

unusual time at my toilette that day; for besides the reluctance I felt to meet any one beyond our family party, there lurked about my heart a secret desire to make the best I could of a faded complexion; and so to arrange my hair, that the few silver threads which already began to glisten about my temples, should not easily be detected.

In these laudable efforts, I know not how far I succeeded; but I remember, that when the second bell had rung for dinner, I was still undecided which ~~cravat~~ <sup>cravat</sup> was most becoming, and whether I was invalid enough to go down in my embroidered slippers.

When I first saw Kate Somerville that day, I confess my recollection was at fault. She was stooping down amongst a group of children; my eye caught only her profile, and I was at a loss to recognise, in the pale, thin, dark woman before me, the laughing girl I had left seven years before. She started up, however, as I approached; and, advancing towards me, held out her hand in her accustomed cordial manner, when I caught at once the flash of her deep, dark eyes, and the glitter of her white teeth, as she smiled, and spoke with that heart-warm vivacity which I had never found in any other woman.

I have said that seven years make an awful chasm in friendship. They make an awful change in youth and beauty too. I could not tell what had come over Kate Somerville, but her smile died away the moment she had done speaking; and though she laughed again, once or twice, during dinner, that wild musical laugh that used to vibrate through us all like an electric spark, her countenance became serious almost before the sound had ceased, and one was tempted to ask from what invisible source that voice of mirth had come.

It was impossible to look at the pale, sunken countenance before me, and not feel, that to one of us, at least, the experience of the last seven years had been heavily laden. Illness had laid its burden upon my frame; but it was too clearly perceptible that her's had been the sickness of the soul, and I felt smitten with grief and shame, that I had not hastened down to offer her the greeting of an old and faithful friend—above all, that I should have bestowed, in connexion with her, a single thought upon the trifles of my toilette.

Kate Somerville had never been solicitous to please by those means in which so many women place the secret of their power—her dress; and in this respect she seemed now to have forgotten the natural vanity of her sex. She was dressed in the simplest, plainest style imaginable; and had the glossy ringlets of her long dark hair required more than a moment's thought, they would never have fallen in such luxuriant beauty over her brow and cheek.

By my sister's children, Kate Somerville was little less than worshipped; and notwithstanding she both gave the law amongst them, and administered summary justice, they desired nothing so much as to monopolize her whole attention; while, on every symptom she evinced of yielding herself to their caresses, she was enclosed in all their little arms at once.

She had never looked so amiable to me, as in the midst of this little group; and I could not help mentally exclaiming, "Is this the woman who has no one to help her to bear the weight of sorrowful experience? No one to sooth her in affliction? No bosom-friend to shield and cherish her?"

I think she must have read my thoughts in the long earnest gaze I fixed upon her; for, though she suddenly averted her face, and stooped down to attend to one of the children, I could see that the rosy blush of former days had risen to her cheek; and when she looked up, and spoke to me again, there was a glistening in her eyes, like the trace of tears, which had been driven back.

Altogether there was a mystery about Kate Somerville which I vainly attempted to unravel; nor was it until my strength enabled me to accept the invitation of her father to spend a day at the Hall, that I could form any conjecture as to the change which seven years had produced in her character and appearance.

The first mild day of spring weather, I spent in revisiting scenes once so familiar, that I should have believed it impossible ever to forget them; and yet, as we pursued our way, I had to trust myself to the guidance of my companion, to lead me along the nearest path. Perhaps I ought rather to say, to the guidance of her horse, for she herself appeared to be entirely absorbed in her own thoughts; so much so, that she answered me at random when I spoke to her, and for the sake of keeping up the conversation, made the most common-place remarks—a fault which she, of all women, had formerly been least addicted to.

"I am happy," said I, as we stopped, as in by-gone days, to gaze upon a favourite scene, "I am happy to find something still unchanged. Tell me, Miss Somerville, shall I see the old Hall the same?"

"The house," she answered very gravely, "is little altered. It has still a bright fire for a winter's evening, and a warm welcome for an old friend. But how is it, when all the world grows weary with the same thing, that you alone find fault with change?"

"No one likes to meet with changes in their friends."

"Oh, yes! when they grow better. When they turn grave, for instance, after they have been too flippant."

She said this with a look and tone so like her former self, that the barrier of reserve was at once broken between us, and we were Kate and Arthur to each other again, apparently with the tacit understanding that we stood in all respects on the footing of our former friendship.

"Yes, Kate," said I, you were indeed rather flippant when I was last here. And now I have need to listen to your voice, and hear you call me by my name, to believe you are the same."

"I am not the same," she replied in a voice rendered tremulous by suppressed emotion. "You will be mistaken indeed if you expect to find me so. Yet the change you cannot but observe, is not the effect of any distinct calamity. One affliction, however great, is seldom sufficient to bow down the spirit; especially such a spirit as mine. It is the gnawing anxiety of years, that nature is unable to sustain."

"But you can have no anxieties, Kate. Your father still lives?"

"Let us ride on," said she hastily, "we shall keep him waiting for his dinner."

We pursued our way accordingly, and as we approached her father's house, notwithstanding she had told me it remained unchanged, I could not but observe a want of neatness in the fences, and an aspect of neglect about the grounds, which, however, I accounted for in my own mind, by the circumstance of her father's advancing years, and the probability that he was less accustomed than formerly, to superintend his labourers himself.

On entering the court-yard, this aspect of indescribable forlornness was still more striking. Grass and weeds had grown almost entirely over the stones, and one or two shutters were hanging from the windows of the lower offices by a single nail, while others swung to and fro in the wind. But for the melancholy aspect which pervaded the scene, I might easily have dreamed myself back again, and have believed it had been only the day, or the week before, that I had trod those stones; for, to my utter astonishment, who should I see but the identical figure of Mr. Ferguson advancing towards us, and looking precisely the same as when I had seen him last. I observed on his first appearance that Miss Somerville's colour rose, and when he took hold of her rein, and attempted to assist her from her horse, she suddenly sprang to the ground, thus leaving him the privilege of calling the groom, or of conducting it to the stable himself.

"You are longing to find something unchanged," said she, as I walked beside her to the door, "look at that man!"

On all my former visits to the Hall, the kind and hospitable master of the house had been one of the first to welcome my arrival. The elasticity of his step, the air of ancient gentility