

"That's enough, Oswald, Hester is a brave little girl, and her father honours her," said Richard Dudley, still looking steadily at the Curate. It might be that those keen eyes of his had detected amongst the strange lower strata, Ralph's feeling of wonder that he should suffer Hester to do as she did. "She formed plans for herself, and has carried them out," he went on. "There is nothing to be ashamed of in working with such weapons as one possesses. The shame is in being ashamed of the work, which my daughter is not. You, Oswald, and Reggie, go to school this year together, but, if it had not been for Hester, I could only have sent you alternately. Now mind, you boys, that this a debt, and when you are men pay it."

"She wouldn't take the money," chorussed the boys.

"Money! Pay it in care for her; for both your sisters. Look upon it as capital sunk in your service, the interest of which you have to pay for life."

"Not exactly the light in which young men view such matters generally," said Ralph.

"No, sisters are catspaws, conveniences, butts; inferior animals, on whom superior brothers fancy they have an indestructible claim in every way. I never had one, so I preach, reversing the rule. As for Hester, if I were not lying here, a useless log—ugh—I was a rich man once, Mr. Selturme, as your brother Cresset could tell you."

"Do you know my brother?"

"I knew your mother and your brother, when I lived—well, differently. But if I lost the greater portion of my property, it was my misfortune not my fault, or I might bear it even worse than I do. Now, you boys, be off, or I shall snub you, for I am in pain."

The next moment the Curate, having taken this speech as his dismissal also, was standing in the deep window of the dining room, looking out upon the rime-laden trees. For Christmas had come and was gone, and a cold, gray sky hid the February sun like a thick veil. It was one of Hester's rare holidays, but she was busy with something for the boys. The Curate took no heed of her occupation; perhaps scarcely knew that she had any. If ever he had seen anything incongruous or ungraceful in such work as she was doing, he saw it no longer. Whatever she did became in her hands a thing worth doing, and he never considered why it should be so, or why the Red Grange saw him so often when his calls upon his other parishioners were so scant and chilly.

Though he knew her now as Hester Dudley, of whose ready sympathy he was always secure, his parish troubles formed no ground of conversation between them; they did not speak of others, but of themselves, and she was still for him the one listener; the solitary gem in all that vast setting of dulness.

It was, perhaps, a strange interest, that drew him towards her. No matter that she had few accomplishments, that she was well-nigh self-taught, with the exception of her father's faithful lessons; that she knew little of music, playing and singing only by ear, and for pure love of it. These things could not add to or diminish the original halo; they even had a charm of their own, from the very simplicity with which they made her look up to him as so far above her. He would not have her different. Untrained though it was, the intellect was still there; the power to spiritualize and to appreciate: and, as it seemed to him that sixth wonderful sense which extracts from the outwardly prosaic life its latent poetry, its pictures, and its music.

They were friends. What did *he* want with such a friend, reasoning on as