

out of sorts. As to this affair—this sacrilege—I really cannot tell you how shocking it seems to me. I can only hope it will not take place. I must certainly speak very plainly about it.”

Mr. Smith smiled, and took the curate's offered hand. There was something irritating about that smile: it was like the look which reminded David Copperfield how very young he was. The churchwarden went with Ralph to the door, and then came back into his library, and folded up the obnoxious paper thoughtfully.

“I can't get that lad's face out of my head,” ejaculated Mr. Smith. “He'll work himself to death or a fever, if somebody doesn't stop him; that's what he'll do.”

And then Mr. Smith smiled again at the pomposity with which the curate had threatened to speak plainly. That smile helped Ralph down to the very lowest step of unpopularity.

CHAPTER VII.—THE ANGEL A MESSENGER.

“It's a regular March night, sir, and a sharp east wind,” said the landlady warningly.

“I have got to go out,” responded Ralph, “so it must not matter about the wind.”

He was glad to go, to escape out of that room with its haunting trouble. It would only be a temporary escape. By and by he would have to come back and sit there alone, and reply to the mockers that worried him; but even a respite was worth something. It was of no use to think about his parish, since the chasm had only grown wider day by day. Neither was there any comfort for him now in his studies or his sermons. In altering the style of these he had, as it seemed, made a false step. He had preached about that horrible auction in such plain terms, that there had been no sleeping and no indifference throughout the church. The irritating smile goaded him on while he wrote it. It was a harsh bitter sermon; arrogant, people called it, and so it was arrogant—the sermon of one who was stung beyond all bearing by something, no one knew what, a startling, irritating effect of a hidden cause. Even the face in the dim corner was turned away sorrowfully from its caustic sentences and stern denunciations. “You, too!” cried out that voice at the preacher's heart. “Well, so much the better!” Better that she should turn against him as well as the rest; it would help his efforts to free himself. And yet as he walked out for very restlessness this bleak evening, if he had been a woman instead of a man, he would have pressed his hands over his heart to still its aching. A little voice was tugging at it, and could not be let in; must not be let in. Pure, and true, and good, though it was, it must yet be repelled and shut out.

It was a regular March night; the east wind blew the flame about in the lamps, and met him with a cutting chill as he walked against it: it gave him something to think of, and did him good. He looked up. Two people were coming to meet him, in the distance—a man and a dark figure beyond, a child or a woman. The first passed him with a short “Good-night,” the other came on quickly, with her head bent down, looking at nothing but the hard road before her. But Ralph stood still in the path. He was not more than mortal that he should heed the sudden warning that thrilled him, even to his finger ends with a secret joy. He could not have dreamed of such a meeting as this, or provided against it; but that he had no room for such a feeling, he would have been shocked to see her out on such a night. It had come upon him by no fault of his, he had not sought her.

(TO BE CONTINUED).