

Mixed up with these thoughts, and in the end driving them out, there came back to him in a sort of thrill the recollection of the meeting in the sick-room. He had stood there with her. He had walked beside her to where the white mist hung low like a sheet over the meadows. What little they had said before, belonged to the solemn messenger hovering over the widow's cottage, and even while he glanced at the lonely walk before her through those still meadows, his questioning words were belied by a feeling of security. Nothing would harm her; nothing could.

It was a speech which that same questioning drew from her, that kept returning to him now with such haunting distinctness. "My father is not rich, and we are a good many of us. I go into the town to give lessons."

All the way home it rang in his ears—"I go into the town to give lessons." She was too young, too delicate, too childlike. If it must be done, why could not the elder sister do it? How could the keen-faced man suffer such a thing? Strangely inconsistent with his hard dealings towards himself and all the world was the tenderness for this his one listener, whose very existence was a memory to touch him with unwonted gentleness. That she should have to work for her living! It took nothing from his idealizing of the face of the dim corner; it rather threw around it a double beauty. It filled him with a longing to sweep away from her path all the necessity, and all the trouble, which he loftily pronounced so good for others. What was she to him? He did not stop to ask himself the question; he was contented and expectant: already in the involuntary softening of his manner as he spoke, she had done him good. He could not afford to lose this one myth which he had clung to so tenaciously; he could not shake off the intangible presence which hovered about his sermons as he wrote them, or the simple intellect which appreciated them. Better she had remained a stranger to him than that he should lose this.

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#### CHAPTER VI.—THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE.

"DID you ever meet with man, woman, or child contented with his or her lot? I with my sofa, which certainly is not a bed of roses, and the boys there with their holidays which are at an end—are we content? Are you? When we get to-day do not we long for to-morrow, to see what that will bring?"

The speaker was Richard Dudley, and his keen eyes were looking up from under their big, black brows at the Curate, who sat opposite to him. And Ralph brought down as usual by the peremptory voice from a reverie, returned the look, puzzled. Never in his whole life had contentment sat so near to him, and why should this time of all others be selected to preach to him about it?

"I am not aware of having shown any signs of uneasiness," he said.

"A little oil on a lake; a thin upper crust hiding many strange strata below. Nevertheless, you are not contented. No man is."

"But a girl may be," broke in one of the boys. "I'm not content, and Oswald isn't, just because the holidays are gone, but Hester is, and she gets no holidays of any account."

"What can girls do with holidays?" interpolated Oswald, contemptuously; "Hester doesn't care whether the Red Pool's frozen over or not, and she's always afraid it won't bear. I can't see what good a girl's life is to her. She musn't play cricket, nor skate, nor fish, and she can't scrauble after the hounds, nor blaze away at the longtails, nor——"