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Mary Somerville

Excerpt

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PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS
OF
MARY SOMERVILLE.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION—PARENTAGE—LIFE IN SCOTLAND IN THE LAST CENTURY
—EARLY EDUCATION—SCHOOL.

THE life of a woman entirely devoted to her family duties and to scientific pursuits affords little scope for a biography. There are in it neither stirring events nor brilliant deeds to record; and as my Mother was strongly averse to gossip, and to revelations of private life or of intimate correspondence, nothing of the kind will be found in the following pages. It has been only after very great hesitation, and on the recommendation of valued friends, who think that some account of so remarkable and beautiful a character cannot fail to interest the public, that I have resolved to publish some detached Recollections of past times, noted down by my mother during the last years of her life, together with a few letters from eminent men and women, referring almost exclusively to her scientific works. A still smaller number of her own letters have been added, either as illustrating her

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opinions on events she witnessed, or else as affording some slight idea of her simple and loving disposition.

Few thoughtful minds will read without emotion my mother's own account of the wonderful energy and indomitable perseverance by which, in her ardent thirst for knowledge, she overcame obstacles apparently insurmountable, at a time when women were well-nigh totally debarred from education ; and the almost intuitive way in which she entered upon studies of which she had scarcely heard the names, living, as she did, among persons to whom they were utterly unknown, and who disapproved of her devotion to pursuits so different from those of ordinary young girls at the end of the last century, especially in Scotland, which was far more old-fashioned and primitive than England.

Nor is her simple account of her early days without interest, when, as a lonely child, she wandered by the seashore, and on the links of Burntisland, collecting shells and flowers ; or spent the clear, cold nights at her window, watching the starlit heavens, whose mysteries she was destined one day to penetrate in all their profound and sublime laws, making clear to others that knowledge which she herself had acquired, at the cost of so hard a struggle.

It was not only in her childhood and youth that my mother's studies encountered disapproval. Not till she became a widow, had she perfect freedom to pursue them. The first person—indeed the only one in her early days—who encouraged her passion for learning was her uncle by marriage, afterwards her father-in-law, the Rev. Dr. Somerville, minister of Jedburgh, a man very much in advance of his century in liberality of thought on all subjects. He was one of the first to discern her rare

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qualities, and valued her as she deserved ; while through life she retained the most grateful affection for him, and confided to him many doubts and difficulties on subjects of the highest importance. Nothing can be more erroneous than the statement, repeated in several obituary notices of my mother, that Mr. Greig (her first husband) aided her in her mathematical and other pursuits. Nearly the contrary was the case. Mr. Greig took no interest in science or literature, and possessed in full the prejudice against learned women which was common at that time. Only on her marriage with my father, my mother at last met with one who entirely sympathised with her, and warmly entered into all her ideas, encouraging her zeal for study to the utmost, and affording her every facility for it in his power. His love and admiration for her were unbounded ; he frankly and willingly acknowledged her superiority to himself, and many of our friends can bear witness to the honest pride and gratification which he always testified in the fame and honours she attained.

No one can escape sorrow, and my mother, in the course of her long life, had her full share, but she bore it with that deep feeling of trust in the great goodness of God which formed so marked a feature in her character. She had a buoyant and hopeful spirit, and though her affections were very strong, and she felt keenly, it was ever her nature to turn from the shadows to all that is bright and beautiful in mortal life. She had much to make life pleasant in the great honours universally bestowed upon her ; but she found far more in the devoted affection of friends, to say nothing of those whose happy lot it has been to live in close and loving intercourse with so noble and gentle a spirit.

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She met with unbounded kindness from men of science of all countries, and most profound was her gratitude to them. Modest and unpretending to excess, nothing could be more generous than the unfeigned delight she shewed in recognising the genius and discoveries of others; ever jealous of their fame, and never of her own.

It is not uncommon to see persons who hold in youth opinions in advance of the age in which they live, but who at a certain period seem to crystallise, and lose the faculty of comprehending and accepting new ideas and theories; thus remaining at last as far behind, as they were once in advance of public opinion. Not so my mother, who was ever ready to hail joyfully any new idea or theory, and to give it honest attention, even if it were at variance with her former convictions. This quality she never lost, and it enabled her to sympathise with the younger generation of philosophers, as she had done with their predecessors, her own contemporaries.

Although her favourite pursuit, and the one for which she had decidedly most aptitude, was mathematics; yet there were few subjects in which she did not take interest, whether in science or literature, philosophy or politics. She was passionately fond of poetry, her especial favourites being Shakespeare and Dante, and also the great Greek dramatists, whose tragedies she read fluently in the original, being a good classical scholar. She was very fond of music, and devoted much time to it in her youth, and she painted from nature with considerable taste. The latter was, perhaps, the recreation in which she most delighted, from the opportunity it afforded her of contemplating the wonderful beauty of the world, which was a never-failing source of intense enjoyment to her, whether she watched the

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changing effects of light and shade on her favourite Roman Campagna, or gazed, enchanted, on the gorgeous sunsets on the bay of Naples, as she witnessed them from her much-loved Sorrento, where she passed the last summers of her life. All things fair were a joy to her—the flowers we brought her from our rambles, the seaweeds, the wild birds she saw, all interested and pleased her. Everything in nature spoke to her of that great God who created all things, the grand and sublimely beautiful as well as the exquisite loveliness of minute objects. Above all, in the laws which science unveils step by step, she found ever renewed motives for the love and adoration of their Author and Sustainer. This fervour of religious feeling accompanied her through life, and very early she shook off all that was dark and narrow in the creed of her first instructors for a purer and a happier faith.

It would be almost incredible were I to describe how much my mother contrived to do in the course of the day. When my sister and I were small children, although busily engaged in writing for the press, she used to teach us for three hours every morning, besides managing her house carefully, reading the newspapers (for she always was a keen, and, I must add, a liberal politician), and the most important new books on all subjects, grave and gay. In addition to all this, she freely visited and received her friends. She was, indeed, very fond of society, and did not look for transcendent talent in those with whom she associated, although no one appreciated it more when she found it. Gay and cheerful company was a pleasant relaxation after a hard day's work. My mother never introduced scientific or learned subjects into general conversation. When they were brought forward by

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others, she talked simply and naturally about them, without the slightest pretension to superior knowledge. Finally, to complete the list of her accomplishments, I must add that she was a remarkably neat and skilful needlewoman. We still possess some elaborate specimens of her embroidery and lace-work.

Devoted and loving in all the relations of life, my mother was ever forgetful of self. Indulgent and sympathising, she never judged others with harshness or severity; yet she could be very angry when her indignation was aroused by hearing of injustice or oppression, of cruelty to man or beast, or of any attack on those she loved. Rather timid and retiring in general society, she was otherwise fearless in her quiet way. I well remember her cool composure on some occasions when we were in great danger. This she inherited from her father, Admiral Sir William Fairfax, a gallant gentleman who distinguished himself greatly at the battle of Camperdown.*

My mother speaks of him as follows among her "Recollections," of which I now proceed to place some portions before the reader.

* Sir William Fairfax was the son of Joseph Fairfax, Esq., of Bagshot, in the county of Surrey, who died in 1783, aged 77, having served in the army previous to 1745. It is understood that his family was descended from the Fairfaxes of Walton, in Yorkshire, the main branch of which were created Viscounts Fairfax of Emly, in the peerage of Ireland (now extinct), and a younger branch Barons Fairfax of Cameron, in the peerage of Scotland. Of the last-named was the great Lord Fairfax, Commander-in-Chief of the armies of the Parliament, 1645—50, whose title is now held by the eleventh Lord Fairfax, a resident in the United States of America.

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My father was very good looking, of a brave and noble nature, and a perfect gentleman both in appearance and character. He was sent to sea as midshipman at ten years of age, so he had very little education; but he read a great deal, chiefly history and voyages. He was very cool, and of instant resource in moments of danger.

One night, when his little vessel had taken refuge with many others from an intensely violent gale and drifting snow in Yarmouth Roads, they saw lights disappear, as vessel after vessel foundered. My father, after having done all that was possible for the safety of the ship, went to bed. His cabin door did not shut closely, from the rolling of the ship, and the man who was sentry that night told my mother years afterwards, that when he saw my father on his knees praying, he thought it would soon be all over with them; then seeing him go to bed and fall asleep, he felt no more fear. In the morning the coast was strewn with wrecks. There were no life-boats in those days; now the lives of hundreds are annually saved by the noble self-devotion of British sailors.

My mother was the daughter of Samuel Charters, Solicitor of the Customs for Scotland, and his wife

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Christian Murray, of Kynynmont, whose eldest sister married the great grandfather of the present Earl of Minto. My grandmother was exceedingly proud and stately. She made her children stand in her presence. My mother, on the contrary, was indulgent and kind, so that her children were perfectly at ease with her. She seldom read anything but the Bible, sermons, and the newspaper. She was very sincere and devout in her religion, and was remarkable for good sense and great strength of expression in writing and conversation. Though by no means pretty, she was exceedingly distinguished and ladylike both in appearance and manners.

My father was constantly employed, and twice distinguished himself by attacking vessels of superior force. He captured the first, but was overpowered by the second, and being taken to France, remained two years a prisoner on parole, when he met with much kindness from the Choiseul family. At last he was exchanged, and afterwards was appointed lieutenant on board a frigate destined for foreign service. I think it was the North American station, for the war of Independence was not over till the beginning of 1783. As my mother knew that my father would be absent for some years, she accompanied him to London, though so near her confinement that in returning home she had just

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time to arrive at the manse of Jedburgh, her sister Martha Somerville's* house, when I was born, on the 26th December, 1780. My mother was dangerously ill, and my aunt, who was about to wean her second daughter Janet, who married General Henry Elliot, nursed me till a wetnurse could be found. So I was born in the house of my future husband, and nursed by his mother—a rather singular coincidence.

During my father's absence, my mother lived with great economy in a house not far from Burntisland which belonged to my grandfather, solely occupied with the care of her family, which consisted of her eldest son Samuel, four or five years old, and myself. One evening while my brother was lying at play on the floor, he called out, "O, mamma, there's the moon rinnin' awa." It was the celebrated meteor of 1783.

Some time afterwards, for what reason I do not know, my father and mother went to live for a short time at Inveresk, and thence returned to Burntisland, our permanent home.

* * * * *

[This place, in which my mother's early life was spent, exercised so much influence on her life and pursuits,

* Wife of the Rev. Dr. Thomas Somerville, minister of Jedburgh, already mentioned (p. 2). Dr. Somerville was author of Histories of Queen Anne and of William and Mary, and also of an autobiography.

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that I am happy to be able to give the description of it in her own words.

Burntisland was then a small quiet seaport town with little or no commerce, situated on the coast of Fife, immediately opposite to Edinburgh. It is sheltered at some distance on the north by a high and steep hill called the Bin. The harbour lies on the west, and the town ended on the east in a plain of short grass called the Links, on which the townspeople had the right of pasturing their cows and geese. The Links were bounded on each side by low hills covered with gorse and heather, and on the east by a beautiful bay with a sandy beach, which, beginning at a low rocky point, formed a bow and then stretched for several miles to the town of Kinghorn, the distant part skirting a range of high precipitous crags.

Our house, which lay to the south of the town, was very long, with a southern exposure, and its length was increased by a wall covered with fruit-trees, which concealed a courtyard, cow-house, and other offices. From this the garden extended southwards, and ended in a plot of short grass covering a ledge of low black rocks washed by the sea. It was divided into three parts by narrow, almost unfrequented, lanes. These gardens yielded abundance