

he did about the contemptible elements which fetter the soul down to earth, and cause it to find beauty in so poor and perishable a world as ours?

It never struck him that this new and unsuspected form of the tempter was the one from which he had held himself most secure, and to which, therefore, he was most blindly accessible. Neither did he perceive his inconsistency. He who had hitherto held himself above the softening influences of life, suddenly conceived that such a friendship was invaluable to him. He had never known a sister; here was one; so he believed, with no misgiving. What Hester herself might believe or think of one who sought her out so persistently; whose words and tones had so different a ring from the tones of those brothers of hers, was a consideration which never entered his head.

"You were not at church last Sunday evening," said Ralph, on a sudden recollection of the wrong her absence had done him.

"No, we could not both go together."

"Why?"

He was strangely exacting and authoritative; but she never resented it, or evaded his questions.

"Because our old servant is gone for her holiday, and her substitute does not suit my father."

"There were the boys."

Hester looked up with an expression of amusement which died out at once.

What was that sudden darkening of the Curate's face? What was it that had startled him in a moment from his haze of content into a whirlpool of dismayed excitement, before which Hester, doubtful and troubled, sought to speak with unwonted gravity.

"The boys are nobodies. But the house will be dull without them."

"Dull!" echoed Ralph, not that he was thinking about the boys or the house, or its possible dullness; he was not thinking at all: he was dazzled. He went on speaking rapidly, but not knowing what he meant to say or how it was to end. Are *you* dull, Hester? Are you like the rest of the world, following after change—is it possible that you of all people are not happy? I have been dreaming——"

It was only by a desperate effort that he stopped himself. Where in the world was he hurrying on to? What mad spirit had taken possession of his brain now? It was but a thought. Who put it there? How did it come? A thought of intoxication, to be followed by intolerable wretchedness, to be smothered up now in its infancy if human will could do it: to be hunted down and driven out, like the promptings of an evil spirit.

He went up and looked at the timepiece on the mantel-shelf, standing with his back to Hester, fighting with himself. One of the boys started up and poked the fire into a blaze. It shone into the corners of the room: it put the warm, brown lights on the head bent over that work-table against the dark back-ground of crimson curtain, and flashed upon the face, the hands, the gleaming needle. He turned and looked at the effect. And outside there were the coming night, the hoary trees, and the bitter cold. What business had he ever to come out of them into this genial warmth? A little while longer he looked, and then he said a hurried good-night, and was gone.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]