian was pleasanter spoken than he was, and that everybody liked him – so, to be sure, he thought his brother was certain to be more favored than he – which only showed how little your papa knows, for all so learned a man as he is,” said Alice, shifting her position, and turning her face to me to place a parcel of books in the great chest; “for Mr. Brian was a man to like, and not to love.”

She was blaming my father, and, perhaps, she had more blame to say; but her blame inferred more than praise, I thought, and I listened eagerly. Yes! my father was a man to love and not to *like*.

“They say courting time is a happy time,” said Alice with a sigh, “it was not so *then*, Miss Hester. However, they all came to an explanation at last. I cannot tell you how it came about, but we heard one day that Mr. Brian was going abroad, and that Mr. Howard was betrothed to Miss Helen. I knew it before any one else, for my young lady trusted me; and when I saw your papa the next day, his face was glorious to behold, Miss Hester. I think he must have had as much joy in that day as most men have in all their lives, for I don’t think I ever saw him look quite happy again.”

“Alice!”

“My dear, it is quite true,” said Alice quietly, and with another sigh: “I could not tell for a long time what it was that made him so overcast and moody, and neither could my young lady. It could not be Mr. Brian, for Mr. Brian gave her up in the kindest and quietest way; you could not have believed

how glad he was to sacrifice himself to his brother – and went away to the West Indies where your grandmamma had an estate, to look after the poor people there; so then the marriage was over very soon, and your grandpapa Southcote took the young people home to live with him at Cottiswoode, and any one that knew how fond he was of Miss Helen, would have thought Mr. Howard had got all the desire of his heart. But he had not, Miss Hester! The heart of man is never satisfied, the Bible says – and I have often seen your papa’s face look as black and miserable after he was married, as when he used to sit watching Mr. Brian and my poor dear young lady. Your mamma did not know what to think of it, but she always hung about him with loving ways and was patient, and drooped, and pined away till my heart was broken to look at her. Then she revived all at once, and there was more life in the house for a little while – she had found out what ailed him: but oh! Miss Hester, a poor woman may set her life on the stake to change a perverse fancy, and never shake it till she dies. Your papa had got it into his head that my young lady had married him out of *pity*; and all her pretty ways, and her love, and kindnesses, he thought them all an imposition, my dear – and that is the reason why he says that hard, cruel saying, ‘Pity is a cheat!’”

“And then, Alice?” said I, eagerly.

“And then? there was very little more, Miss Hester – she was hurried out of this world when you were born; she had never time to say a word to him, and went away with that bitterness in her heart, that the man she had left father and mother for, never understood her. Death tries faith, my dear, though you know nothing of it! think how I stood looking at her white face in her last rest! Thinking of her life and her youth, and that this was the end of all; so carefully as she had been trained and guarded from a child, and all her education and her books, and such hopes as there were of what she would be when she grew up a woman; but soon I saw that she grew up only to die – God never changes, Miss Hester – he tries a poor woman like me very like the way he tried Abraham – and that was what I call a fiery passage for faith!”

“And my mother, Alice? and poor, poor papa! oh! how did he ever live after it?” cried I, through my tears.

“He lived because it was the will of God – as we all do,” said Alice, “a sad man, and a lonely he is to this day: and will never get comfort in his heart for the wrong he did my dear young lady – never till he meets her in heaven.”

At that moment Alice was called and went away. Poor, poor papa! he was wrong; but how my heart entered into his sufferings. I did not think of the bitterness of love disbelieved and disturbed, of my mother’s silent martyrdom – I thought only of my father, my first of men! He loved her, and he thought she *pitied* him. I started from my seat at the touch of this intolerable thought. I realized in the most overwhelming fulness, what he meant when he said, “Pity is a cheat!” Pity! it was dreadful to think of it – though it was but a mistake, a fancy – what a terrible cloud it was!

I will not say that this story filled my mind so much, that I do not recollect the other events of that day; on the contrary, I recollect them perfectly, down to the most minute detail; but they are all connected in my mind with my grief for my father – with the strange, powerful compassion I had for him, and some involuntary prescience of my own fate. For it was him I thought of, and never my mother, whom I had never seen, and whose gentle, patient temper was not so attractive to my disposition. No – I never thought he was to blame! I never paused to consider if it was himself who had brought this abiding shadow over his life. I only echoed his words in my heart, and clung to him, in secret, with a profound and passionate sympathy. Pity! I shuddered at the word. I no longer wondered at his haughty rejection of the slightest approach to it – for did not I myself share – exaggerate this very pride.

This mournful tedious day went on, and its dreary business was accomplished: all our belongings were taken away from Cottiswoode, and Alice and another servant accompanied them to set our new house in order before we came. Just before she went away, at noon, when the autumn day was at its brightest, I found Alice cutting the roses from my favorite tree. I stood looking at her, as she took the

pale faint flowers one by one, but neither of us spoke at first: at last I asked her, “why do you take them, Alice?” and I spoke so low, and felt so reverential that I think I must have anticipated her reply.

I had to bend forward to her, to hear what she said. “They were your mother’s,” said Alice, “I decked her bride chamber with them, and her last bed. They are like what she was when trouble came.”

She had only left one rose upon the tree, a half blown rose, with dew still lying under its folded leaves, and she went away, leaving me looking at it. I felt reproved, I know not why, as if my young mother was crying to me for sympathy, and I would not give it. No! I went back hastily to the dreary half-emptied library where my father sat. My place was by him – this solitary man, who all his life had felt it rankling in his heart, that he was pitied where he should have been loved.

In the evening, just before sunset, I heard wheels approaching, and on looking out, saw the post-chaise which was to take us to Cambridge coming down the avenue. My father saw it also; we neither of us said anything, but I went away at once to put on my bonnet. It was dreadful to go into these desolate rooms, which were all the more desolate because they were not entirely dismantled, but still had pieces of very old furniture here and there, looking like remains of a wreck. After I had left my own room – a vague dusty wilderness now, with the damp air sighing in at the open lattice, and the loose jessamine bough beating against it, and dropping its dreary little leaves – I stole into the dining parlor for a moment to look at that picture which was like Edgar Southcote. I looked up at it with my warm human feelings, my young, young exaggerated emotions, full of resentful dislike and prejudice; it looked down on me, calm, beautiful, melancholy, like a face out of the skies. Pity, pity, yes! I hurried away stung by the thought. Edgar Southcote had the presumption to pity my father and me.

With a last compunctious recollection of my poor young mother, I went to the garden and tenderly brought away that last rose. I could cry over *it*, without feeling that I wept because Cottiswoode was my cousin’s and not mine. “I will always keep it!” I said to myself, as I wrapped some of the fragrant olive-colored leaves of the walnut round its stalk; and then I went in to my father to say I was ready. He had left the library, and was walking through the house – I could hear his slow heavy footsteps above me as I listened breathlessly in the hall. Whitehead, and the other servants, had collected there to say good-bye. Whitehead, who was an old man, was to remain in charge of the house; but all the others, except his niece Amy, were to go away this very night. While I stood trying to speak to them, and trying very hard not to break down again, my father came down stairs, went into the dining-parlor, and passed through the window into the garden. I thought he wished to escape the farewell of the servants, so I said good-bye hurriedly and followed him; but he was only walking up and down, looking at the house. He took my hand mechanically, as I came up to him, and led me along the walk in silence; then I was very much startled to find that he took hold of my arm, and leaned on it as if he wanted a support. I looked up at him wistfully when he paused at last —*he* was looking up at a window above; but he must have felt how anxiously my eyes sought his face, for he said slowly, as if he were answering a question, “Hester, I have *lived* here.” I did not dare to say anything, but I held very close to my heart my mother’s rose; he was thinking of her then, he was not thinking of pity nor of any bitterness.

In a few minutes he was quite himself once more, and drew my hand upon his arm, and went in with me to say farewell to the servants; he did so with grace and dignity like an old knight of romance – for he was never haughty to his inferiors, and they all loved him. They were crying and sobbing, every one of them – even old Whitehead – and I cried too, I could not help it; but my father was quite unmoved. He put me into the chaise, took his seat beside me, waved his hand out of the window, smiling as he did so – and then he closed the blinds rapidly on that side, and the carriage drove away. It was all over like a dream. I dared not and could not, look back upon the home which had been the centre of my thoughts all my life; and with the cold night wind blowing in our faces, we were hurrying to a new life, altogether severed from our old existence, and from Cottiswoode.

Yes! the wind was in our faces, fresh and cold – and I never feel it so now without an instant recollection of that long silent drive to Cambridge, through the darkening October night. The long dark levels of the fields rushed past us so swiftly, and with such a desolate quietness; and the long luminous line of the horizon, and the dull clouds of night kept us company with such a ghost-like constancy, travelling at as quick a pace as ours. I was soon tired of weeping under my veil, for I had all the restlessness of my years; and I can see now how the darkness brooded upon the flat meadows, how there seemed no human divisions of fence or hedge upon them, but only one blank line of grass from which the night had taken all color, and of ploughed land stretching back its lessening furrows over many acres, which the eye ached to see. Sometimes miles away, a pollard willow bristled up upon the sky, showing its every twig with a strange exaggeration as it stood guarding some dreary point of road – and the solitary haystack which belonged to some one of those poor stray cottages belated among the fields, threw up its bulk like a goblin against that clear universal background – that pale line of sky which brought out every outline with such a ghostly distinction. Distance, space, the wild idea of an unending and unreposing journey, are the very spirit and sentiment of this country – I think sometimes its dull unfeatured outline is half sublime; there are no mountain heights to attain to, no sweet valleys charming you to rest; only the long lines converging into the infinite sky – the fresh breeze in your face – and the rushing of your own footsteps through the silence, crying – on – on!

There was not a word exchanged between us all the way – my father sat quite still, looking out from one window, engaged I know not how, while I looked from the other, feeling a strange enjoyment in the mere motion and progress, and in the silence and dreamy dreariness of all those flat, unvarying lines, that glided past us in the twilight and the night.

There were neither moon nor stars, yet it was not very dark, even when we reached Cambridge – I had been in the town before, but I knew little of it, and I had no knowledge of where we were, when we stopped beside the old church of St. Benet, and my father assisted me to alight. I was surprised, for there were only some mean houses and a shop before us – but he drew my hand within his arm, and led me along a paved and narrow lane, on one side of which was the churchyard. The light seemed quite shut out here – it was like descending a well to go boldly into that darkness; but we went on, past the little new houses on the one hand, and the old conventual buildings, which loomed on us so strangely from the other, till we paused at a door where some one stood with a lantern. As the man raised his lantern and the light flashed up, I saw that we were to enter under this arched doorway, which had a coat of arms in the keystone. There were two or three steps to descend, and then the door was closed, and we went along a narrow path, where there was a blank wall covered with ivy on one side, and the house on the other. The light of the lantern gleamed in those dark glistening ivy leaves, and in the square projecting windows of this new home of ours. I was glad to see how different from the massy glories of Cottiswoode, was this strange house, with its two projections, one supported on dark oaken beams, and the other built up from the ground. The building was only wood, and lath and plaster, except the heavy and unlighted ground story, which was grey and aged stone; and the broad square windows on the upper floor which filled the whole front of each projecting part, were formed of small diamond panes. But I saw no mode of entrance, nothing but tall ungainly rose bushes, and withered creepers nestling up against the walls, till we turned a corner and came to a door in the end of the house, where Alice was standing to receive us. We had to make our way in here through a ragged regiment of tall straggling hollyhocks – I have hated them ever since that night.

But my father had not once addressed me yet, and my own mind was so full, that I had never observed his silence. He spoke now when we were on the threshold, and I started at the sound of his voice. He only said, “Hester, this is your new home!” but I think there was the most wonderful mixture of emotions in his voice that I had ever heard – determined composure, and yet highly excited feeling – disdain of this poor place he brought me to, yet a fixed resolution to show content in it, and stronger and greater pride than ever. My heart echoed the resolution and the pride, as I sprang in – but my heart was young and full of the pleased excitement of novelty and change. I knew nothing of

what he felt as he followed me with his slow and stately step – nothing, for I was impatient to see all these rooms that we were to live in, and to make acquaintance with my new home.

So I ran on, leaving him to follow me – I could not have done better, had I been laboring to find something which would comfort and cheer him. My eagerness gave a certain interest to the poor house. I remember that he held me back for a moment, and looked into my face with a slow smile gradually breaking upon his own. Mine, I know, was full of light and animation – I remember how my cheeks glowed from the wind, and how the warmth and the lights had brought water into my eyes; and, I suppose, I looked quite as bright and eager as if I had never known the girlish heroic despair for leaving Cottiswoode which possessed me an hour ago. I ran from one apartment to another, exclaiming at everything, sometimes with pleasure, sometimes with astonishment. The two broad windows which I had seen outside, represented two large apartments, occupying the whole breadth of the house, and each with a window at the other end, looking out upon a great dim silent garden, fenced in by other gardens, and on one side by a dark mass of building, along which a light twinkled here and there. These rooms were not fully furnished, but they were already in a habitable state, and in one of them a bright fire blazed pleasantly, sparkling in the old silver kettle and tea-pot, and antique china, which we always used at home – at home! The words meant these strange rooms, and had no other reference now for my father and me.

But when I went to lay aside my bonnet, I found a room prepared for me, prettier, if that were possible, than the pretty chamber at Cottiswoode, where Alice had tended me all my life. The white draperies were so white, and full, and soft – the pretty chintz hangings were so fresh with their new bands of ribbons, and there was so much care and tenderness in the hands which had restored my old room perfect and unbroken, yet made it brighter than ever, that I clung to Alice with an April face where the tears had somehow lost their bitterness, and the smile its pride. Now and then in my life, I have found out suddenly, in a moment, of how little importance external things were to me. The conviction came upon my mind at this instant, like a sunbeam. What did it matter to me standing here in my triumphant youthfulness, with my father to be loved and cared for, and Alice to love and care for me – what did it matter who lost or who won such outside and external matters as houses and lands? I threw off my mantle upon the kind arm of Alice, and danced away to make tea for my father. In proportion to the depth of my sadness at leaving Cottiswoode, was the height of my exhilaration now to find another home. We had expected this to be a very dreary evening – instead of that I had seldom been so happy, so vivacious, so daring, in my girl's talk; and there sat my father, his face brightening in the firelight, smiling at my boldness, my enthusiasms, my denunciations, my girlish superlative emotion. When tea was over, he fell into a fit of musing, and was not to be disturbed, I knew – and then I examined the room with its wainscot pannels, its carved mantel-shelf, and its pannel pictures, hard flat portraits, which had no pretension to the roundness or the breadth of life, but were as level as the Cambridgeshire flats, and almost as much like each other. And then I went to the further window, and coiled myself up upon the bench within the curtains, to solace myself with my own thoughts. The garden lay dark beneath, with shadowy bare trees here and there, lifting up their branches to the sky, and some fantastic little green-house, or summer-house, half way down, showing a dull glimmer of glass under the boughs. But insensibly my eyes turned from the garden and the darkness, to count the scattered lights in the windows of this dark building, which marked its embrasures upon the sky at my right hand. A light in a window is a strange lure to imagination – I watched them with interest and pleasure – they were unknown, yet they were neighbors – and it was pleasant from hearing the wind without, and seeing the dark, to turn upon the glimmering tapers with a certain friendly warmth and satisfaction, as though some one had said good-night.

And so we were settled to our new beginning, and our new home.

THE THIRD DAY

I WAS in the garden, where I almost lived in the sweet summer days in those times of my youth; it was June, and I did not fear the windows of Corpus, which looked out upon the trees with their numberless leaves, the trees which were quite shelter enough for me. If I had begun to have visions of the universal romance of youth, my thoughts were much too exalted to think of vulgar fallings in love, and though I constantly hailed as neighbors these kindly lights in the windows of the collegiate buildings, I was troubled by no thought of the young gowmsmen, the possible possessors of the same; and so it came about that I went as freely to the garden of our quaint old house, overlooked by the windows of Corpus Christi College as I had been used to go in the garden of Cottiswoode, which was not overlooked by anything within a dozen miles, save the fruit trees in the orchard, and the great walnut by the house.

This was now the second summer since we came to Cambridge, and this garden was no longer the wilderness which it was when I saw it first. My father had a peculiar fancy in gardening – everything in this sunny strip of land was enclosed in a soft frame of greensward – where a path was indispensable, it was a hard, yellow sandy path that glistened in the sun, and threw off the moisture; but instead of geometrical divisions and cross-roads through our garden, you could scarcely see either gravel or soil for the velvet turf that pressed over the roots of the trees, and round the flower-beds; and for the thick and close luxuriance of the flowers that grew within. The one or two Cambridge ladies who came to see me sometimes, shook their heads at our grassy garden, and hoped I took care never to go out when the turf was damp; but, indeed, I took no such care, and was very proud of our full and verdant enclosure in comparison with other people’s flower-beds, where nothing grew so well as ours, though everything had more room to grow. On this day of which I am now speaking, the sweet greensward was warm with sunshine in every corner. It was afternoon, and the streets were sultry, the wayfarers flushed and weary, the fields parched and dry; but the sun was playing in the leaves about me, and making playful figures with his light and shadow on the grass under my feet – figures which changed and varied with sweet caprice as the wind swayed the leaves about, and as the sun stole by invisible degrees towards the west – and everything was fresh and sweet and full of fragrance in this charmed country of mine. I was within the little fanciful greenhouse which was no less a bower for me, than a shelter for the rarer flowers, and I was busy about some of my favorites, which I used to care for with great devotion by fits, making up for it by such negligence at other times, that this pretty place would soon have been a very woeful one had it been left to me. Just on the threshold of this green-house door, was the stool on which I had been sitting, with a piece of embroidery at which I had been working thrown down upon it, and beyond that, on the grass, was a book which I had not been reading; for it was not in my girlish, impatient nature to dally with anything readable – I either devoured it, or I let it alone. I was busy among the plants, and so enclosed by them that I was not visible from the garden – but at this moment I was not aware of that.

I did not hear their footsteps upon the soft grass, but I heard the voices of my father and his friend, Mr. Osborne, a fellow of Corpus, who visited us constantly, and always seemed in my father’s confidence. They came to the green-house door and lingered there, and Mr. Osborne stood before the door, with his gown streaming and rustling behind him, effectually concealing me if I had not been concealed already. I had no reason to suppose that their talk concerned me; nor was I much interested to listen to it. I went on with my occupation, plunging some slips of favorite plants into little pots of rich vegetable mould, and singing to myself half under my breath. I was quite unsuspecting and so were they.

“No,” said my father, “Hester does not know of it. Hester is a girl, Osborne – I have no desire to make a woman of her before her time.”

“Yet girls find out for themselves what interest they have in these matters,” said Mr. Osborne, in his quiet, half sarcastic tone, “and have speculations in those quiet eyes of theirs, whether we will or no, my friend.”

“There are few girls like Hester,” said my father, proudly; “pardon me, Osborne, but you have no child – I want to preserve her as she is – why should I bring a disturbing element into our peaceful life?”

“Why? do you think your little girl is safely through her probation, when she has had the measles and the hooping-cough?” said Mr. Osborne, laughing. “Nonsense, man – d’ye think ye save her from the epidemic of youth by shutting her up in this garden here? Take my word for it, these obnoxious things that you call the world and society, are much better preventives than this leisure and solitude. Why look at these windows, and be a sensible man, Southcote; d’ye think nobody in Corpus but an old fellow like me has seen your Proserpine among the flowers? How old is the child? tell me that, and I will tell you how soon there will be moonlight meditations, and breaking hearts, disturbing your peaceful life for you. Hester is a very good girl – of course, she is – but what is that to the question, I should be glad to know?”

I was very indignant by this time. I had very nearly caught his streaming gown, and shaken it with vehement displeasure, but, withal, I was very curious to know what was the origin of this conversation, and I subsided into a perfect guilty silence, and listened with all my might.

“You do not understand Hester, Osborne,” said my father.

“Granted,” said his friend, quickly, “and perhaps the young lady is not quite an orthodox subject of study, I allow you; but pray what do you intend to do with her? is she to live in this garden for ever, like that fantastic boy’s lady of Shalott?”

My father paused and I listened eagerly. It was some time before he answered, and there was hesitation in his usually firm tones.

“Life has deluded *me*,” he said, slowly. “I am at a loss to know how to guard Hester, that it may not delude her also.”

“Southcote,” said his companion, earnestly, “listen to me a moment. Life deludes no man. You are a self-devourer. You have deluded yourself; nay, take offence and, of course, I have done at once. I do not know the innocent mind of a young girl, very true; but I know that imagination is the very breath of youth – it must look forward, and it must dream – what is Hester to dream about, think you? not of the triumph of an examination, I suppose, nor of going in for honors; you have not even tried to kill the woman in her, and make her a scholar. The child is shamefully ignorant, Southcote. Why here’s this feminine rubbish lying under my very feet – look here!” and he pulled up my mangled embroidery. “I should not be surprised now if it pleased your fancy to see her bending her pretty head over this stuff – what’s she thinking of all this time, my friend? Nothing, eh? or only how to arrange the stitches, and make one little turn the same as another? I’ll trust Hester for that.”

There was another pause, and there he stood turning over my work, and I not able to rush forward and snatch it out of his hand. My cheeks burned with shame and anger – how dared any man discuss my thoughts and fancies so!

“Well, here is the real matter,” said my father, slowly; “Edgar Southcote, it appears, is eighteen – two years older than my Hester, and old enough, he thinks, as he tells me, to decide upon the most important event of his life for himself – so he sends me a formal proposal for the hand of his cousin. My difficulty is not whether to accept the proposal – you understand that, Osborne – but whether, before giving it a peremptory and decided negative, I ought to make it known to Hester?”

“I understand. Well now, waiving that principal difficulty, might one ask why this young man’s very reasonable proposal should have such a peremptory negative?” said Mr. Osborne; “for my own part I do not see that this is at all a necessary conclusion.”

“I am afraid it must suffice that *I* think it so,” said my father, in his firmest and coldest tone.

“On your high horse again, Southcote? Patience a little, now. Your brother Brian was not a strong-minded man – but a very good fellow for all that. What’s your objection now to his son?”

I almost trembled for this cool scrutinizing of my father’s motives and opinions, which he never revealed to any one – yet I too listened with interest for the answer. No answer came. My father spoke hurriedly and with irritation; but he did not reply.

“I presume you will permit us some little exercise of our own will as to the person whom we admit into our family,” he said; “but enough of this. Do you advise me to tell Hester, or to dispose of the affair on my own responsibility?”

Mr. Osborne seemed bent upon provoking my father’s slumbering resentment.

“Well,” he said with a pause of much consideration, “had the boy proposed to *you*, the answer would have lain with you of course – but I think it quite possible that some time or other in her life, Hester might remember that her old home in all its revenues, and, I have no doubt, a very worthy and generous youth along with them, had been laid at her feet, and her father, on his own responsibility, threw them away.”

“Osborne!” cried my father – I almost expected he would command him away, and bid him never more enter our house. I am sure I felt that I never could address him with ordinary civility again – but instead of that, after a moment’s pause, my father resumed, in vehement tones certainly, but not in tones of anger at the speaker. “Generous! and you think I would give my daughter to one who sought her from a generous impulse; you forget my life and you forget me.”

How my heart throbbed and resounded in its quick and painful beating! – I cannot tell how strangely I felt the possibility that I myself might one day or other realize in my own person the misfortune of my father’s life. Yes, Mr. Osborne was right thus far, I had not been thinking of nothing while I sat in the sunshine working at my embroidery. I had already seen dimly through the golden mists the hero, the prince, the red cross knight. I had already seen myself worshipped with the pure devotedness of chivalry. I had already, like a true girl and woman, imagined all manner of glories and honors won for me by my true knight, and prized because they made *him* nobler, and not because they exalted me. Yes! I had been dreaming innocent, beautiful, unworldly dreams – when lo! there fell upon me a vision of my cousin Edgar, and his *generous* impulse. I clenched my hands upon my little plant in a passion of indignation. The words stung me to the heart.

“Well – I am not astonished that you regard it in this light,” said Mr. Osborne, “but you must confess, at the same time, Southcote, that there is a more common sense way of looking at it. The boy is a good boy, and feels that he has been the means of injuring his cousin – what more natural than that the two branches of the family should unite their claims in this most satisfactory way – what is your objection to it? A punctilio? Come, don’t talk of it to Hester yet – let’s have a fight, old friend. I flatter myself you were none the worse in the old days of arguing out the matter with Frank Osborne. Now, then, for your arguments. Heigho! Howard, my boy, do you recollect the last time?”

There was so long a pause that I could not help stealing forward to look what was the reason. My father’s face was as black as night, and he stood opposite his friend in a rigid fixed attitude, vacantly looking at him – then he turned suddenly on his heel, “Excuse me – I am faint – I will return to you instantly,” he said, as he hurried in. Mr. Osborne shrugged his shoulders, gazed after him, shrugged again, began to whistle, and then suddenly turning round found himself face to face with me.

For the first moment I think I was the least disconcerted – for I was very angry and indignant beyond measure; but, as his face gradually brightened into its usual expression of shrewdness and good-humored sarcasm, my own courage fell. I had been eavesdropping, finding out my father’s secrets without his knowledge – playing a very shabby part – I who piqued myself upon my sense of honor.

“So!” said Mr. Osborne, “your father is right, young lady. I see I did not understand Hester; pray what may you be doing here?”

And I, who had intended to denounce his paltry views, and to pour out the full tide of my indignation upon him for thwarting and chafing my father – I was ready to cry with vexation and mortified pride. “I did not intend to listen – I was only here by chance – and, at first, I thought you knew I was here,” said I, making a pause between each sentence, swallowing down my ire and my humiliation. After all I had heard, to have to excuse myself to him!

“Well, your father’s run away,” said Mr. Osborne; “suppose we finish the argument, Hester. It is your concern after all; but I suppose such a thing as a sweetheart, or the dim possibility of being wooed and married never entered your guileless thoughts at all?”

I did not answer him – my girlish pride was on fire, and my cheeks burnt, but I could find nothing sufficiently annihilating to reply to Mr. Osborne.

We heard the noise of an opened door just then, and of a footstep in the passage which led to the garden. Mr. Osborne glanced hastily round him, and then bent forward to me.

“Hester, attend to me. You are very young, and have had a wild education; try, if you can think before you permit your father to decide on this. Do you mark me? I know this boy – he is a better boy than you are, and he has a fantastic fancy for you, as great as you could desire. Hester, here’s your father. I’ll keep your secret, and do you think of what I say.”

My father joined us immediately. If it surprised him to find me there, he took no notice of it, and I was glad to pick up my embroidery and hurry away. I was impressed with an uncomfortable necessity for thinking about it, from what Mr. Osborne had said, and I went to my own room to recollect myself. I could not deny either that I was a little excited and agitated about this new appearance of Edgar Southcote. It did not soften my heart to him, but it awoke my curiosity, and it made a step in my life. I said to myself with a beating heart – a heart disturbed with wonder, with anger, with surprise, and something like affright, that I was no longer a girl, but a woman now, standing upon the threshold of my life. I was sixteen. I thought I was rapidly maturing and growing old, for in this old house of ours, so quiet and withdrawn from common company, the days were peopled with fancies and imaginary scenes, and I did not know how very, very young and girlish were my secret conceptions of life and of the world.

Life! Here was my father, a man in whom I could see no blemish – what was his existence? Such as it was, he lived it in his library, among his books; talking with me now and then, and coming forth to take a long silent solitary walk, or a stroll in the garden in the evening, once or twice a week. Was this all? yes! and I said within myself in reverent explanation of it, that his life had been blighted and cast down by one wrong that always gnawed at his heart; he had married for love; but my mother had married him for pity. Was not this enough to account for the sombre shade in which he lived and walked? I said yes, yes! in eager youthful enthusiasm – yes, this was surely enough to decide for good or evil the whole tenor of a life.

And then there was Alice! Nothing in this house or about it, not even the sunshine, cheered my heart like the smile of Alice; yet she was not merry, and had little to be merry for. Alice was like one who had come out of a desert, leaving all her loves and treasures there behind her – she had lost everything, everything but her life – what had she to live for? I shuddered while I said so; for without Alice how dreary would my days be; and then I paused to recollect that on the borders of this grand and momentous existence, where my father had failed in his own enterprise for happiness, and in which Alice had lost all she loved, my own feet were standing now.

This was what I thought on the subject which Mr. Osborne recommended to my consideration; when I thought again of Edgar, it was with a renewed flush of anger and mortification. My cousin pitied me, who dreamed of inspiring some true knight with the loftiest ambitions, and rewarding him sufficiently with a smile. I was to be subjected to the humiliating proposals which Edgar Southcote’s “generous impulse” suggested to him! These were unfortunate words – how often they have clamored in my ear, and haunted me since then.

I did not go into the garden again that day; not even when it was twilight, and the dews were culling out the odors, and the murmur of hushed sounds and distant voices from the quiet town charmed the dim air into an enchanted calm. In my new-born consciousness, I walked up and down the dim close, at the other side of the house, where there were no windows overlooking the high walls and its glistening ivy. I would be no Proserpine among the flowers, to any foolish boy who dared spy upon my retirement from the college windows. Proserpine! if Mr. Osborne had known I heard him, he never would have called me by that name, nor supposed that any gownsman of Corpus could ever interest *me!* I had a great contempt for my next neighbors in my girlish loftiness and maturity. I could not have been more insulted than by such an insinuation as this.

And then I went to the drawing-room, and stationed myself at my usual place in the window; the long room was nearly dark, though the pale half-light streamed through it from window to window, and it was strange to look across the whole length of the room to the ivy leaves faintly quivering on the wall at the other side. My father and Mr. Osborne, who had dined with us, were walking in the garden, talking earnestly, and with some indignation I watched them, wondering if they still talked of me. Then there came out, one by one, these lights in the windows, some of them looking faint and steady like true students' lamps, some suspiciously bright as though there was merry-making within. It pleased me to watch them, as window after window brightened on the night. I scorned the inmates; but I did not scorn these neighborly and kindly lights.

My father came in very soon, and Mr. Osborne called me to say good-night; I went down to him where he stood at the door, and he held my hand a moment, and looked into my face. "Now, Hester, good night – think of what I said," he repeated. These words induced me to return very quickly upstairs, where my father had gone, following Alice with the lamp. When she had placed it on the table and left the room, I went to my father and stood beside him, till he lifted his eyes from the book. He looked at me with a kind loving look, as if he had pleasure in seeing me – a look not very usual to my father – and took my hand as he always used to do, when I stood at his knee, to ask anything of him as a child, and said, "Well, Hester?" I was full of excitement and resolution, and came to my subject at once, without remembering that I might be blamed for what I had to say first. "I was in the greenhouse, papa, when you were talking there with Mr. Osborne to-day," I said, firmly – and then I paused with a sudden recollection that this was not quite consistent either with my father's code of honor or my own.

"I did not intend to listen – it was very wrong – but I could not conceal it from you, now it is done," I proceeded hurriedly, "and I have come to say, papa, that I heard what you told Mr. Osborne about Edgar Southcote. I wonder how he dares presume upon us so; I think a true gentleman would be sorry to let us see that he was able to be generous to us; and I hope you will write to him at once, papa, and if it is necessary to say anything from me, let it be that I hope there never will be any communication between us, nor any need for me to tell him what I think in plain words."

My father continued to smile upon me, holding my hand, but without speaking – then he said, still with a smile – "This is a very enigmatical message, Hester – I am afraid I must make it plainer; for this young man, your cousin, has not dared nor presumed so much as you seem to think, my love; I am to tell him that we cannot entertain any proposal for an alliance between the rival branches of the house of Southcote, that we beg his overtures may not be repeated, and though sensible of the great honor he does us, we must beg to decline any further correspondence on the subject – is that what you mean, Hester? I think that is about as much as we are entitled to say."

I was scarcely pleased at the playful manner in which my father now treated a matter which he evidently had not looked on in a playful light a few hours ago; but, at the same time, his tone made me ashamed of my own vehemence, and I assented hastily. He still held my hand, and his face became quite grave – he seemed to see that I was surprised, and wanted explanation of what he had said.

"I am afraid we are thinking of this young man with a little bitterness, Hester," said my father, raising his lofty head, "which is not very creditable to us, I fear, my love; – that he has claimed and

won what is justly his own, can be no wrong or offence to us. It is rather my part to thank him that he has set me right, than to imply that he has injured me. This last is by no means a dignified assumption, Hester, and it is more or less implied in every harsh judgment we give against your cousin – whereas he is simply indifferent to us, and in rejecting this proposal, I do it with civility, you perceive, just as I would any proposal which was distasteful, from whomsoever it came.”

This speech of my father’s impressed me very greatly; I left him holding my head erect, yet feeling humbled. Yes, I had been very bitter in my heart against Edgar Southcote – I had felt resentment against him, strong and violent, as the supplanter of my father; but it was mean to dislike him on such a ground – it was what Alice called “a poor pride;” yet I confess, it was somewhat difficult to rise, in anything but words, to the altitude of the other pride, and say “he is quite indifferent to me – he has done me no wrong – it is not possible that I can have any grudge against my cousin.”

It was thus that I returned to my window-seat; when I placed myself in my favorite corner, I looped up the curtain, so that I could look in as well as out. The room was dim with that summer dimness which only the evening firelight drives away, and the mild light of the lamp shone softly in the middle of the silent apartment, throwing every piece of furniture near in shadows on the carpet, and leaving all the corners in a faint half-shade of darkness. The point of light in the room was my father’s high white forehead, looking like marble with that illumination on it, and contrasting so strangely with his black hair. I looked at him as I might have looked at a picture. On one of his thin white fingers he had a ring, a very fine diamond in a slender circle of gold, which flashed and shone in the light as he raised his hand, now and then, to turn a leaf – behind him and around him there was shadow and darkness, but the light had gathered on his face, and shone there like a star to me, as I lay within the curtain looking out into the stillness: and on my other hand was the soft gloom of a summer night lying close with its downy plumes upon the trees, and the soft pale skies with a faint star in them here and there, and the lights in the college windows glowing upon youth and untried strength like mine. Rest and calm, and the mild oblivion of the night enclosed us like the arms of angels, but did not silence the swell of the rising tide in my heart.

THE FOURTH DAY

IT was winter again, a gloomy November day, ungenial and cold. The rain was beating on the dark buildings of the college, and saturating the dreary greensward in our garden, till it sunk under the foot like a treacherous bog. There was not a leaf on the trees, and the ivy on the high wall of the close at the other side, glistened and fluttered under the rain. There was nothing very cheerful to be seen out of doors. I was alone in our drawing-room, and it was still early, and nothing had occurred to break the morning torpor of this unbrightened day. I was sitting at the table, working with great assiduity, with scraps of my materials lying round me on every side. My occupation was not a very serious one, though I pursued it with devotion. I was only dressing a doll for a little girl, who was niece to Alice, and named after me; but as it did not consist with my ambitious desires to have a doll of my dressing arrayed like a doll which could be bought by any one, I was attiring this one in elaborate historical costume, like a lady of the age of Elizabeth, or even – so stiff and so grand was she – like that grim and glorious sovereign herself.

The fire burned with a deep red glow, so full that it warmed and reddened the very color of the room; and though it was a very subdued and gloomy light which came through the rain, from those heavy leaden skies, there was a warmth and comfort in the stillness here, which was rather increased than diminished by the dreary prospect without. It was very still – the great old clock ticking on the stair, the rain pattering upon the gravel and on the broad flag-stones at the kitchen door below, the faint rustle of the ivy leaves upon the wall, and sometimes the footsteps of Alice, or of Mary, as they went up and down about their household work, were all the sounds I could hear; and as the excitement of my enterprise subsided, and my occupation itself was almost done, I began to be restless in the extreme quietness. It is true, I was very well used to it, and made up to myself largely by dreams and by visions; but I am not sure that I was much of a dreamer by nature. I had a strong spirit of action and adventure stirring within me. I was moved by the swiftest and most uncontrollable impulses, and had such a yearning upon me to do something now and then, that there was about the house a score of things begun, which it was impossible I could ever finish, and which, indeed, I never tried to finish, except under a momentary inspiration. If any one had tried to direct me, I might have applied to better purpose my superfluous energy – but no one did – so I wasted it in wild fancies, and turbulent attempts at doing something, and sometimes got so restless with the pressure of my own active thoughts and unemployed faculties, that I could rest nowhere, but wandered about as perverse and unreasonable as it was possible for a lonely girl to be, and generally ended by quarrelling with Alice, and finding myself to be in the wrong, and miserable to my heart's content.

This stillness! it began to get intolerable now – to sit and look at these ivy leaves, and at the rain soaking into the spongy grass – to feel the warm full glow of the fire actually make me sleepy in the vacancy of my life – I started up in high disdain, and threw down the doll which caricatured Queen Elizabeth. I wanted something to do – something to do – I was sixteen and a half, high spirited, warm tempered, a Southcote! and I had nothing better to do with my youth and my strength, than to fall asleep over the fire, before it was noon in the day! I rushed down stairs immediately, with one of my sudden impulses to make some sort of attack upon Alice. I would have been glad to think that it was somebody's fault that my life was of so little use; and I ran along the passage leading to the kitchen with an impatient step; on the same floor was my father's study, and a little odd parlor where we now and then sat; but I did not disturb my father with my perverse thoughts.

The kitchen was not very large, but looked so cheerful, that it always reminded me of Alice. The walls of the ground floor of the house were founded on some tiers of massy stonework, and I suppose that gave it a look of warmth and stability – and in the side of the room, which was of this same old masonry almost to the roof, there was a little high window with an arched top, which threw a strange stream of sunlight into the room, and constantly annoyed Alice, in the summer, by putting out

her fire. There was no sun to put out anybody's fire to-day, but the rain beat against the panes instead, and the high straggling head of a withered hollyhock nodded at the window-sill, with the dreariest impertinence. In the breadth of the kitchen, however, looking out on the garden, was a broad low lattice, quite uncurtained, which gave the fullest light of which the day was capable to this cheerful apartment; and at the great table which stood by it, Alice was standing making some delicate cakes, in the manufacture of which she excelled. I came up to her hastily, and threw myself upon the wooden chair beside her. I was full of those endless metaphysical inquiries which youth – and especially youth that has nothing to do, abounds in – what was life for – what was it – what was the good of me, my particular self, and for what purpose did I come into the world? Before now, I had poured my questionings into the ears of Alice, but Alice was very little moved by them, I am constrained to say.

“Have you done, Miss Hester?” said Alice, for I had taken her into my counsels to discuss the momentous question of the doll's costume, and of what period it was to be.

“Oh, yes! I am done,” said I; “only think, Alice, nothing better to do all this morning than dress a doll; and now I have nothing at all to do.”

“Dear Miss Hester, you never can want plenty of things to amuse you,” said Alice; “don't speak to me so – it's unkind to your papa.”

“I don't want things to amuse me,” said I, “I want something to do, Alice. What is the use of me – it is very well for you – you are always busy – but I want to know what's the good of me!”

“You must not say that, dear! don't now,” said Alice, “you're but a child – you're only coming to your life – ”

“I don't think life is much better, Alice,” said I. “Mr. Osborne and my father dispute for hours about passages in Greek books; are books life? I don't think there's any satisfaction in them, more than in dressing a doll.”

“You did not think so on Tuesday night, my dear,” said Alice quietly, “when the light was in your window half through the night, and I know you were sitting up reading one.”

“Ah! but that was a novel,” I cried, starting up, “that is the very thing! May I send Mary to the library? I will have one to-day.”

So I ran up stairs to make a list of certain desirable volumes, and sent off Mary forthwith; then I returned to the table, where Alice made her cakes, and to my wooden chair.

“No, there is no satisfaction in them,” said I, “even a novel has an end, Alice; but do you think that reading pages of printed paper is all that people need to care for – do you think that is life?”

“Life is not one thing, but a many things, Miss Hester,” said Alice. “Dear, you're a-coming to it now.”

“What am I coming to – only to breakfast, and dinner, and supper, over and over again, Alice,” said I. “I don't think it was so at Cottiswoode, but it is so here, I know – then you have to work all day to cook for us, and we have to eat what you cook – and that is our life.”

“Don't speak so, Miss Hester,” entreated Alice once more, “it is not a poor woman like me that can tell you what life is; there were ten years or more in my life that were full of great things happening to me; but little happened to me before or after – you would think it was not worth my while living after these years.”

I confessed to my thought. “Yes, Alice! I am afraid I did think so; though I would be a very desolate girl, I am sure, without you.”

It seemed to move her a little, this that I said. Her cheeks reddened, and she paused in her work.

“If you were older, you would know better,” said Alice. “After the last of them were gone, it was a dreary, dreary time. I rose to do my work, Miss Hester, and laid me down to sleep and forget what a lonesome woman I was. What was it you said this morning about the new day cheering you, and the fresh spirit you had when you woke, howsoever you had been at night? I know what that is – but after my troubles, when I opened my eyes, and saw the daylight, it made me sick – I used to turn my face to the wall, and wish and wish that I might sleep on, and never wake to think about what had

befallen me; but still I lived, and still I lived, and the breakfast and the dinner and the common ways were what God had appointed me. If I said life was trouble and sorrow, would you like it better than when its only comfort was quiet, and reading books as it is with you?”

“But it was not all trouble and sorrow, Alice, in these ten years?”

Her face changed again a little. I knew I was urging her to a painful subject, yet I did not pause; and I do not think my questions grieved her, even though they revived her grief.

“When joy turns to sorrow, it’s the sorest grief of all, Miss Hester,” said Alice; “no, I was happy beyond the common lot of women, but one by one everything I rejoiced in was taken away. Yes, that was *life*— I had babies in my arms, and plans for them in my heart; I was working and contriving for their schooling and their clothing, and laying by for them and considering in my mind how to train them up. We were walking together, striving for them, using all our strength, my husband and me; ay, that was life!”

I was a little awed by the words and said nothing. All this had ceased for Alice – absolutely ceased – yet left a far sorer blank than if it had never been. As I looked at her, going on very hurriedly with her work, something I had been reading came to my mind. I said it aloud, watching her, and wondering if it was true —

“I hold it true whate’er befall,
I feel it when I sorrow most;
’Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.”

Alice turned round to me eagerly with a tear shining in her eye.

“Don’t you think I’d rather have been without them, Miss Hester; don’t you think it now! it’s hard to lose, but it’s blessed to have; that’s true – that’s true! I would not have been without one, though they’re all gone: I have read in books many a time, good books, books that were written on purpose to comfort the sorrowful,” said Alice, sinking to her usual quietness of tone, “that God did but lend our treasures to us, to take them back at His pleasure. No, Miss Hester, no! – as sure as they are His, my darling, His first and His always, so sure do I know that He’s keeping them for me.”

I was silenced again, and had nothing to say, for the name of God then was nothing but a sound of awe to me. I held it in the deepest reverence, this wonderful great name – but *Him*, the august and gracious Person to whom my poor Alice lived, her bereaved and pious life, was unknown to me.

And Alice, I believe, had reproached herself already, for bringing her real griefs, or the shadow of them, to eclipse my cherished discontent. She returned to me with her face lighting up again in its cheerful kind humility.

“Ay, Miss Hester, that’s life to a woman,” said Alice, “and, my dear, in a year or two, you will find it waiting for you.”

But this did not at all chime in with the current of my thoughts.

“Do you think, Alice, that a woman is fit for nothing but to be married?” I exclaimed, fiercely. Poor Alice was taken by surprise: she had not expected such a flush of sudden displeasure – she paused in her work, and looked at my crimsoned face with a glance of real apprehension. Alice was old-fashioned and held by many primitive notions – she did not understand what I could mean.

“Miss Hester, if it’s the nuns you’re thinking of, I’ll break my heart,” said Alice.

“I’m not thinking of the nuns,” cried I, indignantly, “why should a lady be married any more than Mr. Osborne? do you mean I could not be as well by myself as he is? I do not think you can have any woman-pride when you speak so, Alice.”

Alice smiled with her eyes when I made this speech, but kept her gravity otherwise. “To be like Mr. Osborne is nothing much to wish for, my dear,” said Alice, quietly, “but I can tell you, Miss Hester, it is not Mr. Osborne’s fault that he is living lone in his rooms, a college gentleman, instead

of having his own house, and a happy family round him – if it had pleased God. Ah! if Mr. Osborne had been the man!”

“What do you mean?” said I, quickly; I had an instinctive suspicion as she spoke.

“Long days ago, before ever your papa knew my dear young lady, Mr. Osborne came a-courting to her,” said Alice, “and if you’d have told that merry young gentleman what he was to come to, he’d have laughed in your face then; he did not choose for himself in those days to be living all by himself as he does now.”

“Mamma again,” said I under my breath, with wonder and curiosity, “did she break *his* heart too?”

“To tell the truth I do not think she did, Miss Hester,” said Alice, with a smile, “it’s only a heart here and there, my dear, that breaks when it’s crossed in love.”

“Alice!” cried I, horror-stricken at her want of feeling – for I had a very poor opinion of any heart which would not break instantly for such a weighty reason.

“She did not break his heart, dear; she only disappointed him,” said Alice, “and I never heard how it was that he took so much to learning and settled down here; but he never had any grudge at Miss Helen, though I can see he likes you the better for it, that you sometimes have a look like her sweet face.”

“She was my mother,” said I doubtfully, “but it was cruel of her to marry papa, Alice. Why was it, I wonder, that so many people cared for her?”

“It was because she deserved better love than she ever got in this world,” said Alice, with a start; “why was it cruel of her to marry your papa, Miss Hester? It was cruel of him – she never gave him cause to doubt her, she waited on his will as if he had been a king; oh! my dear, your papa was hard upon my young lady, and all for a fancy of his own.”

“It has blighted his life, Alice,” said I.

“Your papa is my master, Miss Hester,” said Alice, with some pride, “and you and I can only speak of him as his servant and his daughter should – but I would have you think upon your mamma sometimes – your dear, sweet, innocent young mother; she never did harm to any living creature; she was always a delight to look upon till – ”

“Till what, Alice?”

“My dear, till *her* heart broke.”

Alice moved away without saying another word; this was a perplexing new light upon my meditations, but I was very reluctant to receive it. If it should happen that my mother had been misconceived and misinterpreted – that she, after all, was the wronged person, and that my father was to blame, it might have made a great difference in the influences which just then were moulding my mind and life; but I rejected this unwelcome conclusion – I would not permit myself to be convinced of it. I clung over again to my father, and made my stand by him, and so went on, unconsciously determining and ripening for my fate.

“Don’t take it ill of me, Miss Hester,” said Alice, coming back, and I thought her voice trembled slightly, “but never distrust one that cares for you, dear – don’t do it – you can’t tell what ill comes of it in a house; and when any one speaks to you of a blighted life, be you sure it’s his own doing more or less, and not another’s. Take heed to your way, darling, there’s not a speck on your life yet; but the cloud rises like a man’s hand, Miss Hester. Pray that it may never come to you.”

“Alice, how can it come to me?” cried I, trying to smile at her earnestness, yet I was angry for her implied blame of my father, and at the moment Edgar Southcote’s rejected overtures flashed upon my mind. Yes! if by any chance these had been accepted, the curse of my father’s life would have come to me. I was silent, oppressed by a vague discomfort; it was foolish, but I could not overcome it, and Alice did not answer my question, but returned to her work once more.

When Mary came back with the novel I wanted, I confess that I ran up stairs with it, and that there ensued an immediate dispersion of my thoughts – nor did I recal them much till the evening

when I had galloped through the three volumes, and was left sitting by the fire in the sudden reaction of excitement, to cogitate upon the disagreeable necessity common to stories, of coming to an end. My father, who, from habit and punctilio, never returned to the library in the evening, sat at the table as usual with his book, and after a little pause of impatience at the conclusion of my tale, I resumed the thread of my previous meditations. I had been a little startled and shaken to-day in my thoughts. To say that I was inclined to scoff at the youthful notion of a life determined once and for ever by the misfortune which Alice mentioned as being “crossed in love,” would be to say what was not true – for my ideal belief in this extraordinary and all-powerful unknown influence was as devout as that of any girl or boy of my years, and I had an equal admiration for that melancholy constant faithful lover, doomed to be unrequited, and never to overcome his disappointment, of whose existence many a romance had made me aware. But I was misanthropical to-night from the abrupt ending of my novel – and there was still the greater part of the evening left vacant with no new story to begin – so I speculated with a more sceptical mind than usual upon my great problem. Was it my mother, so many years ago – twenty years or more, a fabulous and unappreciable period, before I was born – whose rejection of him had fixed Mr. Osborne in his rooms at Corpus, and made the records of his life little better than a library catalogue? Was it my mother, and his disappointment in her, which had cast my father into his existence of aimless and sombre dignity? Was all this the single work of a young girl who died nearly seventeen years ago, and who was not much more than twenty when she died?

I was much perplexed to answer this question; though it flattered my pride as a woman shortly to enter upon the field myself, and perhaps make decisions of equally momentous result to somebody, it sadly bewildered my perceptions of right and wrong. I felt humbled rather than exalted in my own self-opinion by the idea, that anything *I* said or did could produce such consequences; and I could not understand about Mr. Osborne. He, with his shrewd merry eyes, his regard for all his own comforts and luxuries, his want of sentiment and melancholy – that *he* should be the disappointed lover, almost exceeded my powers of belief. I was glad to think that he must have “got over it,” but I was greatly puzzled to make the conclusion whether it could be this that decided the manner of his life.

My father was extremely absorbed in *his* book to-night – more than usually so I thought; and I am afraid that circumstance made me still more disposed to question him, unoccupied and idle as I was. I had disturbed him two or three times already by stirring the fire, and moving my seat, and had perceived his quick upward glance of impatience, but I was not deterred from beginning my investigations.

“Papa, have you known Mr. Osborne a very long time?” said I, looking at his face in the lamplight, and at the ray of reflection which came from the diamond on his finger. He looked up sharply as if not quite comprehending.

“Known Mr. Osborne? – yes, a long time, Hester – since I was a boy.”

“And do you know why he lives here – why he is not married, papa?” I continued quietly.

My father looked up with a smile. “He is not married because he did not choose it, I suppose; and because he is a fellow, and has his income on that condition. Osborne is a scholar, and not a family man.”

“I wonder now what is the good of being a scholar,” said I. “Is Mr. Osborne poor? Does he do it for the sake of his income? Yes! I know all these colleges are for making scholars – but then, what is the good of it, papa?”

“Hester, you speak like a child,” said my father with a little anger; “you might say in the same foolish words what is the good of anything – what is the good of life?”

“And so I do,” said I with a little terror, and in an undertone.

“So! I have a young misanthrope on my hands – have I?” said my father; “we will not enter on that question, but return to Mr. Osborne, if you please, for I am busy. Are you very sorry for Mr. Osborne, Hester?”

“No, papa,” said I.

“I am glad to hear it – there is no such prolific source of evil in the world,” said my father gradually becoming vehement, “as false and injudicious pity – take care you never let *that* fictitious principle sway your conduct, Hester. Justice – let every man have justice – and he who is not content with that deserves no more.”

He ceased abruptly, and returned to his book with a stern face. This was enough for me; all my questionings disappeared at once, in the greatness of my sympathy for my father. I thought again upon Edgar Southcote, and upon his “generous impulse.” I unconsciously associated myself with my father, and took his place, and tried to fancy the intolerable misery with which I should feel the substitution of pity and generosity in my own case, for that unknown love, that wonderful visionary influence which was in my favorite stories, and in my girlish dreams – and my heart returned to its former confidence in my father, and passionate feeling of his great wrong. His life *had* been blighted – who could deny it! he who was so well worthy of the loftiest affection, he had found nothing better than pity in its place.

It is not my wish to trace all we did hour by hour in our solitary house, or I might record many a day like this. This was not a day of very vital moment in my life – but it was one which confirmed into singular strength and obstinacy, the influences which have guided and led me through many a more momentous day.

THE FIFTH DAY

ALL this day, with a degree of expectation and excitement, of which I felt somewhat ashamed, I had been preparing for a party to which, at the instance of Mr. Osborne, I was to go in the evening. It was a ridiculous thing for a girl of nineteen – that was my age now – to think so much of a party which was by no means a great party, nor had anything remarkable about it; but, though I was so old, I had never been out anywhere before, and much as I denied it to myself, this was really an event for me. Our days were all so like each other, of such a uniform color and complexion, that it was something to be roused even to anxiety for a becoming dress. We were not precisely poor – this old house in which we lived was my father's property, and though I did not know what was the amount of the income which he inherited, along with this house, from his mother, I knew it was enough to maintain us in comfort, and that nothing in the household was ever straitened. But, I had never gone out in the evening before, and I did not very well know what to wear. Alice and I had a great many consultations on the subject. For my own part, I thought white muslin was only suitable for *girls*, and very young people, and at nineteen I no longer thought myself very young; and I had no patience for the pink and blue in which dolls were dressed as well as young ladies – it was very hard to please me – and the question remained still undecided, even to the afternoon of this very day —

When I went up to my room and summoned Alice for our last deliberation. I found a white muslin dress elaborately propped up on a chair, waiting my inspection at one side of my dressing-table; and at the other: yes, I was no stoic, I confess to a throb of pleasure which I can still recollect and feel – at the other, rich full folds of silk, of what I thought, for a moment, the most beautiful color in the world, a soft creamy amber crossed with white, attracted my delighted eye. Alice stood behind me, watching the effect it would have, and Alice, I am sure, had no reason to be disappointed; but when I cried eagerly, “Where did you get it, Alice?” the smile faded from her kind face.

“My dear, it was given to your mamma just before you were born,” said Alice, “and she would not permit it to be made, for I don't doubt, Miss Hester, she had a thought how it was to happen with her – and from that day to this, I have kept it safe, and nobody has ever known of it but me; and I thought I would take upon me to have it made, Miss Hester. Dear! you have very few things that were your mamma's.”

I expressed no more delight after that. I almost think she thought me angry, her explanation silenced me so suddenly; but she said no more, and neither did I. There were other little things arranged for me on my table which I turned to with measured satisfaction. I think poor Alice was disappointed now, for I saw her cast furtive glances at me as she smoothed down the silk with a tender hand, trying as I thought to draw my attention to it; and I would gladly have spoken, if I could, to please her; but I was strangely moved by this occurrence, and could not speak.

And when I came up again to dress, and Alice began to brush out my hair, I saw her face in the glass, and that it was troubled and tears were in her eyes. She did not think I saw her, while she stood behind me busy with my hair, and when she looked up and saw that my eyes were fixed upon her in the glass, she started and reddened, and was painfully confused for a moment. I knew what she was thinking – she was pained in her good heart for what she thought the hardness of mine.

When I was dressed and looked in the mirror again, I scarcely knew myself in my unusual splendor. Yet I was not very splendid – I had not a single ornament, not so much as a ring or bracelet – and I am not sure the color of my dress was the best in the world for my brown hair; but, I had a very fair complexion, Alice said, and some color in my cheeks, though I was not ruddy; and my uncovered arms, with their very short sleeves and rich frill of lace, and the unusual elaboration of my hair, and the beautiful material of my dress, made me look a very different person from the plain everyday girl who had entered the room an hour before.

“There is one thing I would like to have,” said I, as I contemplated my own appearance, and saw with how much proud, yet tremulous satisfaction, Alice stood behind, arranging the folds of my dress, and regulating, with anxious touches, the beautiful trimmings of lace, and the braids of my hair.

“What is that, dear?” cried Alice eagerly.

“One of the roses that you brought from Cottiswoode – one from *that* tree – to put here at my breast,” said I. “Alice, I will think all to-night, that this dress is from mamma.”

Alice kissed me suddenly before I had finished speaking.

“Lord bless my darling!” she said in a low voice, turning her face away from me; I knew she did so that I might not see how very near crying she was.

When I went to show myself to my father – he was not going – but a lady, a friend of Mr. Osborne’s, was to come for me – he looked at me with some surprise.

“What fairy princess gave you your gown, Hester?” he said, with a smile. I could not help hesitating and looking embarrassed, when I answered almost under my breath,

“Alice had it, papa.”

He became grave immediately, and the color flushed to his cheek. Then he opened a cabinet which always stood in his library, both here and at Cottiswoode, and took out a box.

“These are yours, Hester – it is time they were given to you,” he said, almost with coldness; “you will use your own discretion in wearing them, only I beg you will not show them to me to-night. Good-night, my love, take what pleasure you can, and be ready when your friend calls for you – good-night.”

I carried the box away mechanically, and returned to the drawing-room to wait for Mrs. Boulder. I was surprised, but still sufficiently curious to open the box at once. It contained a number of smaller morocco jewel cases, which I examined eagerly; I was as ignorant as my father of the ancient fashion of these ornaments, but I think an uncultivated and savage taste such as mine was, is generally disappointed with the appearance of precious stones. I was extremely interested, but I did not admire them, and that I should wear them did not occur to me at the first moment. But there was one little spot of quivering living light which changed my opinion; it was a small diamond pendant attached to a very little chain, which puzzled me into a deliberation whether it was intended for the neck or the arm. I tried it on, however, and settled the question in the most satisfactory manner possible; and then there was a bracelet of pearls, and then – but Mrs. Boulder’s carriage came up to the door with a great rush and din, and I hurried away my store of treasures, and suffered myself to be wrapped up, and went away to make my first entrance into the world.

The world! had I been a boy I would have been an adventurer, and sought my fortunes in toils, and fights, and travel: but it was strange to look round upon this Cambridge drawing-room, and think of it and of its well-dressed, commonplace company as representing the great stormy universe, of which I had my grand thoughts, like every other inexperienced spirit. There was a large company, I thought, being unused to evening parties. Mr. Osborne and a few more of his rank and standing, scholars who looked shorn and diminished for want of their habitual cap and gown, some young undergraduates, and a background of county people made up the number – and a stray lion from London, who had been caught in the neighborhood, was reported to be somewhere in the room. My chaperone, Mrs. Boulder, was a professor’s wife, and herself a scientific person, who seldom condescended to talk of anything but literature, geology, and the gossip of the colleges; she was very much interested about this unknown author. From the sofa where she had established herself, and where her professional black satin swept its ample folds over my pretty dress, she was constantly thrusting her head into the groups of people who gathered before her, searching with her spectacles for somebody who might be the distinguished visitor.

“That must be he, talking to the Master,” she exclaimed, “no, there is another stranger, I declare, a very remarkable looking personage, beside Mr. Selwyn. I wonder why nobody brings him to me. Mr. Osborne – Mr. Osborne! Professor! I cannot make any of them hear me; my love, would you mind stepping to Mr. Osborne? There he is talking to that very old Fellow. Call him to me.”

I rose with considerable trepidation to obey – an old Fellow, it must be understood, is by no means a contemptuous expression in a University town; and this was a very old white-haired man with whom Mr. Osborne was engaged. He held out his hand when I came up to him, and looked at me with a glance of pleased satisfaction, almost as if he were proud of me, which warmed my heart in spite of myself. I told my message, but he made no haste to obey it. He only nodded his head, with a smile, in answer to Mrs. Boulder's urgent beckoning.

"Should *you* like to see him, Hester?" said Mr. Osborne, "there he is, that young dandy there, among all the young ladies – he prefers worshippers to critics, like a sensible man. Should you like to hear the great lion roar, Hester?"

"I am very glad to have seen him," said I, "but he has enough of worshippers. No, thank you: but Mrs. Boulder wants to see him, Mr. Osborne."

"Presently," he said, once more nodding at that tantalized and impatient lady, "presently – and how do you like the party, Hester?"

"I like very well to look at it," said I, glancing round the handsome, well-proportioned, well-lighted room, "it is a picture, but I do not know any one here."

"We will remedy that, by and by," said Mr. Osborne, "see there is something to look at in the meantime; and I will bring Mrs. Boulder to you here."

As he spoke, he wheeled in a chair for me, close to a table, covered with plates and drawings. I could not help being pleased at the kindness of his manner and tone, and at the pride he seemed to have in me, as if he wished other people to see that I belonged to him. A young man was standing at the table, minutely examining some of the prints – at least, I supposed so, they occupied him so long; and the old gentleman who had been speaking to Mr. Osborne, remained by me when he went to Mrs. Boulder, and said a word now and then, to encourage me, and set me at my ease I thought – for I was shy and embarrassed, and not very comfortable at being left alone. The young man on the other side of the table – how very long he held that print! it made me impatient to watch his examination of it, and ashamed of myself for finding so little in the others to detain me. When he laid it down at last – it was one of those street landscapes of the old quaint Flemish towns – the old gentleman made some remark upon it, and the young one replied. They had both been there. I have no doubt that was the reason why he looked at it so long.

"These Low Countries – you have not seen them, Miss Southcote?" said Mr. Osborne's friend, "they are about as dull and unimpressive as our own Cambridgeshire." I had a great deal of local pride and was piqued at this – it restored me to my self-possession better than his kindness had done. "Do you think Cambridgeshire is unimpressive?" I asked quickly, looking up at him.

"Why, yes, I confess I think so," said the old Fellow. "I have forgotten my native fells a little, after living here nearly fifty years; but I have never learned yet to find any beauty in the country here. Pray what are its impressive features, Miss Southcote?"

I paused a moment that I might not be angry. "There is the sky," said I.

The youth, on the other side of the table, bent towards me to listen; the old gentleman laughed a polite little critical laugh. "The sky is scarcely a part of the Cambridgeshire scenery, I am afraid," he said.

As I paused, not quite knowing what to answer, the young man came to my aid. "I am not sure of that, sir," he said, with a look of eagerness, which struck me with some wonder. "The sky is as much a portion of the Cambridgeshire scenery as Michael Angelo's roof is a part of the Sistine chapel. Where else have you such an extent of cloud and firmament? You must yield us the sky."

"The sky belongs equally to every county in England, and to every country in the world," said our white-haired critic. "I will yield you no such thing – there is but one Sistine chapel in the world, and one roof belonging to it. You must find a better argument."

"You can see so far – you are bounded by nothing but heaven," said I.

“Yes,” said my new supporter, “there is the true sense of infinitude in that wonderful vast blank of horizon; you never find the same thing in a hilly country, and it is perfect of its kind.”

“My young assailants,” said the old gentleman, smiling, “if you mean to maintain that your county has no features at all, I have no controversy with you; that is exactly my own opinion.”

It happened that as we both glanced up indignantly, and both paused, hesitating what next to say to such an obdurate infidel, our eyes met. He looked at me earnestly, almost sadly, and with a rising color – I felt my cheeks burn, yet could not help returning his gaze for an instant. It was a contemplative face, with fine and regular features, and large dark blue eyes; the oval outline of the cheeks was quite smooth, and the complexion dusky and almost colorless; but I was surprised to find myself wondering over this stranger’s features, as if they were familiar to me. Where was it possible I could have seen them before? but, indeed, if he was a Cambridgeshire man, as his words implied, it was easy to account for having seen him.

For the moment, looking at each other, we forgot the cause we were defending, and our antagonist stood contemplating us with a pleasant smile; he did not say anything, but when I looked up and caught his eye, I withdrew my own in confusion. I did not know why, and there was, indeed, no cause, but though I could not explain, I felt a strange embarrassment, and hastened to speak to shake it off.

“I know what I mean, though I may not be able to say it,” said I; “I think in our country you are never master of the landscape – you can never see it all, as you could if it was shut in with hills; it is always greater than you – and it is because our eyes are not able, and not because there is any obstacle in nature, that we cannot see twice as far – to the end of the world.”

“It is quite true,” said the young man hurriedly, “these flat fields are boundless like the sky – or like a man’s desires which are limited by nothing but heaven.”

“My dear boy, a man’s desires are limited by very trifles, sometimes,” said our old friend; “happy are they whose wishes reach like your Cambridge fields as far as the horizon. If you come to that,” he continued, going on with a smile, “and give a figurative significance to those dreary levels, I will not quarrel with you. In my north country, which, by the way, I have quite lost acquaintance with – the extent of our ambition is, to have our hills recognised as mountains, and get to the top of them; but your land, I confess, Miss Southcote, gets to the sky as soon as we do; there is no dispute about that.”

I was obliged to be content with this, satirical as it was, and began to occupy myself immediately with the prints on the table. The old gentleman fell back a step, and began conversing with some one else. The youth still stood opposite, holding an engraving in his hands and going over it minutely. It was very strange – I cannot tell how it came about – but in this crowded room, and among all these echoes of conversation, I felt myself in some extraordinary way alone with this young stranger. I never lifted my eyes from the picture before me, yet I was aware of every motion he made – and though he did not once look up, I felt his eye upon me. We did not exchange a single word, but we remained opposite each other perfectly still, watching each other with a sort of fascination. I do not know how the time went for those few moments – I know it looked like an hour to me before Mrs. Boulder came back; yet when she did come back, she exclaimed at having lost sight of me for full ten minutes, and began to overpower me with an account of the unknown lion, and the clever things he said – and to pull about and turn over the prints which had been passing so slowly and so unwittingly through my hands.

Mrs. Boulder had not been seated by our table for five minutes when she had a ring of potent people round her, whom she had called out of the crowd. I sat by her timidly on a stool, which some one brought me when I gave up my easy chair to the great lady – and bent my head, half with awkwardness and half to find breathing room, oppressed as I was by the bulky figure of the Professor leaning over me in earnest discussion with another pillar of learning. Mr. Osborne was not far off; but though this might be pleasant enough for Mrs. Boulder, who was the centre of the group, it was

very much the reverse for me, stifled and overwhelmed by half-a-dozen people pressing over me to pay their court to the eminent woman, who had taken charge of a bewildered and shy girl to her own inconvenience, and who, if she ever thought of me at all, thought no doubt that I was only too greatly privileged, had I been entirely, instead of only half, stifled with the pressure of this learned crowd. But the young stranger whom I followed, not with my eyes, but with my attention, remained still very near us, and still I felt strongly that though our eyes had only met once, we had been observing each other all the time.

I saw Mr. Osborne speak to him, as to a familiar acquaintance – I saw him honored with a nod from Mrs. Boulder – and I wondered greatly who he was. He was certainly not older than myself, and of a slight youthful figure, which made him look even younger, I thought – was he a Cambridge man? a traveller, though so young, and a scholar too, of course, or he would not be here. I was very curious about this young man; would he speak to me again? what could we have to do with each other which could account for this strange mutual attraction? for I felt sure that he was wondering and inquiring in his own mind about me, as I was about him.

After a little while, he drew nearer to us, and joined our little circle, and turning round to answer some question for Mr. Osborne, I was surprised to find him still by my side. Then, still under cover of the prints, he spoke to me. I would have gladly spoken to any one else, but I was uncomfortably embarrassed, I could not tell why, in speaking to him. He began to tell me of those Dutch towns, and then we returned to talk of our own country, and insensibly grew into a kind of acquaintance. Then when the greater people dispersed, Mrs. Boulder perceived him, and entered into a condescending conversation with him, touching, in a professional tone, on the progress of his studies, and putting hard questions to him, which puzzled and somewhat irritated me. He answered them quietly and with a smile, and was evidently in great favor with her; and still I sat by watching him, and still he stood at my side observing me.

“How well he gets on!” said Mrs. Boulder, in a loud whisper to Mr. Osborne, behind her chair. Mrs. Boulder did not think it necessary to conceal her favorable judgment from the happy object of it.

“Who? oh! Harry Edgar,” said Mr. Osborne, glancing at him; “that will be a distinguished man!”

I had nothing to do with it, yet it pleased me, and set me on a new train of questions – how would he distinguish himself? Not after the fashion of my heroes – not like Columbus or Buonaparte – in books then, I supposed. Now I had few literary tastes, though I read novels with devotion; yet I paused to marvel what kind of books they could be, which should distinguish this youth; but without finding any answer to my secret question. More than ever now was I anxious about him. I wondered what he was thinking now – what he would think to-morrow. I felt a great desire to see into the mind of my new acquaintance, not by any means to see how he thought, or if he thought at all, of me; it was simply himself whom I wanted to understand. Harry Edgar – I did not think it was a Cambridgeshire name – it sounded hard to me, like a north country one; but it did not throw the least light upon who he was.

When Mr. Osborne put me into Mrs. Boulder’s carriage at the door, I saw Mr. Edgar’s face again turned towards us for a moment. He, too, was going away – and when Mr. Osborne asked me how I liked the party, it was with difficulty I restrained the words on my lips: “I wonder who he is!” I had no doubt he was thinking the same of me; yet I am sure we were not attracted by each other, as people might suppose, who heard what I say. For my part, it was a species of fascination. I did not either like or dislike this stranger; but somehow I wanted to penetrate his thoughts, and to know what manner of man he was.

Alice, of course, was waiting for me, and a fire was burning in my room, to make it more cheerful. When Alice loosed off the great shawl I was wrapped in, I could not comprehend, for a moment, what caused her sudden exclamation of pleasure, and the heavy sigh with which it was followed. It was the little diamond ornament which I wore round my neck. I had forgotten it. Yes, this had been my mother’s too; but I was tired and sleepy, and not communicative. Had I liked the party? Yes, I thought I had – pretty well – quite as much as I expected; sometimes it was very pretty,

that was taking it in the picture point of view – for I did not think it necessary to tell Alice how I had been interested by the stranger. What a pity, I thought, that he was a *young* man! for people would laugh at me, if I expressed any interest in him.

So I lay down to rest in the firelight, to watch the ruddy shadows dancing on the walls, and wakefully and long to consider this evening and all its novelties. It was all novel to me. My dress and my jewels were enough to have woke me for a little out of the usual torpor of my life; but this party which I had been rather ashamed of desiring to go to, I felt I should never forget it now. Why? I could not tell why – but I went to sleep wondering which was Harry Edgar's college, and what he might be thinking of. I even looked into the future with a little eagerness, marvelling what sort of career his was to be, and if I should ever know more of him. It was very strange – for certainly his thoughts, and the subjects they might be occupied with, were nothing to me.

THE SIXTH DAY

I WAS out upon a household errand to order something for Alice. My father and Alice conspired to keep me still as free of cares and almost of duties, as a child. Alice attended to everything; she was a good careful housekeeper, long accustomed to our house and ways, and needed no help in the administration of our domestic economy; though, perhaps, it would have been better for me, if I had been led to these homely occupations, and found something tangible to employ my mind and thoughts. It was Spring, one of those fresh, sunny, showery, boisterous days, which are so pleasant to youth. I liked my quiet walk along the narrow, old-fashioned streets – I liked the wind which blew my hair loose from my bonnet, and swept the clouds along the blue, blue sky, rushing past the turrets and pinnacles of the collegiate buildings. I was young, and my heart rose with the vague and causeless exhilaration of youth. I scarcely cared to think, but went on with a pure delight in the motion and life which I had within me. I was pleased to feel the shawl escaping from my hand, and my hair curling upon the breeze; and if my step was not quite so bold as its girlish freedom permitted five years ago, it was as firm a tread as it had been among our own fields, or in the lanes that led to Cottiswoode.

I had done my errand and was going home; but I was scarcely contented to return so soon, and would have walked a mile or two with pleasure. When I came to the paved alley, by St. Benet's, which was the nearest way to our house, I paused a moment in uncertainty, thinking where I should go – but just as I was about to return in the opposite direction, I started to hear Mr. Osborne's voice behind me. "Running away, Hester? – nay, I want you at home to-day; come back and tell me how your father is."

I turned round – Mr. Osborne was not alone – standing a little apart from him, out of regard to his meeting with me, was the young man who had so strangely interested me at the party. I glanced at him involuntarily, and so did he at me; but we had no warrant for knowing each other, and I drew apart as he did, as if by instinct. Mr. Osborne was not paying the least attention to his companion, and seemed quite careless of him, whether he stayed or went away, and the wind at that moment was playing very strange pranks with the elder gentleman's gown, so that, what with keeping it in order, and addressing me, Mr. Osborne had quite enough to do.

"My father is very well," I said. "He is at home, of course; are you going to see him?"

"I am going to tell him how his daughter behaved on her entrance into the world," said Mr. Osborne with much importance. "Were you very much impressed by your first experiences, Hester? There now, that is a little better. We are, at least, out of the road of that vagabond breeze."

We had turned into the alley, and I had been waiting for Mr. Osborne's young acquaintance to leave us; but he walked on steadily at the other side, and showed no disposition to go away. I did not quite like answering Mr. Osborne's questions before this stranger; he made me feel so strangely conscious of all my own words and movements. I no longer did anything easily, but became aware of every step I made.

"Have you not seen him since *that* night?" said I, "it is quite a long time ago."

"*That* night – so it did make some impression on my young *debutante*," said Mr. Osborne, with a smile. "Do you know I have been out of Cambridge for nearly three weeks, you forgetful young lady? Well, Hester, what of *that* night?"

"What of it, Mr. Osborne?" said I, with some little indignation. "I suppose there was nothing very extraordinary about it."

Mr. Osborne laughed, and I was provoked. "There only was a crowd of people – there is nothing remarkable in a crowd," said I, impetuously. "Why should *I* think about it – you do not suppose that I take a party like that for the world?"

"What do you call the world then, Hester?" said Mr. Osborne.

"I do not know," said I, hesitating a little. "I cannot tell," I repeated, after another pause, "but I suppose there is as much of it here as there was *yonder*. I think so, at least."

“So that is the verdict of youth, is it?” said Mr. Osborne. “Henry, my boy, what say you?”

I could not help turning my head quickly towards him, but I did not raise my eyes; how I wondered what he would say.

“The party has sometimes more influence on a life than the street can have,” said the young man, with hesitation, “otherwise, I have no doubt, a thronged and busy street in London would look more like the world than a Cambridge drawing-room – but sometimes the drawing-room makes a greater mark in a life.”

“My good youth, you are less intelligible than Hester,” said Mr. Osborne, “but the young lady has no metaphysical bias that I know of, so we will not discuss the question. So we were very prosy, were we, the other night? and you were nearly smothered under the Professor’s shadow, and had nothing but pictures to look at, poor child! The next one will be better, Hester, do not be dismayed.”

I made no answer. I was piqued at Mr. Osborne’s mockery; but I wondered over what the other had said – what did he mean by the drawing-room making a mark in his life. Had it made any mark in mine? why should it? and why was he walking along so quietly by Mr. Osborne’s side, without the least intention of going away? I saw that he kept his eyes away from me, as carefully as I kept mine from him; but how I observed him for all that. His walk was rather slow and steady – he was not quick and impetuous as I was – I wanted to hasten on, for I was embarrassed a little, not knowing anything about “society,” and being quite at a loss to know whether I was acquainted with this stranger or not; but, of course, Mr. Osborne continued *his* leisurely pace, and so did his young companion. They made me impatient and almost irritated me; they went on so quietly.

When we came to the door, I opened it hastily, for it was an old-fashioned, unsuspecting door, and opened from the outside. Then in my awkwardness I went down the two steps which led from it, and stood below in the door, waiting for Mr. Osborne. I was in a little tremor of expectation – what was he going to do?

“I think I may presume on your father and yourself, Hester, so far as to ask my young friend to come in with me,” said Mr. Osborne, “for we have some business together. This is Mr. Harry Edgar, Miss Southcote – will you admit him within your precincts.”

Of course I had to make a little awkward bow to him, and I do not think his was much more graceful; and then I hurriedly led the way into the house. Mr. Osborne went directly to the library, and I called Alice to show Mr. Edgar up-stairs, then I ran to my own room to take off my bonnet. Must I go to the drawing-room where he was sitting alone – I thought it was very unpleasant – I felt extremely confused and awkward, yet I smoothed my hair, and prepared to go.

When I went into the room, he was looking at the pictures – those dark, hard panel portraits on the wall, and with some interest as I thought – though when I came, he, too, grew a little embarrassed like me. I went to my work-table immediately to look out some work, for I could not sit idle and talk to him. There were countless little bits of work lying half completed on my work-table, I had no difficulty in finding occupation, and when I had selected one, I sat down by the window and wished for Mr. Osborne. He ought to know better, than to leave me alone here.

There was nothing at all to keep us from the necessity of talking to each other, for he immediately gave up looking at the portraits, and the room was in fatal good order, and all the books put away. After the first awkward pause, he said something about the pictures: “they were family portraits, no doubt.”

“No,” said I, “that is, they are not Southcotes; they are portraits of grandmamma’s family, I suppose; but we always count our family on the other side.”

Then we came to another dead pause, and Mr. Edgar advanced to the window where I sat.

“How fresh and green your garden looks,” he said, after the fashion of people who must say something, “what a good effect the grass has – are there really blossoms on the trees? how early everything is this year!”

“We are well sheltered,” said I, in the same tone. “Our trees are always in blossom before our neighbors’.”

“And that is old Corpus,” he said, glancing out at the little gleaming windows of the College, “all this youth and life out of doors, contrasts strangely enough, I am sure, with the musty existence within.”

“The books may be musty, but I don’t think the existence is,” said I, rashly; “everybody ought to be happy that has something to do.”

“Yes. I always envy a hard student who has an object,” said Mr. Edgar, rather eagerly seizing upon this possibility of conversation – “he is a happy fellow who has a profession to study for, otherwise it is vanity and vexation of spirit.”

Now I had a strong instinct of contradiction in me – a piece of assertion always provoked me to resistance.

“I do not know how that can be,” said I. “I suppose Mr. Osborne only lives for his books, and his spirit shows very little vexation or vanity, and papa does nothing else but study, and cannot have any object in it – I fancy a good thing ought to be good for its own sake.”

“Mr. Osborne is a very busy man – he has a great many pursuits,” said my new friend, “he is not a fair example. We have an enthusiasm for books when we are young, and suck inspiration from them, and then we come back to them that they may deaden our own feelings and recollections after we have had a life of our own – when we are old.”

“You are not old, to be aware of that,” cried I, though I secretly thought that, at least, in my father’s case this might be true.

“I have lived a very solitary life,” he said, “which is almost as good as grey hairs.”

After that we paused again, very conscious of our silence, but finding conversation a very difficult matter. I was more at my ease than I had expected. I observed him, but not with the same intense observation. A person I knew by name, and spoke to in my father’s house, was a less mysteriously interesting person than the stranger who had attracted my notice so much, when all were strangers. At last, Mr. Edgar began to talk again – it was only to ask me if I had seen the great author who was at the party when he met me first – he did not say “had the pleasure to meet.”

“I saw him, but I did not speak to him – nor even hear him speak,” said I.

Another pause – what were we to say? “Do you like his books?” said the young man.

“I do not care for any books but novels,” said I bluntly. I am afraid I was not above a wish to shock and horrify him.

Mr. Edgar laughed a little, and his color rose. I am sure I did what I could to give him an unfavorable impression of me, in this our first interview. He said —

“You are very honest, Miss Southcote.”

I cannot tell how it was either that he presumed so far, or that I suspected it – but I certainly did think he had a great mind to say Hester, instead of Miss Southcote, and only checked himself by an effort. It was very strange – I felt *haughty* immediately, but I scarcely felt displeased; but I am sure there was a consciousness in the deep color that rose upon his face, and in my tone as I answered him.

“I am only telling the truth,” said I. “I cannot help it – when it is only thinking about a thing, I would rather think myself. A story is a different matter; I am very sorry for my dulness, but I think there are no really pleasant books except those which tell a story.”

“Even that limit reaches to something more than novels,” said Mr. Edgar; “there is history, and biography besides.”

“Yes – but then I only care for them for the mere story’s sake,” said I, “and not because they are true or good, or for any better reason. I suppose a man’s life is often more like a novel than like anything else – only, perhaps, not so well arranged. The misfortunes do not come in so conveniently, and neither do the pleasures. I think reading a novel is almost next best to having something to do.”

“I am afraid some of us think it a superior good, now and then,” said my companion.

And so our talk came to an abrupt conclusion again. It was my turn to make a new beginning, and I could not. I did not like to ask him any questions about himself – which was his college, or if he was a Cambridgeshire man, or any of the things I wished to know; and, as I glanced up at his thoughtful face, I once more fell a-pondering what he could be thinking of. I do not recollect that I had ever had much curiosity about other people's thoughts before. My father always had a book before him, which he read, or made a pretence of reading, and my father's meditations were sacred to me. I guessed at them with reverence, but it would have been sacrilege to inquire into them. As my established right, I claimed to know what Alice was thinking of, and did not need to wonder; but here, with the full charm of a mystery which I could not inquire into, came back upon me my first curiosity about this stranger. Either his face did express what was in his mind, or I was not acquainted with its language. What was he thinking of? – what did he generally think of? I wondered over his thoughts so much that I had no leisure to think of himself who was standing beside me, though still I was strongly aware of every movement he made.

Just then I heard my father and Mr. Osborne ascending the stairs. I was half sorry, and yet altogether glad that they were coming; and I was a little curious how my father would receive my new acquaintance. My father received him with stately politeness, distant but not ungracious, and as Mr. Osborne and he took their usual places, they began their ordinary conversation. When Mr. Edgar joined in it, I discovered from what they said that he was a student of Corpus, a close neighbor, and it amused me a little to watch the three gentlemen as they talked; of course, my father and Mr. Osborne were in the daily habit of talking, without any greater reference to me than if I had been a very little girl with a doll and a pinafore. I was not intellectual. I did not care for their discussions about books – and I expected no share in their conversation, nor wished it. I was quite pleased to sit by, with the ring of their voices in my ear, doing my needlework. I always worked at something, during these times; and thinking my own thoughts. But Mr. Edgar, who was unused to this, and perhaps did not think me quite so little a girl as my father and his friend did, was puzzled and disconcerted, as I saw, by my exclusion from the stream of talk. I had a certain pleasure in showing him how much a matter of course this was. I had never known a young man of rank and age before, but I had a perverse delight in making myself appear something different to what I was. I turned half aside to the window, and hemmed as only demure little girls can hem, when grave talk is going on over their heads. But I saw very well how uncertainly he was regarding me – how puzzled he was that I should be left out of the conversation, and how he wanted to be polite and amiable, and draw me in.

“How is the garden, Hester?” said Mr. Osborne at last, rising and coming towards me with a subject adapted to the capacity of the little girl, “what! blossom already on that little apple tree – what a sturdy little fellow it is! Now, Southcote, be honest – how many colds has Hester taken this winter in consequence of your trap for wet feet – that grass crotchet of yours?”

“Hester is a sensible girl in some respects,” said my father, “she never takes cold – and your argument against my grass is antiquated and feeble. I will not plan my garden by your advice, Osborne.”

“My advice is always to be depended on,” said Mr. Osborne; “you have taken it in more important matters, and I think I know some matters in which it would be very well you took it again.”

“That is my affair,” said my father coldly. “Advice is a dangerous gift, Mr. Edgar,” he continued, with a somewhat sarcastic smile, “every man who has the faculty thinks himself infallible – and when you bring yourself ill fortune by following good advice and friendly counsel, you are in a dangerous dilemma – to hide your failure or to lose your friend.”

“What do you mean, Southcote?” cried Mr. Osborne with a look of great surprise and almost anxiety in his face.

“Nothing but my old opinion,” said my father, “that every man must stand on his own ground, consult his own discretion, and build only upon his own merits. I have no faith in the kindness and compassion of friends; a *kind* act, done with the noblest good intentions, may make a man's life

miserable. No, no, justice, justice – what you deserve and no galling boon of pity – all is dishonest and unsatisfactory but this.”

Mr. Edgar and Mr. Osborne exchanged a slight rapid glance, and I saw the color rise over the young man’s broad white brow; but I was too much concerned and moved by what my father said to observe the others much. His friend even did not comprehend him, I alone knew what he referred to. I alone could enter into his feelings, and understand how deep the iron had gone into his soul.

After that Mr. Edgar was very silent, and listened to what was said, rather than took part in it – so that when Mr. Osborne spoke of going away, the young man had subsided into a chair, as humble and unconsidered as I was. He did not come to talk to me – he sat quite silent looking on – looking round at the pictures sometimes, with a quiet sweep of his eyes, often looking at the speakers, and sometimes examining curiously my work-table. I was sitting close by it, but he never looked at me nor did I look at him.

When they were going away, my father, to my great surprise, bade him return. “Come again, I will be glad to see you,” said my father. I looked up almost with consternation, and Mr. Edgar, though he looked gratified, was surprised too, I could see – however, he answered readily, and they went away.

My father did not leave me immediately after they were gone; he walked up and down the room for a while, pausing sometimes to look at the ivy leaves which waved and rustled as much as the fine tendrils clasping the wall would let them, in the fresh spring breeze. My father seemed to have a certain sympathy with these clusters of ivy – he always went to that window in preference to this one where I was seated, and which looked into the free and luxuriant garden. After standing there for some time, he suddenly turned and addressed me.

“Since you went out, Hester,” said my father, “I have had another letter from your persevering cousin. He is at Cottiswoode, and would fain ‘be friends,’ as he says; though I will not permit him to be anything warm. He is of age – he has entered upon his inheritance – though I hear no one has seen him yet; and he does us the honor to desire to become acquainted with us, whom he calls his nearest relations. What do you say?”

“You will not let him come, papa,” cried I, “why should he come here? Why should he trouble us? We do not want him – you surely will tell him so.”

“I am glad you agree with me so thoroughly, Hester,” said my father. “Osborne is a great advocate for this young man. He has been urging me strongly to receive him – and had you been of his opinion, Hester, I am not sure that I could have held out.”

This was so singular a confession from my father, that I looked up in alarm and dismay. *My opinion!* what was that in comparison with his will?

He caught my look, and came towards me slowly, and with a step less firm than usual – then he drew a chair near me, and sat down.

“What I have to say, I must say in so many words,” said my father. “My health is declining, Hester. I have exhausted my portion of life. I do not expect to live long.”

“Papa!” I exclaimed, starting up in sudden terror – the shock was so great that I almost expected to see him sink down before me then. “Papa! shall I send for the doctor? what shall I do? are you ill, father, are you ill? oh! you do not mean *that*, I know.”

“Sit down, my love – I am not ill now – there is nothing to be done,” said my father; “only you must listen calmly, Hester, and understand what I mean. You will not be destitute when I die, but you will be unprotected. You will be a very lonely girl, I am afraid. Ignorant of society, and unaccustomed to it; and I have no friend with whom I could place you. This was the argument which Mr. Osborne urged upon me, when he advised me to receive your cousin.”

“Mr. Osborne was very cruel,” I exclaimed, half blinded by tears, and struggling with the hysterical sobbing which rose in my throat. “He knows nothing of me if he thinks – Oh! papa, papa! what would my life be to me if things were as you say?”

My father smiled upon me strangely. “Hester, you will grieve for me, I know,” he said, in his quiet, unmoved tones; “but I know also the course of time and nature; and in a little while, my love, your life will be as much to you, as if I had never been.”

I could not utter the passionate contradiction that came to my lips. This composed and philosophic decision struck me dumb. I would rather he had thought of his daughter and of her bitter mourning for him, than of the course of time and nature. But I sat quite silent before him, trembling a great deal, and trying to suppress my tears. This doctrine, that grief is not for ever – that the heavy affliction which it is agony unspeakable to look forward to, will soften and fade, and pass away, is a great shock to a young heart. I neither could nor would believe it. What was my after life to me? But for once, I exercised self-denial, and did not say what I thought.

“Shall I say any more, Hester? Can you hear me? or is this enough for a first warning?” said my father.

“Oh! say all, papa, say all!” cried I. “I can bear anything now – anything after this.”

“Then I may tell you, Hester, plainly, that it would give me pleasure to see you ‘settled,’ as people call it – to see you married and in your own house, before I am removed from mine. Circumstances,” said my father, slowly, “have made me a harsh judge of those romantic matters that belong to youth. I am not sure that it would much delight me to suppose my daughter the heroine of a passionate love-story. Will you consent to obey me, Hester, in an important matter as readily as in the trifling ones of your childhood? I have no proposal to make to you. I only desire your promise to set my mind at ease, and obey me when I have.”

My face burned, my head throbbed, my heart leaped to my throat. Shame, pride, embarrassment, and the deeper, desolate fear of what was to happen to my father, contended within me. I could not give an assent to this strange request. I could not say in so many words that I gave up utterly to him the only veto a woman has upon the fashion of her life. Yet I could not refuse to do what, under these circumstances, he asked of me. I made him no answer. I clasped my hands tightly over my brow, where the veins seemed full to bursting. For an instant I felt, with a shudder, what a grand future that was, full of all joyous possibilities, which I was called upon to surrender. I had thought to myself often that my prospects were neither bright nor encouraging; at this moment I saw, by a sudden light, what a glorious uncertainty these prospects were, and how I clung to them. They were nothing, yet the promise of everything was in them; and my father asked me to give them up – to relinquish all that might be. It was a great trial; and I could not answer him a word.

“You do not speak, Hester,” he said. “Have you no reply, then, to my question?”

“I want no protector, father,” I cried, almost with sullenness. “If I must be left desolate, let me be desolate. Do not mock me with false succor. I want no home. Let Alice take care of me. I will not want very much. Alice is fond of me, though I do not deserve it. Let her take care of me till I die.”

I was quite overcome. I fell into a violent outbreak of tears as I spoke. I could command myself no longer. I was not made of iron to brave such a shock as this “with composure,” as my father said. He rose and went away from me towards the other window, where he stood looking out. Looking after him through my tears, I fancied that already I could see his step falter, and his head droop with growing weakness. I cried out, “Oh, my father! my father!” with passionate distress. Perhaps he had never seen me weeping before since I was a child. Now, at least, he left me to myself, as I could remember him doing when I was a little girl, when I used to creep towards him very humbled and penitent after the *fit* was over, and sit down at his feet, and hold his hand, and after a long time get his forgiveness. I could not do that now. I sat still, recovering myself. I was no longer a child, and I had a stubborn spirit. It wounded me with a dull pain that he should care so little for my distress.

He did not return to me. He left the room, only saying as he went away, “You will tell me your decision, Hester, at another time;” and when the door closed upon him I gave way to my tears, and let them flow. If he had only said a word of consolation to me – if he had only said it grieved him

to see my grief! But he treated it all so coldly. “The course of time and nature!” – they were bitter in their calmness, those dreadful words.

I wept long; but my tears did not help me. I did not feel it possible to make this promise. To be given to somebody who would take care of me, as if I was a favorite spaniel! I could not help the flush of indignation and discontent which came over me at the thought. And then I began to think of my father’s real state of health in this revulsion of feeling. He was mistaken – he must be mistaken. When I thought over the subject I could find no traces of illness, no change upon him. He was just as he had always been. The longer I considered, the more I convinced myself that he was wrong; and somewhat relieved by this, I went to my room to bathe my eyes and arrange my dress for dinner. How I watched my father while we dined! – how tremulously I noted every motion of his hand, every change of his position. His appetite was good – rather greater than usual; and he had more color in his face. I was sure he had been deceived. He spoke very little during that meal. For the first time a sort of antagonism had risen between my father and me. I could not consent to what he asked of me; and, even if I could have consented, I could not be the first to enter upon the subject again.

And when I crept into my window-seat in the twilight, and watched as I had watched so often, the lights gleaming in the windows of the College, I wondered now with a strange sense of neighborhood and friendship, which of them shone upon the thoughtful face and dark blue eyes of my new friend. I had made many a story in my own mind about the lights; and there was one favorite one, which was lighted sooner, and burned longer than any of the others, which I immediately fixed upon as his. I thought I could fancy him sitting within its steady glow, reading books which I knew nothing of, writing to friends unknown to me, thinking thoughts which I could not penetrate. As I sat still in the darkness, with my eyes upon that little gleaming window, I found a strange society and fellowship in looking at it. If I had had a brother now, like this student, how much happier would I have been. As it was, the idea of him was a relief to me. I forgot my own perplexity as I wondered and pondered about him.

My father came into the drawing-room, as I sat thus in the corner of the window-seat, leaning my cheek upon my hand, and looking out upon the little shining windows of Corpus – he was displeased that the lamp was not lighted, and rang the bell hurriedly; and it was only by some sudden movement I made, that, with a start, he discovered me. “So, Hester, you are thinking,” he said, in a low tone. I started up, emboldened by my own thoughts.

“Papa – papa! you were mistaken in what you said this morning,” I exclaimed eagerly, “you are not ill – how firm your hand is, and I never saw your eyes so bright – you are mistaken, I am sure you are.”

“Do me justice, Hester,” said my father, in a voice which chilled me back out of all my hopes. “I took care not to speak of this till I was sure that I could not be mistaken. Trust me, I have a fearful warrant for what I say.”

His voice neither paused nor faltered – it was a stoic speaking of the mortal pain he despised; but it was hard and bitter, and so cold – oh! so cold! If he had no pity for himself, he might have had pity for me.

I held his hand, grasped it, and clung to it; but I did not cry again, for I felt that he would have been displeased, and it was a long time before his fingers closed upon mine with any return of my eager clasp. “You have been thinking, Hester, of what I said to you – what have you to tell me now?”

“I cannot do it, papa,” I said, under my breath.

He did not answer anything at first, nor loose my hand, nor put me away from him. But after a little while he spoke in his measured low melodious tones. “You think it better to risk your all upon a chance, do you, Hester? Such a chance – happiness never comes of it. It is always an unequal barter – but you prefer to risk that rather than to trust to me.”

“I want to risk nothing – I need nothing!” cried I, “while I have my father, I want no other, and do not bid me think of such misery – do not, papa! You will live longer than I shall – oh! I hope, I pray you will. Papa, do not urge me, I cannot anticipate such a calamity!”

“This is merely weakness; is it compassion for my feelings?” said my father. “I tell you this calamity, if it is a calamity, is coming rapidly, and you cannot stay it. What will you do then?”

“I do not care what I do then,” I said, scarcely knowing what my words were, “but I would rather you left me desolate than gave me to somebody to protect me. Oh! father, I cannot do it – I cannot consent.”

He said nothing more, but turned away from me, and went to his usual seat at the table, and to his book. I sat still in my corner, once more venturing to weep, and struck with a hundred compunctions; but I steadily resisted the strong impulse which came upon me to go to his feet and promise anything he wished – I could not do this – it would kill the very heart in me, and surely I was right.

THE SEVENTH DAY

IT was now nearly Midsummer, the crown of the year. I was sitting in my own room by the window, idly musing, when Alice came in with some of my light muslin dresses to put them away. I had neither book nor work to veil my true occupation. I was leaning my head upon both my hands, sometimes vacantly looking out at the windows, sometimes closing my fingers over my eyes. I had both scenery and circumstances in my dream – I wanted nothing external to help me in the meditations with which my mind had grown familiar now.

I was not unaware of the entrance of Alice, but I only changed my position a little, and did not speak, hoping to be undisturbed. I saw, with a little impatience, how careful she was about the dresses – how she smoothed down their folds, and arranged them elaborately, that they might not be crushed in the drawer; but she certainly took more time than was necessary for this simple operation, and though Alice had no clue to my thoughts, I scarcely liked, I cannot tell why, to continue them in her presence. But when the drawers were closed at last, Alice still did not go away – she came to the dressing-table, and began to arrange and disarrange the pretty toilette boxes which she kept in such good order, and to loop up and pull down the muslin draperies of the table and the mirror; at last she gathered courage and came close to me.

“May I speak to you, Miss Hester?” said Alice, but it was in a disturbed and nervous tone.

Now I was annoyed to have my own thoughts, which had a great charm for me at that time, interrupted and broken. I looked up with a little petulance – “What is it, Alice?”

She came still closer to where I was sitting, and her bright good face was troubled. “Miss Hester, my darling, I want to consult you,” said Alice, and I thought I saw a tear trembling in her eye. “I am afraid your papa is ill. I am afraid he is very bad. The doctor comes and goes, and he never lets you know; and I have said to myself this three months back: ‘it’s cruel to keep it from her – the longer she is of knowing the worse it will be.’ And now, dear, I’ve taken heart and come myself to tell you. He’s very bad, Miss Hester, he has a deal of trouble; and it’ll come hard – hard upon you.”

I felt that my face was quite blanched and white. What a contrast was this to the terror of my own thoughts! I shrank within myself with a guilty consciousness, that while I had been running in these charmed ways, my father had suffered in secret, making no sign. I cannot say I was startled – Alice’s words fell upon me with a dull heavy pang – I felt as if a blow which had long been hanging over me had fallen at last.

“But Alice, Alice, I see no change in him,” cried I, for a moment struggling against the truth.

“If you went to him as I sometimes go, you would see a change, Miss Hester,” said Alice; “it is not your fault, dear. Well I know that – but the light in his eye and the color in his cheek – hush – that’s the hectic, darling, you’ve heard of that,” and Alice turned to me a glance of fright, and sunk her voice to a whisper, as if this was some deadly enemy lurking close at hand.

And fever and faintness came upon me as she spoke. I rose and threw up the window for a moment’s breath, and then I turned to Alice, and cried upon her shoulder and asked her what I was to do – what I was to do?

With her kind hand upon my head, and her kind voice blessing her “dear child,” Alice soothed and calmed me – and the tears gave me some relief, and I gradually composed myself. “Do you think he will let me nurse him, Alice? He told me he was ill long ago, but I persuaded myself he was mistaken; and you think he is very bad – in great pain? oh! do you think he will let me nurse him, Alice?”

“I cannot tell. Miss Hester,” said Alice, “but, dear, you must try – did he tell you he was ill? – and I was doing him wrong, thinking he was too proud to let his own child see him in weakness: oh, we’re hard judges, every one of us. When was it, dear?”

“In spring, a long time ago; and we were not quite friends then,” said I. “I thought he was cruel; he spoke to me about – about – I mean he told me that I must soon be left alone, and that he wanted to find some one to take care of me. I cannot tell you about it, Alice; and I refused – I said no to my father; and we have never been very good friends since then.”

“Do you mean that your papa wanted you to marry, Miss Hester?” asked Alice.

“I suppose so – yes!” I said, turning away my head – she was looking full at me, and looking very anxiously – she had always been greatly privileged. I feared I might have been questioned, had she caught the expression of my eye.

“And did he say who? Was it M – ? Was it your cousin?” said Alice.

“No, it was not my cousin; but why do you speak of that? Alice, let me go to my father,” said I.

“He does not want you now, darling,” said Alice, detaining me. “Dear Miss Hester, don’t you think it wrong of me – you’re my own child. I took you out of your mother’s arms. Speak to me just one word. Is there any one, darling, any one? – Miss Hester, you’ll not be angry with me?”

“Then do not ask me such questions, Alice,” I said, in great shame and confusion, with a burning flush upon my cheek, “does it become us to speak of things like this, when my father so ill – why do you say he does not want me now! he may want me this very moment, let me go.”

“Dear, he’s sleeping,” said Alice, “he has been very ill, and now he’s at rest and easy, and lying down to refresh himself – you can’t go now, Miss Hester, for it would only disturb him – poor gentleman – won’t you stay, dear, and say a word to me?”

“I have nothing to say to you, Alice,” said I, half crying with vexation and shame and embarrassment, “why do you question me so? I have done nothing wrong – you ought rather to tell me how my father is, if you will not let me go to see.”

“The pain is here,” said Alice, putting her hand to her side, “here at his heart. I know what trouble at the heart is, Miss Hester, and your papa has known it many a day, but it isn’t grief or sorrow now, but sickness, and if the one has brought the other, I cannot tell. It comes on in fits and spasms, and is very bad for a time, and then it goes off again, and he is as well to look at as ever he was. But every time it comes he’s weaker, and it’s wearing out his strength day by day. Yes, dear, it’s cruel to say it, but it’s true.”

“And are you with him when he is ill, Alice?” said I anxiously.

“He rings his bell when he feels it coming,” said Alice, “though I know he has many a hard hour all by himself; and anxiety on his mind is very bad for him, dear,” she continued, looking at me wistfully, “and he is troubled in his spirit about leaving you. If you *can* give in to him, Miss Hester, dear, if it’s not against your heart – if you’re fancy-free, and think no more of one than of another – oh! darling, yield to him anything you can. He’s a suffering man, and is your father, and pride is the sin of the house; every one has it, less or more; and there are only two of you in the world, and you are his only child!”

Alice ran breathlessly through this string of arguments, while I listened with a disturbed and a rebellious heart. No, if this was true, – if my father was slowly dying – if he would soon be beyond the reach of all obedience and duty, I would not deny him anything – not even this. It was hard, unspeakably hard, to think of it. I could not see why he should ask such a bitter sacrifice from me. I knew of no self-sacrifice in his history – why should he think it was easy in mine?

Alice left me like a skilful general, when she had made this urgent appeal, and went away down stairs, saying she would call me when my father awoke. I remained at my window, where I had been dreaming before, but what a harsh interruption had come to my dreams – the sunshine without streamed down as full and bright as ever over the trees and flowers, and fresh enclosing greensward of our pretty garden; half an hour of time had come and gone, but it might have been half a year for the change it made in me. Alice had come to my Bower of Bliss, like Sir Guyon, and driven me forth from among the flowers and odors of the enchanted land. My heart became very heavy, I could not tell why. I resolved upon making my submission to my father, if I had an opportunity, and telling him

to do what he would with me. This was not a willing or tender submission, but a forced and reluctant one; and I did not try to conceal from myself that I felt it very hard, though when I thought again of his recent suffering, and of the fantastic paradise of dreams in which I was wandering, while he wrestled with his mortal enemy, I felt suddenly humiliated and subdued. My father! my father! I had belonged to him all my life, I had no right to any love but his; I had lived at ease in his care, and trusted to him with the perfect confidence of a child. But now, when it was at last of importance that I should trust him, was this the time to follow my own fancies and leave him to suffer alone?

At that moment Alice called me, and I immediately went down stairs. I went with a tremulous and uncertain step, and an oppressed heart – to make any sacrifice he wished or asked – to do anything he desired of me. When I entered the library, my father looked up from his book with a momentary glance of surprise and inquiry; and with a heart beating so loud and so uneasily as mine it was hard to look unembarrassed and natural. I said breathlessly: “May I sit beside you, papa? I want to read a little,” but I did not dare to look at him as I spoke – the calm everyday tone of his voice struck very strangely upon my excited ear as he answered me: “Surely, Hester,” he said, with a slight quiet astonishment at the unnecessary question. He was perfectly unexcited – I could see neither care, nor anxiety, nor suffering in his calm and equable looks; and he did not perceive nor suspect the tumult and fever in my mind. Prepared as I was to yield to him with reluctance, and a feeling of hardship, I felt a shock of almost disappointment when I found that nothing was to be asked of me – I sank into the nearest chair and took up the first book I could find to cover my trembling and confusion. The stillness of the room overpowered me – I could hear my heart beating in the silence, and as my eye wandered over all these orderly and ordinary arrangements, and to the calm bright sunshine out of doors, and the shadow of the trees softly waving across the window, I was calmed into quieter expectancy and clearer vision. My father sat in his usual place at his usual studies, with the summer daylight full upon his face, and everything about him arranged with scrupulous propriety and care; if any of his habitual accessories had been disturbed – if he had occupied another seat, or sat in a different attitude, or if I could have detected the slightest sign of faltering or weakness in his manner, I would not have felt so strongly my sudden descent from the heights of terror, anxiety, and expectation, to the everyday level of repose and comfort; but there was no change in his stately person or dress, no perceptible difference in his appearance. He was not old – at this present moment he looked like a man in his prime, handsome, haughty, reserved, and fastidious. As I observed him under the shadow of my book, I felt like a spy watching to detect incipient weakness – was I disappointed that he did not look ill? Was this the man who half an hour ago was sleeping the sleep of exhaustion after a deadly struggle with his malady? I could not believe myself, or Alice – she was mistaken – for it was impossible to reconcile what she told me with what I saw.

But the stillness of the room and his steady occupation influenced me like a spell – I did not go away – and when a slight movement he made startled me into a momentary fear that he might perceive I was watching him, I began to read in earnest the book which, all this time, I had been holding in my hands. It had been lying on the top of a pile of others, and was quite a new book, not entirely cut up, a very unusual thing here. My eye had already travelled vacantly two or three times to the end of the page without knowing a syllable of the lines which I went over mechanically – but now I caught the name of the book, and it strangely awed and startled me. I could almost have cast it from me like a horrible suggestion when I saw that title. It was a medical treatise, and its subject was “Sudden Death” – the words were like a revelation to me – this was why he sat so composed and stately, ready to meet the last enemy like a brave man; this was why he suffered no trace of agitation or of languor to come into this solemn room which at any moment, as my excited fancy whispered, might become the chamber of death. I could almost fancy I saw the shadowy sword suspended over my father’s head, and in another instant it might fall.

My terror now, for himself and for him only, was as insane and wild as it seemed visionary and baseless; for I had seen nothing as yet to point to him as one of the probable victims of this sudden

conclusion. But the very manner of the book convinced me of what he thought himself. I went on reading it, scarcely sensible now how my hands trembled, nor how easily he would find me out, if he happened to glance at me. Yes! here was abundant confirmation of my fears. I read with a breathless and overwhelming interest cases and symptoms – to my alarmed fancy, every one seemed to bear some likeness to what I knew of his; I never read a drama or a tale with such profound excitement as I read this scientific treatise – there seemed to be life and death in its pages – the authoritative mandate which should forbid hope, or silence fear.

“Hester!” said my father. I started violently and looked up at him, I felt the heat and flush of my intense occupation upon my cheek, and I almost expected to see him faint or fall as I sprang towards him. He held up his hand half impatient, half alarmed, at my vehemence. “What are you reading? what has excited you, Hester?” he said.

I retired very rapidly and quietly to my chair, and put my book away with nervous haste. “Nothing, papa,” I said, bending my head to escape his eye.

“Nothing! that is a child’s answer,” said my father, and I felt that he smiled; “I have been watching you these five minutes, Hester, and I know that ‘nothing’ could not make you so earnest. What is it you have been reading – tell me.”

“It is only a book – a new book,” I said slowly.

“I thought so – almost the only new book in my library, is it not?” said my father, in a singular tone, “what do you think of it, Hester?”

I lifted my hands in entreaty – I could not bear to hear him speaking thus.

“It is true,” he said quietly, “and you perceive it does not disturb me – this is what you must make up your mind to, Hester. It will be a trial for you – but not a long and tedious one – and you must hold yourself prepared for it as I do.”

“But father – father! you are not ill. You are not so ill – I cannot believe it,” I cried, scarcely knowing what I said.

“It will prove itself by and by,” he answered calmly, and returned to his book as if we had been speaking of some indifferent matter. I could not think of it so coolly – I cried: “Papa, listen to me, I will do anything, everything you want – do you hear me, papa?”

He looked up at me for a moment – was it suspicion? he certainly seemed to have forgotten that he had ever asked anything of me which I had refused.

“I require nothing, Hester,” he said, “nothing, my love, and I perfectly believe in your willingness to serve me. Lay down the book, it is not for you, and go out and refresh yourself. I am pleased that you know what may come, but I shall not be pleased if you brood upon it. Now leave me, Hester, but come again when you will, and I will never exclude you. Pshaw, child! it is the common lot. What do you tremble for? what is it you want to do?”

“Is there nothing you wish, papa – nothing I could do to please you?” I said, under my breath. I could not allude more plainly to the former question between us.

“It is time enough to ask such questions,” he said, with a momentary jealousy of my intention, “I am not dying yet.”

He did not understand me – he had forgotten! I hurried out grieved, overwhelmed, yet in spite of myself relieved on this one point. I thought myself the meanest wretch in the world, to be able to derive satisfaction from it at such a moment. Yet I was so! I felt a thrill of delight that I was free, in the midst of my terrors and dismay at the doom which hung over our house. I tried to conceal it from myself, but I could not. I was free to mourn for my dear father for ever, and admit no human consolation. I was not bound under a promise to commit myself to somebody’s hands to be taken care of. I was afflicted, but at liberty.

Alice waited eagerly to speak to me when I came from the library, but I only could speak two or three words to her, and then hastened out, to relieve the oppression on my spirit if I could. It was a dreadful thought to carry with me and ponder upon, and when I was walking fast along a lonely

wood, half a mile out of Cambridge, it suddenly occurred to me what danger there was in leaving home, even for an hour. Before I returned, the blow might fall – it might be falling even now. I turned at once and went hastily homewards, my heart sick with anxiety and terror. When I nearly reached the house, I met Mr. Osborne; though I knew he would detain me, I was yet very anxious to speak to him, for perhaps he would give me some hope. He was speaking to some one, but he saw that I waited for him, and immediately left his former companion and came to me. “No other young lady in the world would do me so much honor,” said Mr. Osborne, in the gay good-humored tone which was usual to him, but which jarred so much upon my feelings. “Oh! Hester, what’s this? why do you look so much excited? Have you something important to tell me? I have almost expected it, do you know.”

I was very sorry, but I could not help the burning heat which came to my face; and I could not lift my eyes for the moment to meet his saucy eyes which seemed to read my thoughts. What had I to do with such thoughts! I cast them from me with bitter self-indignation, and looked up at him at last with a face so grave that he smiled on me no more.

“I want to speak to you about papa, Mr. Osborne,” I said. “Will *you* tell me? – you must know. He thinks he is very ill. He thinks – oh! tell me if you think he is so bad as that.”

For an instant his face grew very serious. “I am not qualified to give an opinion,” he said, first; and then, regaining his usual look, with an effort, he continued, “He is not well, Hester; but quite well and very ill are a long way from each other. I do not think he is very bad – I do not, indeed. I see no need for your alarming yourself.”

“But he speaks of danger and of sudden –” I could not say the fatal word. “Has he any foundation for it; do you think he is right, Mr. Osborne?” I continued with a shudder.

“I do not think he is right, Hester. I think that you ought not to be frightened with such a ghastly doubt as this,” said Mr. Osborne, seriously, “your father has fancies, as every man in weak health has; but I know enough of his illness, I think – I am almost sure – to give you confidence on this point. If anything sudden should occur, it will not be without long and abundant warning – a sudden or immediate blow is not to be feared. I assure you I am right, Hester, you may trust to me.”

I did trust to him with gratitude, and a feeling of relief. He walked home with me, moderating my pace, and leading my mind to ordinary subjects. He was very kind to me. He said nothing to embarrass or distress; but calmed my excitement, and made me feel a real confidence in him. When we got home, nothing had happened. The quiet house was as quiet and undisturbed as ever it had been. Mr. Osborne went to the library; and I went up-stairs to the window-seat in the drawing-room. And I do not venture to say that I did not go back to my dreams.

THE EIGHTH DAY

ALICE had sent me out to walk at sunset – she said I was breaking her heart with my white thin face, and woful looks. I had spent all that afternoon in the garden watching my father at his window. I could do little else but watch him, and listen, and wait near the library; the constant strain of anxiety almost wore me out; yet I had a fond persuasion at the bottom of my heart, that my fears were groundless, and I think I almost kept up my anxiety on purpose as a sort of veil for this hope. Since I had been so much afraid for him, he seemed to have grown better every day – he had begun to take his walks again, and had never had another attack since the time Alice warned me how ill he was.

I obeyed her now tacitly and went out; though it was a beautiful night, few people were walking when I went to walk by the river side, where the last rays of the sun were shining gloriously through the half transparent leaves of the lime-trees. The tender slanting golden light was very sweet to see, as it touched upon the green surface of the lawn at some single ripple or eddy, and left all beside in the deep shadow of the coming twilight. In those great trees overhead, the wind was sighing with a gentle rustle, shaking the leaves against each other, swaying the sunny branches into the shade, and thrusting now and then a dark parcel of leaves into the sunshine, when they suddenly became illuminated and showed you all the life in their delicate veins, quivering against the light. On the one bank of the river was a trim slope of grass descending to the water, and on the other, withdrawn over broad lawns of greensward, with shadows of trees lying on the grass, and the light falling on it aslant and tardily, stood the stately College buildings, noble and calm in the sweet leisure of the evening rest. I came here because I saw it solitary; no one interrupted me as I wandered along the broad sandy footpath; no one disturbed my thoughts as I pursued my dream. Sometimes a bird fluttered through the leaves from one branch to another, going home; and there was a low sweet twittering of welcome from the tiny household deep in the heart of the green lime, a forest all bedewed and shining with the last smiles of the sun; but I heard no other sound except my own footsteps, at which I sometimes could almost have blushed and stepped aside, afraid of some spectator of my maiden meditations, or some passer-by who might guess at the secret of my dream.

When I first saw him coming on the same solitary road, no one here but he and I, my first impulse was to turn back and escape. I trembled and blushed, and shrank with conscious conviction, believing he could read all my thoughts whenever he met my eyes. Then I paused and stumbled, and felt how ashamed and hesitating my face had become, and wondered what he would think was the occasion of this nervous foolishness. But I do not think he took time to observe, for he was hastening towards me, with an eager haste which only made me shrink the more. I could not turn back, I could not go steadily onward; I almost thought all nature which had made this seem so beautiful, and all Cambridge who had left it to us, were in a conspiracy against me. On came his light active figure, pushing through the trees, and I with my faltering steps advanced slowly, going towards him, because I could not help myself. When we met at last, he turned and went on with me; I was not able to object to this, and even he did not say anything about it, but merely turned by my side, subdued his hasty pace to my slow one, and accompanied me as though it had been quite a matter of course. I do not think we said much to each other. I do not recollect anything that passed between us – I remember only the twittering of the birds, the rustle of the leaves, the light stealing off the dewy greensward and the darkening river, all those soft sweet distant sounds that belong to a summer's night were ringing with a subdued and musical echo in the air around us; our own steps upon the path – the beating of our own hearts – these, and not words from each other, were what we listened to.

Then he suddenly seemed to rouse himself, and began to speak – suddenly, in a moment, when I was quite unprepared for it. I cannot tell how I felt while I listened. We went on mechanically, I am sure, not knowing or caring whither we went. He was speaking to me, pleading with me, entreating me; and I listened with a vague, secret delight, half pain, half pleasure, when his voice stopped at

last. I became aware how I was hanging upon it – what a great shock and disappointment it was that it should cease. But still, in my trance of embarrassment, in my agitation and perplexity, it never occurred to me that it was I who must speak now – that it was I who had to decide and conclude upon this strange eventful question, and that with still greater excitement than that with which I had listened to him, he was waiting to hear me.

I did not speak – I went slowly on with the echo of his words ringing into my heart – then came his voice again, agitated and breathless. “Hester, have you nothing to say to me?”

I cannot tell why, at this moment, our first conversation together, when he came to our house with Mr. Osborne, returned to my memory. I did not turn towards him nor lift my eyes, but I asked in a tone as low and hurried as his own, “Almost the first time you ever spoke to me, you were going to call me Hester – why was that?”

He did not answer me immediately. “Because your name became the sweetest sound in the world to me, the first time I heard it,” he said, after a moment’s pause. I believed him – I was not vain of it, it seemed to be a merit in him to think so of me, but no merit in me.

“Not a word – not a word – must I go away then – will you answer me nothing?” he said, at last, after another interval, with other wild words of tenderness, such as had never been said to me before, and such as no woman can tell again. I was roused by his outcry, I turned for an instant to look at him, and then I suddenly felt my face burn and my brow throb, and then – it seemed he was satisfied, and wanted no more words from me.

And we wandered on together, out from the shadows of the trees, where the sun came gleaming and glistening upon us like a friend who had found us out. I think there never was such a night of content, and satisfaction, and peace; there was the calm of night, and the flush of hope for another day upon the heavens; and the sweet light blessed the earth, and the earth lay still under it in a great joy, too deep to be expressed. I was leaning with my hand upon his arm – I was leaning my heart upon him, so that I could have wept for the delight of this sweet ease and rest. Yes! it was the love of the Poets that had overtaken us, and put our hands together. As he clasped both his hands over one of mine, he said it was for ever and for ever – for ever and for ever, and lingered on the words. I said nothing – but the clasp of his hands holding me, stirred the very depths in my heart. I was alone no longer, I wanted to tell him everything – my secret thoughts, my fears – all that had ever happened to me. I could not tell him my fancies about himself, though I listened so eagerly to all he said of me, but all my life came brightening up before me, I was eager to show it all to him – I was jealous of having anything in which he had no share.

We went up and down – up and down – the same bit of enchanted ground, and it was only when I felt a chill breath of air, and slightly shivered at it, and when he put up my shawl upon my shoulders, and drew it round me so anxiously and tenderly, that I glanced up at the sky to escape his eyes which were gazing full upon me, and saw that it was getting quite dark, and must be late. “Is it late?” I said, starting suddenly at the thought of my father; “they will wonder where I am – oh! I must go home.”

“Time has not been to-night,” he said, with the smile upon his lip quivering as if the tears were in his eyes as well as in mine. “Once more, Hester, let me look at this glorious bit of road that has brought me fortune. Here – it was just here – winter should never come to this spot; and there is a faint timid footstep in the sand. My sovereign lady was afraid of me! If you had but known what a poor coward I was, how I trembled for those words which would not come, and how you held my fate in your hand, and played with it. Love is quite bad enough – but Love and Fear! how is a single man to stand against them!”

“I do not think you looked very much afraid,” said I.

“You cannot tell – you never vouchsafed me a glance,” said Harry, “and Fear is the very soul of daring; when a man will rather hear the worst than hear nothing, Hester, his courage is not very cool, I can tell you. And how unmindful you were!”

“Hush! hush! I am sure it is very late,” said I, “I must go home.”

“But not without me, Hester,” said my companion.

I did not want him to leave me, certainly; but I was a little startled. My father! what would he say? how would he receive this unexpected accomplishment of his desires? The idea agitated and excited me. I suddenly felt as if this meeting of ours had been clandestine and underhand. I did not know what I could say to my father, and Alice would be anxious about myself already.

“You would not prolong my suspense, Hester,” said Harry, as we slowly took the way home; “you know I cannot rest till I have spoken to your father – have I a rival, then – do you see difficulties? or is it that you would rather tell him with your own sweet lips what you have never yet told me?”

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