

## CHAPTER V—A DAY OF HER LIFE

I should like to call back a day of her life as it was at this time, when her spirit was as bright as ever and her hand as eager, but she was no longer able to do much work. It should not be difficult, for she repeated herself from day to day and yet did it with a quaint unreasonableness that was ever yielding fresh delight. Our love for her was such that we could easily tell what she would do in given circumstances, but she had always a new way of doing it.

Well, with break of day she wakes and sits up in bed and is standing in the middle of the room. So nimble was she in the mornings (one of our troubles with her) that these three actions must be considered as one; she is on the floor before you have time to count them. She has strict orders not to rise until her fire is lit, and having broken them there is a demure elation on her face. The question is what to do before she is caught and hurried to bed again. Her fingers are tingling to prepare the breakfast; she would dearly love to black-lead the grate, but that might rouse her daughter from whose side she has slipped so cunningly. She catches sight of the screen at the foot of the bed, and immediately her soft face becomes very determined. To guard her from draughts the screen had been brought here from the lordly east room, where it was of no use whatever. But in her opinion it was too beautiful for use; it belonged to the east room, where she could take pleasant peeps at it; she had objected to its removal, even become low-spirited. Now is her opportunity. The screen is an unwieldy thing, but still as a mouse she carries it, and they are well under weigh when it strikes against the gas-bracket in the passage. Next moment a reproachful hand arrests her. She is challenged with being out of bed, she denies it—standing in the passage. Meekly or stubbornly she returns to bed, and it is no satisfaction to you that you can say, ‘Well, well, of all the women!’ and so on, or ‘Surely you knew that the screen was brought here to protect you,’ for she will reply scornfully, ‘Who was touching the screen?’

By this time I have wakened (I am through the wall) and join them anxiously: so often has my mother been taken ill in the night that the slightest sound from her room rouses the house. She is in bed again, looking as if she had never been out of it, but I know her and listen sternly to the tale of her misdoings. She is not contrite. Yes, maybe she

did promise not to venture forth on the cold floors of daybreak, but she had risen for a moment only, and we just t'neaded her with our talk about draughts—there were no such things as draughts in her young days—and it is more than she can do (here she again attempts to rise but we hold her down) to lie there and watch that beautiful screen being spoilt. I reply that the beauty of the screen has ever been its miserable defect: ho, there! for a knife with which to spoil its beauty and make the bedroom its fitting home. As there is no knife handy, my foot will do; I raise my foot, and then—she sees that it is bare, she cries to me excitedly to go back to bed lest I catch cold. For though, ever careless of herself, she will wander the house unshod, and tell us not to talk havers when we chide her, the sight of one of us similarly negligent rouses her anxiety at once. She is willing now to sign any vow if only I will take my bare feet back to bed, but probably she is soon after me in hers to make sure that I am nicely covered up.

It is scarcely six o'clock, and we have all promised to sleep for another hour, but in ten minutes she is sure that eight has struck (house disgraced), or that if it has not, something is wrong with the clock. Next moment she is captured on her way downstairs to wind up the clock. So evidently we must be up and doing, and as we have no servant, my sister disappears into the kitchen, having first asked me to see that 'that woman' lies still, and 'that woman' calls out that she always does lie still, so what are we blethering about?

She is up now, and dressed in her thick maroon wrapper; over her shoulders (lest she should stray despite our watchfulness) is a shawl, not placed there by her own hands, and on her head a delicious mutch. O that I could sing the pæan of the white mutch (and the dirge of the elaborate black cap) from the day when she called witchcraft to her aid and made it out of snow-flakes, and the dear worn hands that washed it tenderly in a basin, and the starching of it, and the finger-iron for its exquisite frills that looked like curls of sugar, and the sweet bands with which it tied beneath the chin! The honoured snowy mutch, how I love to see it smiling to me from the doors and windows of the poor; it is always smiling—sometimes maybe a wavering wistful smile, as if a tear-drop lay hidden among, the frills. A hundred times I have taken the characterless cap from my mother's head and put the mutch in its place and tied the bands beneath her chin, while she protested but was well pleased. For in her heart she knew what suited her best and would

admit it, beaming, when I put a mirror into her hands and told her to look; but nevertheless the cap cost no less than so-and-so, whereas— Was that a knock at the door? She is gone, to put on her cap!

She begins the day by the fireside with the New Testament in her hands, an old volume with its loose pages beautifully refixed, and its covers sewn and resewn by her, so that you would say it can never fall to pieces. It is mine now, and to me the black threads with which she stitched it are as part of the contents. Other books she read in the ordinary manner, but this one differently, her lips moving with each word as if she were reading aloud, and her face very solemn. The Testament lies open on her lap long after she has ceased to read, and the expression of her face has not changed.

I have seen her reading other books early in the day but never without a guilty look on her face, for she thought reading was scarce respectable until night had come. She spends the forenoon in what she calls doing nothing, which may consist in stitching so hard that you would swear she was an over-worked seamstress at it for her life, or you will find her on a table with nails in her mouth, and anon she has to be chased from the garret (she has suddenly decided to change her curtains), or she is under the bed searching for band-boxes and asking sternly where we have put that bonnet. On the whole she is behaving in a most exemplary way to-day (not once have we caught her trying to go out into the washing-house), and we compliment her at dinner-time, partly because she deserves it, and partly to make her think herself so good that she will eat something, just to maintain her new character. I question whether one hour of all her life was given to thoughts of food; in her great days to eat seemed to her to be waste of time, and afterwards she only ate to boast of it, as something she had done to please us. She seldom remembered whether she had dined, but always presumed she had, and while she was telling me in all good faith what the meal consisted of, it might be brought in. When in London I had to hear daily what she was eating, and perhaps she had refused all dishes until they produced the pen and ink. These were flourished before her, and then she would say with a sigh, 'Tell him I am to eat an egg.' But they were not so easily deceived; they waited, pen in hand, until the egg was eaten.

She never 'went for a walk' in her life. Many long trudges she had as a girl when she carried her father's dinner in a flagon to the country place where he was at work, but to walk with no end save the good of your

health seemed a very droll proceeding to her. In her young days, she was positive, no one had ever gone for a walk, and she never lost the belief that it was an absurdity introduced by a new generation with too much time on their hands. That they enjoyed it she could not believe; it was merely a form of showing off, and as they passed her window she would remark to herself with blasting satire, 'Ay, Jeames, are you off for your walk?' and add fervently, 'Rather you than me!' I was one of those who walked, and though she smiled, and might drop a sarcastic word when she saw me putting on my boots, it was she who had heated them in preparation for my going. The arrangement between us was that she should lie down until my return, and to ensure its being carried out I saw her in bed before I started, but with the bang of the door she would be at the window to watch me go: there is one spot on the road where a thousand times I have turned to wave my stick to her, while she nodded and smiled and kissed her hand to me. That kissing of the hand was the one English custom she had learned.

In an hour or so I return, and perhaps find her in bed, according to promise, but still I am suspicious. The way to her detection is circuitous.

'I'll need to be rising now,' she says, with a yawn that may be genuine.

'How long have you been in bed?'

'You saw me go.'

'And then I saw you at the window. Did you go straight back to bed?'

'Surely I had that much sense.'

'The truth!'

'I might have taken a look at the clock first.'

'It is a terrible thing to have a mother who prevaricates. Have you been lying down ever since I left?'

'Thereabout.'

'What does that mean exactly?'

'Off and on.'

'Have you been to the garret?'

'What should I do in the garret?'

'But have you?'

'I might just have looked up the garret stair.'

'You have been redding up the garret again!'

'Not what you could call a redd up.'

'O, woman, woman, I believe you have not been in bed at all!'

'You see me in it.'

'My opinion is that you jumped into bed when you heard me open the door.'

'Havers.'

'Did you?'

'No.'

'Well, then, when you heard me at the gate?'

'It might have been when I heard you at the gate.'

As daylight goes she follows it with her sewing to the window, and gets another needleful out of it, as one may run after a departed visitor for a last word, but now the gas is lit, and no longer is it shameful to sit down to literature. If the book be a story by George Eliot or Mrs. Oliphant, her favourites (and mine) among women novelists, or if it be a Carlyle, and we move softly, she will read, entranced, for hours. Her delight in Carlyle was so well known that various good people would send her books that contained a page about him; she could place her finger on any passage wanted in the biography as promptly as though she were looking for some article in her own drawer, and given a date she was often able to tell you what they were doing in Cheyne Row that day. Carlyle, she decided, was not so much an ill man to live with as one who needed a deal of managing, but when I asked if she thought she could have managed him she only replied with a modest smile that meant 'Oh no!' but had the face of 'Sal, I would have liked to try.'

One lady lent her some scores of Carlyle letters that have never been published, and crabbed was the writing, but though my mother liked to

have our letters read aloud to her, she read every one of these herself, and would quote from them in her talk. Side by side with the Carlyle letters, which show him in his most gracious light, were many from his wife to a friend, and in one of these a romantic adventure is described—I quote from memory, and it is a poor memory compared to my mother's, which registered everything by a method of her own: 'What might be the age of Bell Tibbits? Well, she was born the week I bought the boiler, so she'll be one-and-fifty (no less!) come Martinmas.' Mrs. Carlyle had got into the train at a London station and was feeling very lonely, for the journey to Scotland lay before her and no one had come to see her off. Then, just as the train was starting, a man jumped into the carriage, to her regret until she saw his face, when, behold, they were old friends, and the last time they met (I forget how many years before) he had asked her to be his wife. He was very nice, and if I remember aright, saw her to her journey's end, though he had intended to alight at some half-way place. I call this an adventure, and I am sure it seemed to my mother to be the most touching and memorable adventure that can come into a woman's life. 'You see he hadna forgot,' she would say proudly, as if this was a compliment in which all her sex could share, and on her old tender face shone some of the elation with which Mrs. Carlyle wrote that letter.

But there were times, she held, when Carlyle must have made his wife a glorious woman. 'As when?' I might inquire.

'When she keeked in at his study door and said to herself, "The whole world is ringing with his fame, and he is my man!"'

'And then,' I might point out, 'he would roar to her to shut the door.'

'Pooh!' said my mother, 'a man's roar is neither here nor there.' But her verdict as a whole was, 'I would rather have been his mother than his wife.'

So we have got her into her chair with the Carlyles, and all is well. Furthermore, 'to mak siccar,' my father has taken the opposite side of the fireplace and is deep in the latest five columns of Gladstone, who is his Carlyle. He is to see that she does not slip away fired by a conviction, which suddenly overrides her pages, that the kitchen is going to rack and ruin for want of her, and she is to recall him to himself should he put his foot in the fire and keep it there, forgetful of all save his hero's eloquence. (We were a family who needed a deal of watching.) She is not interested in what Mr. Gladstone has to say; indeed she could never be brought to

look upon politics as of serious concern for grown folk (a class in which she scarcely included man), and she gratefully gave up reading 'leaders' the day I ceased to write them. But like want of reasonableness, a love for having the last word, want of humour and the like, politics were in her opinion a mannish attribute to be tolerated, and Gladstone was the name of the something which makes all our sex such queer characters. She had a profound faith in him as an aid to conversation, and if there were silent men in the company would give him to them to talk about, precisely as she divided a cake among children. And then, with a motherly smile, she would leave them to gorge on him. But in the idolising of Gladstone she recognised, nevertheless, a certain inevitability, and would no more have tried to contend with it than to sweep a shadow off the floor. Gladstone was, and there was an end of it in her practical philosophy. Nor did she accept him coldly; like a true woman she sympathised with those who suffered severely, and they knew it and took counsel of her in the hour of need. I remember one ardent Gladstonian who, as a general election drew near, was in sore straits indeed, for he disbelieved in Home Rule, and yet how could he vote against 'Gladstone's man'? His distress was so real that it gave him a hang-dog appearance. He put his case gloomily before her, and until the day of the election she riddled him with sarcasm; I think he only went to her because he found a mournful enjoyment in seeing a false Gladstonian tortured.

It was all such plain-sailing for him, she pointed out; he did not like this Home Rule, and therefore he must vote against it.

She put it pitiful clear, he replied with a groan.

But she was like another woman to him when he appeared before her on his way to the polling-booth.

'This is a watery Sabbath to you, I'm thinking,' she said sympathetically, but without dropping her wires—for Home Rule or no Home Rule that stocking-foot must be turned before twelve o'clock.

A watery Sabbath means a doleful day, and 'A watery Sabbath it is,' he replied with feeling. A silence followed, broken only by the click of the wires. Now and again he would mutter, 'Ay, well, I'll be going to vote—little did I think the day would come,' and so on, but if he rose it was only to sit down again, and at last she crossed over to him and said softly, (no sarcasm in her voice now), 'Away with you, and vote for

Gladstone's man!' He jumped up and made off without a word, but from the east window we watched him strutting down the brae. I laughed, but she said, 'I'm no sure that it's a laughing matter,' and afterwards, 'I would have liked fine to be that Gladstone's mother.'

It is nine o'clock now, a quarter-past nine, half-past nine—all the same moment to me, for I am at a sentence that will not write. I know, though I can't hear, what my sister has gone upstairs to say to my mother:—

'I was in at him at nine, and he said, "In five minutes," so I put the steak on the brander, but I've been in thrice since then, and every time he says, "In five minutes," and when I try to take the table-cover off, he presses his elbows hard on it, and growls. His supper will be completely spoilt.'

'Oh, that weary writing!'

'I can do no more, mother, so you must come down and stop him.'

'I have no power over him,' my mother says, but she rises smiling, and presently she is opening my door.

'In five minutes!' I cry, but when I see that it is she I rise and put my arm round her. 'What a full basket!' she says, looking at the waste-paper basket, which contains most of my work of the night and with a dear gesture she lifts up a torn page and kisses it. 'Poor thing,' she says to it, 'and you would have liked so fine to be printed!' and she puts her hand over my desk to prevent my writing more.

'In the last five minutes,' I begin, 'one can often do more than in the first hour.'

'Many a time I've said it in my young days,' she says slowly.

'And proved it, too!' cries a voice from the door, the voice of one who was prouder of her even than I; it is true, and yet almost unbelievable, that any one could have been prouder of her than I.

'But those days are gone,' my mother says solemnly, 'gone to come back no more. You'll put by your work now, man, and have your supper, and then you'll come up and sit beside your mother for a whiley, for soon you'll be putting her away in the kirk-yard.'

I hear such a little cry from near the door.



So my mother and I go up the stair together. 'We have changed places,' she says; 'that was just how I used to help you up, but I'm the bairn now.'

She brings out the Testament again; it was always lying within reach; it is the lock of hair she left me when she died. And when she has read for a long time she 'gives me a look,' as we say in the north, and I go out, to leave her alone with God. She had been but a child when her mother died, and so she fell early into the way of saying her prayers with no earthly listener. Often and often I have found her on her knees, but I always went softly away, closing the door. I never heard her pray, but I know very well how she prayed, and that, when that door was shut, there was not a day in God's sight between the worn woman and the little child.