

T H E D A Y S O F M Y L I F E .

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY,

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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

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