

her power, when her dealings with Vice sink into a mere matter of individual opinion, personal dislike, or selfish fear of harm. For all offences, punishment, retributive and inevitable, must come; but punishment is one thing, revenge is another. ONE only, who is Omniscient as well as Omnipotent, can declare, "Vengeance is *Mine*."

## CHAPTER XII.

## Growing Old.

"Do ye think of the days that are gone, Jeanie,  
As ye sit by your fire at night?  
Do ye wish that the morn would bring back the time,  
When your heart and your step were so light?"  
'I think of the days that are gone, Robin,  
And of all that I joyed in then;  
But the brightest that ever arose on me,  
I have never wished back again.'"

GROWING old! A time we talk of, and jest or moralise over, but find almost impossible to realise—at least to ourselves. In others, we can see its approach clearer: yet even then we are slow to recognise it. "What, Miss So-and-so looking old, did you say? Impossible! she is

quite a young person : only a year older than I—and that would make her just . . . . Bless me ! I am forgetting how time goes on. Yes,"—with a faint deprecation which truth forbids you to contradict, and politeness to notice,—“I suppose we are neither of us so young as we used to be.”

Without doubt, it is a trying crisis in a woman's life—a single woman's particularly—when she begins to suspect she is “not so young as she used to be ;” that, after crying “Wolf” ever since the respectable maturity of seventeen—as some young ladies are fond of doing, to the extreme amusement of their friends—the grim wolf, old age, is actually showing his teeth in the distance ; and no courteous blindness on the part of these said friends, no alarmed indifference on her own, can neutralise the fact that he is, if still far off, in sight. And, however charmingly poetical he may appear to sweet fourteen-and-a-half, who writes melancholy verses about “I wish I were again a child,” or merry three-and-twenty, who

preserves in silver paper “my first grey hair,” old age, viewed as a near approaching reality, is—quite another thing.

To feel that you have had your fair half at least of the ordinary terms of years allotted to mortals ; that you have no right to expect to be any handsomer, or stronger, or happier than you are now ; that you have climbed to the summit of life, whence the next step must necessarily be decadence ;—ay, though you do not feel it, though the air may be as fresh, and the view as grand—still, you know that it is so. Slower or faster, you are going down-hill. To those who go “hand-in-hand,”

“And sleep together at the foot,”

it may be a safer and sweeter descent ; but I am writing for those who have to make the descent alone.

It is not a pleasant descent at the beginning. When you find at parties that you are not asked

to dance as much as formerly, and your partners are chiefly stout, middle-aged gentlemen, and slim lads, who blush terribly and require a great deal of drawing out;—when you are “dear”-ed and patronised by stylish young chits, who were in their cradles when you were a grown woman; or when some boy, who was your plaything in petticoats, has the impertinence to look over your head, bearded and grand, or even to consult you on his love-affairs;—when you find your acquaintance delicately abstaining from the term “old maid” in your presence, or immediately qualifying it by an eager panegyric on the solitary sisterhood;—when servants address you as “Ma’am,” instead of “Miss;” and if you are at all stout and comfortable-looking, strange shopkeepers persist in making out your bills to “Mrs. Blank,” and pressing upon your notice toys and perambulators.

Rather trying, too, when, in speaking of yourself as a “girl”—which, from long habit, you un-

wittingly do—you detect a covert smile on the face of your interlocutor; or, led by chance excitement to deport yourself in an ultra-youthful manner, some instinct warns you that you are making yourself ridiculous. Or catching in some strange looking-glass the face that you are too familiar with to notice much, ordinarily, you suddenly become aware that it is *not* a young face; that it will never be a young face again; that it will gradually alter and alter, until the known face of your girlhood, whether plain or pretty, loved or disliked, admired or despised, will have altogether vanished—nay, is vanished: look as you will, you cannot see it any more.

There is no denying the fact, and it ought to silence many an ill-natured remark upon those unlucky ones who insist on remaining “young ladies of a certain age,”—that with most people the passing from maturity to middle age is so gradual, as to be almost imperceptible to the individual concerned. It is very difficult

desperately to the youth that will not stay? and which, after all, is not such a very precious or even a happy thing. Why give herself such a world of trouble to deny or conceal her exact age, when half her acquaintance must either know it or guess it, or be supremely indifferent about it? Why appear dressed—*undressed*, cynics would say—after the pattern of her niece, the belle of the ball; annoying the eye with beauty either half withered or long overblown, and which in its prime would have been all the lovelier for more concealment?

In this matter of dress, a word or two. There are two styles of costume which ladies past their *première jeunesse* are most prone to fall into: one hardly knows which is the worst. Perhaps, though, it is the ultra-juvenile—such as the insane juxtaposition of a yellow skin and white tarlatane, or the anomalous adorning of grey hair with artificial flowers. It may be questioned whether at any age beyond twenty a

ball-costume is really becoming; but after thirty, it is the very last sort of attire that a lady can assume with impunity. It is said that you can only make yourself look younger by dressing a little older than you really are; and truly I have seen many a woman look withered and old in the customary evening-dress which, being unmarried, she thinks necessary to shiver in, who would have appeared fair as a sunshiny October day if she would only have done Nature the justice to assume, in her autumn time, an autumnal livery. If she would only have the sense to believe that grey hair was meant to soften wrinkles and brighten faded cheeks, giving the same effect for which our youthful grandmothers wore powder; that flimsy, light-coloured dresses, fripperied over with trimmings, only suit airy figures and active motions; that a sober-tinted substantial gown and a pretty cap will any day take away ten years from a lady's appearance;—above all, if she would observe this

one grand rule of the toilet, always advisable, but after youth indispensable—that though good personal “points” are by no means a warrant for undue exhibition thereof, no point that is positively unbeautiful ought ever, by any pretence of fashion or custom, to be shown.

The other sort of dress, which, it must be noted, is less frequent, is the dowdy style. People say—though not very soon—“Oh, I am not a young woman now; it does not signify what I wear.” Whether they quite believe it is another question; but they say it—and act upon it when laziness or indifference prompts. Foolish women! they forget, that if we have reason at any time more than another to mind our “looks,” it is when our looks are departing from us. Youth can do almost anything in the toilet—middle-age cannot; yet is none the less bound to present to her friends and society the most pleasing exterior she can. Easy is it to do this when we have those about us who love

us, and take notice of what we wear, and in whose eyes we would like to appear gracious and lovely to the last, so far as nature allows: not easy when things are otherwise. This, perhaps, is the reason why we see so many unmarried women grow careless and “old-fashioned” in their dress—“What does it signify?—nobody cares.”

I think a woman ought to care a little—a very little—for herself. Without preaching up vanity, or undue waste of time over that most thankless duty of adorning one’s self for nobody’s pleasure in particular—is it not still a right and becoming feeling to have some respect for that personality which, as well as our soul, Heaven gave us to make the best of? And is it not our duty—considering the great number of uncomely people there are in the world—to lessen it by each of us making herself as little uncomely as she can?

Because a lady ceases to dress youthfully, she has no excuse for dressing untidily; and though having found out that one general style suits both her person, her taste, and her convenience, she keeps to it, and generally prefers moulding the fashion to herself, rather than herself to the fashion,—still, that is no reason why she should try the risible nerves of one generation by showing up to them the out-of-date costume of another. Neatness invariable; hues carefully harmonised, and as time advances, subsiding into a general unity of tone, softening and darkening in colour, until black, white, and grey alone remain, as the suitable garb for old age: these things are every woman's bounden duty to observe as long as she lives. No poverty, grief, sickness, or loneliness—those mental causes which act so strongly upon the external life—can justify any one (to use a phrase probably soon to be obsolete, when charity and common-

sense have left the rising generation no Fifth of November) in thus voluntarily "making a Guy of herself."

That slow, fine, and yet perceptible change of mien and behaviour, natural and proper to advancing years, is scarcely reducible to rule at all. It is but the outer reflection of an inward process of the mind. We only discover its full importance by the absence of it, as noticeable in a person "who has such very 'young' manners," who falls into raptures of enthusiasm, and expresses loudly every emotion of her nature. Such a character, when real, is unobjectionable, nay, charming, in extreme youth; but the great improbability of its being real makes it rather ludicrous, if not disagreeable, in mature age, when the passions die out or are quieted down, the sense of happiness itself is calm, and the fullest, tenderest tide of which the loving heart is capable, may be described by those "still waters" which "run deep."

To "grow old gracefully," as one, who truly has exemplified her theory, has written and expressed it, is a good and beautiful thing; to grow old worthily, a better. And the first effort to that end is not only to recognise, but to become personally reconciled to the fact of youth's departure; to see, or, if not seeing, to have faith in, the wisdom of that which we call change, yet which is in truth progression; to follow openly and fearlessly, in ourselves and our daily life, the same law which makes spring pass into summer, summer into autumn, autumn into winter, preserving an especial beauty and fitness in each of the four.

Yes, if women could only believe it, there is a wonderful beauty even in growing old. The charm of expression arising from softened temper or ripened intellect, often amply atones for the loss of form and colouring; and, consequently, to those who never could boast either of these latter, years give more much than they take away.

A sensitive person often requires half a lifetime to get thoroughly used to this corporeal machine, to attain a wholesome indifference both to its defects and perfections, and to learn at last, what nobody would acquire from any teacher but experience, that it is the mind alone which is of any consequence; that with a good temper, sincerity, and a moderate stock of brains — or even the two former only — any sort of body can in time be made useful, respectable, and agreeable, as a travelling-dress for the soul. Many a one, who was absolutely plain in youth, thus grows pleasant and well-looking in declining years. You will hardly ever find anybody, not ugly in mind, who is repulsively ugly in person after middle life.

So with the character. If a woman is ever to be wise or sensible, the chances are that she will have become so somewhere between thirty and forty. Her natural good qualities will have de-

veloped; her evil ones will have either been partly subdued, or have overgrown her like rampant weeds; for, however we may talk about people being "not a whit altered" — "just the same as ever" — not one of us is, or can be, for long together, exactly the same; no more than that the body we carry with us is the identical body we were born with, or the one we supposed ours seven years ago. Therein, as in our spiritual self which inhabits it, goes on a perpetual change and renewal: if this ceased, the result would be, not permanence, but corruption. In moral and mental, as well as physical growth, it is impossible to remain stationary; if we do not advance, we retrograde. Talk of "too late to improve" — "too old to learn," &c.! Idle words! A human being should be improving with every day of a lifetime; and will probably have to go on learning throughout all the ages of immortality.

And this brings me to one among the number of what I may term "the pleasures of growing old."

At our outset, "to love" is the verb we are most prone to conjugate; afterwards we discover, that though the first, it is by no means the sole verb in the grammar of life, or even the only one that implies (*vide* Lennie or Murray) "to be, to do, or to suffer." To know — that is, to acquire, to find out, to be able to trace and appreciate the causes of things, gradually becomes a necessity, an exquisite delight. We begin to taste the full meaning of that promise which describes the other world as a place where "we shall know even as we are known." Nay, even this world, with all its burdens and pains, presents itself in a phase of abstract interest entirely apart from ourselves and our small lot therein, whether joyful or sorrowful. We take pleasure in tracing the large workings of all things — more clearly apprehended as we cease



to expect, or conduct ourselves as if we expected, that Providence will appear as *Deus ex machina* for our own private benefit. We are able to pass out of our own small daily sphere, and take interest in the marvellous government of the universe; to see the grand workings of cause and effect, the educing of good out of apparent evil, the clearing away of the knots in tangled destinies, general or individual, the wonderful agency of time, change and progress in ourselves, in those surrounding us, and in the world at large. We have lived just long enough to catch a faint tone or two of the large harmonies of nature and fate—to trace the apparent plot and purpose of our own life and that of others, sufficiently to make us content to sit still and see the play played out. As I once heard said, "We feel we should like to go on living, were it only out of curiosity."

In small minds, this feeling expends itself in meddling, gossiping, scandal-mongering; but

such are only the abortive developments of a right noble quality, which, properly guided, results in benefits incalculable to the individual and to society. For, undoubtedly, the after-half of life is the best working-time. Beautiful is youth's enthusiasm, and grand are its achievements; but the most solid and permanent good is done by the persistent strength and wide experience of middle age.

A principal agent in this is a blessing which rarely comes till then—contentment: not mere resignation, a passive acquiescence in what cannot be removed, but active contentment; bought, and cheaply, too, by a personal share in that daily account of joy and pain, which the longer one lives the more one sees is pretty equally balanced in all lives. Young people are happy—enjoy ecstasically, either in prospect or fruition, "the top of life;" but they are very seldom contented. It is not possible. Not till the cloudy maze is half travelled through, and we

begin to see the object and purpose of it, can we be really content.

One great element in this—nor let us think shame to grant that which God and nature also allow—consists in the doubtful question, “To marry or not to marry?” being by this time generally settled; the world’s idle curiosity or impertinent meddling therewith having come to an end; which alone is a great boon to any woman. Her relations with the other sex imperceptibly change their character, or slowly decline. Though there are exceptions, of old lovers who have become friends, and friends whom no new love could make swerve from the fealty of years, still it usually happens so. If a woman wishes to retain her sway over mankind—not an unnatural wish, even in the good and amiable, who have been long used to attention and admiration in society—she must do it by means quite different from any she has hitherto employed. Even then, be

her wit ever so sparkling, her influence ever so pure and true, she will often find her listener preferring bright eyes to intellectual conversation, and the satisfaction of his heart to the improvement of his mind. And who can blame him?

Pleasant as men’s society undoubtedly is; honourable, well-informed gentlemen, who meet a lady on the easy neutral ground of mutual esteem, and take more pains to be agreeable to her than, unfortunately, her own sex frequently do; they are, after all, but men. Not one of them is really necessary to a woman’s happiness, except *the* one whom, by this time, she has probably either met, or lost, or found. Therefore, however uncomplimentary this may sound to those charming and devoted creatures, which of course they always are in ladies’—young ladies’—society, a lady past her youth may be well content to let them go before they depart

of their own accord. I fear the waning coquette, the ancient beauty, as well as the ordinary woman, who has had her fair share of both love and liking, must learn and show by her demeanour she has learned that the only way to preserve the unfeigned respect of the opposite sex, is by letting them see that she can do without either their attention or their admiration.

Another source of contentment, which in youth's fierce self-dependence it would be vain to look for—is the recognition of one's own comparative unimportance and helplessness in the scale of fate. We begin by thinking we can do everything, and that everything rests with us to do; the merest trifle frets and disturbs us; the restless heart wearies itself with anxieties over its own future, the tender one over the futures of those dear to it. Many a young face do I see wearing the indescribable *Martha*-look — “troubled about many things”—whom I

would fain remind of the anecdote of the ambassador in China. To him, tossing sleepless on his bed, his old servant said:

“Sir, may I put to you, and will you answer, three questions? First, did not the Almighty govern this world very well before you came into it?”

“Of course.”

“And will He not also do the same when you are gone out of it?”

“I know that.”

“Then, do you not think, sir, that He is able to govern it while you are in it?”

The ambassador smiled assent, turned round, and slept calmly.

Alas! it is the slowest and most painful lesson that Faith has to learn—Faith, not Indifference—to do steadfastly and patiently all that lies to her hand; and there leave it, believing that the Almighty is able to govern His own world.

It is said that we suffer less as we grow older

that pain, like joy, becomes dulled by repetition, or by the callousness that comes with years. In one sense this is true. If there is no joy like the joy of youth, the rapture of a first love, the thrill of a first ambition, God's great mercy has also granted that there is no anguish like youth's pain; so total, so hopeless, blotting out earth and heaven, falling down upon the whole being like a stone. This never comes in after-life, because the sufferer, if he or she have lived to any purpose at all, has learned that God never meant any human being to be crushed under any calamity like a blindworm under a stone.

For lesser evils, the fact that our interests gradually take a wider range, allows more scope for the healing power of compensation. Also our strongest idiosyncrasies, our loves, hates, sympathies, and prejudices, having assumed a more rational and softened shape, we do not present so many angles for the rough attrition of the world. Likewise, with the eye of that

Faith already referred to, we have come to view life in its entirety, instead of agonisingly puzzling over its disjointed parts, which are not, and were never meant to be, made wholly clear to mortal eye. And that calm twilight, which by nature's kindly law so soon begins to creep over the past, throws over all things a softened colouring which altogether transcends and forbids regret. I suppose there is hardly any woman with a good heart and a clear conscience, who does not feel, on the whole, the infinite truth of the verses at the head of this paper, and of the other two verses which I here add—partly because a pleasant rhyme is a wholesome thing to cling about the memory, and partly in the hope that some one may own or claim this anonymous song:—

“ ‘ Do ye think of the hopes that are gone, Jeanie,  
As ye sit by your fire at night?  
Do ye gather them up as they faded fast  
Like buds with an early blight?’

' I think of the hopes that are gone, Robin,  
And I mourn not their stay was fleet ;  
For they fell as the leaves of the red rose fall,  
And were even in falling, sweet.'

' Do ye think of the friends that are gone, Jeanie,  
As ye sit by your fire at night ?  
Do ye wish they were round you again once more  
By the hearth that they made so bright ?'

' I think of the friends that are gone, Robin,  
They are dear to my heart as then :  
But the best and the dearest among them all  
I have never wished back again !''

Added to all these reasons, contentment, faith, cheerfulness, and the natural calming down of both passions and emotions, which give a woman greater capacity for usefulness in middle life than in any previous portion of her existence, is another — her greater independence. By the time she has arrived at the half of those three-score-years-and-ten which form the largest available limit of active life, she will generally have become, in the best sense of the term, her own mistress. I do not mean as regards exemption

from family ties and restrictions, for this sort of liberty is sadder than bondage, but she will be mistress over herself—she will have learned to understand herself, mentally and bodily. Nor is this last a small advantage, for it often takes years to comprehend, and act upon when comprehended, the physical peculiarities of one's own constitution. Much valetudinarianism among women arises from ignorance or neglect of the commonest sanitary laws ; and indifference to that grand preservative of a healthy body, a well-controlled, healthy mind. Both of these are more attainable in middle age than youth ; and, therefore, the sort of happiness they bring—a solid, useful, available happiness—is more in her power then, than at any earlier period.

And why ? Because she has ceased to think principally of herself and her own pleasures ; because, as I tried to show in a former chapter, happiness itself has become to her an accidental thing, which the good God may give or withhold

as He sees most fit for her—most adapted to the work for which He means to use her in her generation. This conviction of being at once an active and a passive agent—self-working, worked through, and worked upon—is surely consecration enough to form the peace, nay, the happiness, of any good woman's life: enough, be it ever so solitary, to sustain it until the end.

In what manner such a conviction should be carried out, no one individual can venture to advise. Women's work is, in this age, if undefined, almost unlimited, when the woman herself so chooses. She alone can be a law unto herself; deciding, acting according to the circumstances in which her lot is placed.

And have we not many who do so act? Women of property, whose name is a proverb for generous and wise charities—whose riches, carefully guided, flow into innumerable channels, freshening the whole land. Women of rank and influence, who use both, or lay aside both, in the

simplest humility, for labours of love which level, or rather raise, all classes to one common sphere of womanhood. And many others, of whom the world knows nothing, who have taken the wisest course that any unmarried woman can take, and made for themselves a home and a position: some, as the ladies Bountiful of a country neighbourhood; some, as elder sisters, on whom has fallen the bringing up of whole families, and to whom has tacitly been accorded the headship of the same, by the love and respect of more than one generation thereof; and some as writers, painters, and professional women generally, who make the most of the special gift apparently allotted to them, believing that, be it great or small, it is not theirs either to lose or to waste, but that they must one day render up to the Master His own, with usury.

Would that, instead of educating our young girls with the notion that they are to be wives, or nothing—matrons, with an acknowledged

position and duties, or with no position and duties at all—we could instil into them the principle that, above and before all, they are to be *women*—women, whose character is of their own making, and whose lot lies in their own hands. Not through any foolish independence of mankind, or adventurous misogamy: let people prate as they will, the woman was never born yet who would not cheerfully and proudly give herself and her whole destiny into a worthy hand, at the right time, and under fitting circumstances—that is, when her whole heart and conscience accompanied and sanctified the gift. But marriage ought always to be a question not of necessity, but choice. Every girl ought to be taught that a hasty, loveless union, stamps upon her as foul dishonour as one of those connexions which omit the legal ceremony altogether; and that, however pale, dreary, and toilsome a single life may be, unhappy married life must be tenfold worse—an ever-haunting temptation, an incur-

able regret, a torment from which there is no escape but death. There is many a bridal-chamber over which ought to be placed no other inscription than that well-known one over the gate of Dante's hell:

“*Lasciate ogni speranza, voi chi entrate.*”

God forbid that any woman, in whose heart is any sense of real marriage, with all its sanctity, beauty, and glory, should ever be driven to enter such an accursed door!

But after the season of growing old, there comes, to a few, the time of old age; the withered face, the failing strength, the bodily powers gradually sinking into incapacity for both usefulness and enjoyment. I will not say but that this season has its sad aspect to a woman who has never married; and who, as her own generation dies out, probably has long since died out, retains no longer, nor can expect to retain, any flesh-and-blood claim upon a single human being.

When all the downward ties which give to the decline of life a rightful comfort, and the interest in the new generation which brightens it with a perpetual hope, are to her either unknown, or indulged in chiefly on one side. Of course there are exceptions; where an aunt has been almost like a mother, and a loving and loveable great-aunt is as important a personage as any grandmother. But I speak of things in general. It is a condition to which a single woman must make up her mind, that the close of her days will be more or less solitary.

Yet there is a solitude which old age feels to be as natural and satisfying as that rest which seems such an irksomeness to youth, but which gradually grows into the best blessing of our lives; and there is another solitude, so full of peace and hope, that it is like Jacob's sleep in the wilderness, at the foot of the ladder of angels.

“All things are less dreadful than they seem.”

And it may be that the extreme loneliness which, viewed afar off, appears to an unmarried woman as one of the saddest of the inevitable results of her lot, shall by that time have lost all its pain, and be regarded but as the quiet, dreamy hour “between the lights;” when the day's work is done, and we lean back, closing our eyes, to think it all over before we finally go to rest, or to look forward, in faith and hope, unto the Coming Morning.

A finished life—a life which has made the best of all the materials granted to it, and through which, be its web dark or bright, its pattern clear or clouded, can now be traced plainly the hand of the Great Designer; surely this is worth living for? And though at its end it may be somewhat lonely; though a servant's and not a daughter's arm may guide the failing step; though most likely it will be strangers only who come about the dying bed, close the eyes that no husband ever kissed, and



draw the shroud kindly over the poor withered breast where no child's head has ever lain; still, such a life is not to be pitied, for it is a completed life. It has fulfilled its appointed course, and returns to the Giver of all breath, pure as He gave it. Nor will He forget it when He counteth up His jewels.

On earth, too, for as much and as long as the happy dead, to whom all things have long been made equal, need remembering, such a life will not have been lived in vain:

“ Only the memory of the just  
Smells sweet, and blossoms in the dust.”

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