

"I wish I could," she answered; "from my heart I wish I could. But, strange as it may seem, I want the moral courage. When I first began to see the evil, I thought I should be able to speak, if it increased; and now I think I should be better able, were it only commencing. And, so it is—we shrink from the most obvious duty, until the time to perform it has passed by, and then waste the remainder of our lives in unavailing regret."

"Mr. Ferguson, you say, encourages it?"

"Oh, yes! There is a long history of that man's connexion with my father, which you will probably some time become acquainted with. In one way or other they have been engaged in business together almost ever since you left this country. Nothing, however, has answered with them until the new manufactory, which you must have seen in coming. Here so many hands are employed, and such mighty wonders done, that the poor people around us think we must be worth a world of wealth. But what would money avail us, if we had the wealth of Cræsus, and my poor father carried up every night, as you have just seen him. It is true, there are days, though few and far between, when he seems to make an effort to be his better-self again; and it was seeing him so well yesterday, and hearing that Mr. Ferguson was away, which induced me to ride over to your brother's this morning, with an invitation which I believed you could not refuse; for I thought it possible, that by securing your company to-day, I might delay your knowledge of my father's actual state. No sooner did I see Mr. Ferguson, however, than I knew how the day would close; for I always observe, that my father is least like himself when that man is here."

Miss Somerville then added: "You are not one of those summer friends to whom I would apologize for your visit having been made so unpleasant. You remember, I doubt not, the happy meetings we used to have at this fire-side; and if the change is painful to you, what must it be to me?"

"And is there nothing that can be done?" I asked.

"Nothing that I know of," she replied, "Night after night I sit by this solitary hearth, brooding over the same subject; looking at it in every point of view, and asking in vain if nothing can be done. Perhaps," and she looked eagerly in my face, as if struck by some new, and forcible idea; "perhaps if I could talk to my father about religion, it might do some good."

"Have you never tried it?"

"Ah! no. I am miserably dark myself. Our good pastor used to warn me, that the time would come when I should need to realize the hopes I was so fond of speculating upon; but since he left us, no one has ever talked with me on this subject, and by degrees I seem to have lost the little hold of it I once possessed. Can you not help me here?"

I was silent; and we two friends—friends not only in name, but friends who would each have done and suffered much to save the other from a moment's pain, sat together alone, after seven years of separation—one having known much of the painful experience of sickness, and the other of sorrow; and each met the inquiring glance of the other with the total blank of fatal ignorance on that one subject, which it was becoming daily and hourly more important for us both to understand.

Oh, who shall dare to call himself by the sacred name of friend, unless he can answer such an appeal as was made to me that night, by the woman I had left so gay and happy—the woman, whom I found on my return bowed down with anxiety and grief—forced even to the verge of premature old age, so much had sorrow worn away the bloom and the vivacity of her youth.

Yet by this sacred name I scrupled not to call myself; and such had been the effect of affliction on the mind of Miss Somerville, that she seemed, from the very weakness of her unsupported nature, to derive more satisfaction than in for-

mer years, from the idea that I really was her friend. In this manner, our acquaintance was renewed, with only one point of difference in our intimacy, which on my part at least, was more felt than understood.

I had been accustomed, in by-gone days, to regard Miss Somerville as something of a coquette; for she had a habit of perpetually leading one's attention to herself, and would rather provoke anger or reproof, than submit to be unnoticed. Thus she had been a little too fond of placing her peculiarities in a conspicuous point of view, as well as of piquing the vanity and wounding the self-love of those who formed her little court, in order that she might enjoy an opportunity of flattering them more effectually by her attentions, and soothing them by her yet more irresistible kindness.

All this, however, had now vanished as completely as if she had never known what it was to be admired. She now seldom spoke of herself, and, even when conversing with me, would always change the conversation as soon as my observations referred to her own character and situation. This I regretted the more, as I found that her feelings, in their subdued and altered tone, her affectionate solicitude for her father, and the difficult and isolated position she held, as the only child of such a parent, were all combining to render her an object of deeper interest to me, than she had ever been before; though the apparent coldness of her manner effectually repelled me whenever I attempted to give utterance to such feelings.

The time was now approaching for me to decide upon whether I should return to India; and as long illness had exercised considerable influence over my habits, by damping the ardour of youthful enterprise, I will not deny that certain calculations upon the fortune of Miss Somerville did occasionally mingle themselves with my admiration of her character. The possession of such a fortune would enable me with prudence to resign my commission. If, therefore, Miss Somerville would not allow me to introduce the subject in the customary manner, it became necessary to the arrangement of my plans, that I should adopt some other method of bringing the question to a final decision. It was doubly painful to me to have no other alternative, because I knew that her fortune and her position in society had rendered a mere proposal of marriage a circumstance of such common occurrence in her experience, as to be despatched in the most summary manner; yet I trusted to her good sense and generosity for pardoning in me, what she had left me no means to avoid.

Nothing could be more embarrassing to me, however, than the perfect silence with which my proposal was at last received. I could see that she was affected by it—perhaps too much affected for words; but in what manner I was at a loss to comprehend; and I had nothing left but to implore her to answer a question on which depended my happiness here, and perhaps hereafter.

"Then I will treat you with a frankness equal to your own," said she "and briefly answer—No! Whether my answer is dictated by duty or inclination, can be of little consequence to you to know. It is as irrevocable as if you were to me the least attractive being upon earth."

There remained little more for me to say, for there was a firmness in the tone and manner of Miss Somerville, which left no doubt as to the strength of her determination. We were, therefore, pursuing our walk in silence, when I perceived with surprise, that while she often turned away her head, as if to look at the plants by the way, or the prospect we were leaving, tears were absolutely streaming from her eyes, so fast, that it was no longer possible to conceal them from my observation.

Encouraged by this evidence of emotion, whatever might be its secret cause, I very naturally resumed the subject of our conversation, to which, however, she only replied with more firmness and decision.

"Do not," said she, "I entreat you, do not mention this