

a striking testimony have we here to the power of conscience; to the yet undethroned authority of heaven's viceroy in the human soul; to the difficulty of effacing the characters of that inward decalogue, in whose broken tables nature still reads her law, and the heathen finds himself "without excuse;" and, until it is scathed over by the hot iron of hardening and unrepented sin, or until its fine edge is blunted by a course of oft-resisted and despised convictions, will conscience continue to prosper in that whereunto God hath sent it. In the soul's deep solitude it will hold its court: itself the giver of the law; itself the witness to its transgression; itself the judge to sentence; itself the executioner to avenge; all as if in mute rehearsal of that deeper tragedy, where, on the high platform of heaven's judicature, both quick and dead must stand.

Thus was it in the bosom of Felix. Torpid and trance-like had Heaven's messenger been lying in the lap of sin; but, at the sound of Paul's voice, she proved she was not dead, but sleeping; or telling him, in her stifled utterances, to hear the anticipative verdict of a judgment yet to come; and, instantly the governor forgot his dignity as much as the prisoner forgot his chains. The two parties appeared, for the moment, to have changed places; conscience having made a coward of the judge, and truth having invested the captive with more majesty than the purple. And why, we may ask, did not the genuine conversion of the governor ensue upon this? The reasoning of the apostle had convinced his understanding, and had both awakened and alarmed his conscience; wherefore did it not penetrate further, into the inner chamber of the heart? Without controversy, this is the natural tendency of deep spiritual convictions; left to itself, truth would as assuredly issue in the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, as water, unobstructed, would run down the mountain's side. But we may oppose a force to this spiritual gravitation; the Spirit of God will work powerfully *with* us, but it will not always work irresistibly *against* us; and, therefore, if, after a man has had the eyes of his understanding opened, and the powers of his moral sense awakened, he should still resolve, like Felix, to say to every message addressed to his soul, "Go thy way for this time," with sorrowful steps and slow will the insulted Spirit retire from his heart, leaving conscience to return to its stupor, and the understanding to close its eyes again.

And, here, let us not lose ourselves in any metaphysical subtleties, as to where the constraining energy of the Spirit terminates, and the permitted exercise of the human will begins. Philosophy cannot tell us any thing more than our consciousness; and, if it could tell us any thing contrary to it, we should pause before we received it: and this consciousness tells us, that we have it in our power almost at any time to dismiss an unwel-

come subject from our thoughts. "The most obvious of the powers which the mind possesses over the train of its thoughts," says an eminent authority, "is its power of singling out any one of them at pleasure; of detaining it; of making it a particular object of attention;"* and, for the calling into exercise of this power, there is no readier or more effective way than that resorted to by the guilty Felix: namely, by the forced dismissal of every external association, by which the succession of disagreeable thoughts could be kept up; or by surrounding ourselves with other outward objects, which should divert these thoughts into a different channel. The conduct of Felix, therefore, is intelligible enough with the sermon in his ears, and with the preacher before his eyes, and having seated at his side the shameless partner of his crimes, he could think of nothing but "righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come." Conscience seemed to owe all its power to the presence of the apostle; and, so long as Paul was allowed to lash him with "whips," would conscience have the power to scourge his soul with scorpions.† To break the chain, therefore, to stop the succession of painful thoughts, he resolves on an immediate dismissal of the preacher, saying, "Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee."

But the most important of the practical lessons to be gathered from this history remains to be considered: namely, the strange infatuation of unconverted men, in supposing that, though they trifle with conviction for the present, a time will yet come, when they shall be better prepared to yield to them. "When I have a convenient season, I will call for thee." The great fallacy of life seems to be a persuasion, that, having for a given part of our days run in the way of the ungodly, we shall afterwards be able to retrace our steps, and, with the speed of thought, find ourselves in the ways of God. All considerations of time, habit, diminished strength, and contracted insensibility to religious impressions, are overlooked; whilst the soul yields itself to the fascinations of delay, pledges the future to noble and high resolves, and sees facilities for duty in some distant morrow, which it thinks are wholly wanting while it is called to-day." In vain does reason urge, that, if we find it hard to put out the first spark of sin, we shall find it harder still to extinguish the raging flame; that, if we cannot pluck up sin when it is a green twig, it will be in vain to try when custom has given it the strength of a sturdy tree: spell-bound and reason-proof, we resolve that it is better to "contend with horses," than let "the footmen" weary us; and that, though, at this time, we faint in the

* Stewart's Philosophy of the Mind, p. 298.

† "My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,

And every tongue brings in a several tale."