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Goethe Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle Hall
Baum Cotton Henry Flaubert Turgenev Balzac Willis
Leslie Dumas Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
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Thomas Wingfold, Curate

George MacDonald

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THOMAS WINGFOLD, CURATE.

CHAPTER I.

HELEN LINGARD.

A swift, gray November wind had taken every chimney of the house for an organ-pipe, and was roaring in them all at once, quelling the more distant and varied noises of the woods, which moaned and surged like a sea. Helen Lingard had not been out all day. The morning, indeed, had been fine, but she had been writing a long letter to her brother Leopold at Cambridge, and had put off her walk in the neighbouring park till after luncheon, and in the meantime the wind had risen, and brought with it a haze that threatened rain. She was in admirable health, had never had a day's illness in her life, was hardly more afraid of getting wet than a young farmer, and enjoyed wind, especially when she was on horseback. Yet as she stood looking from her window, across a balcony where shivered more than one autumnal plant that ought to have been removed a week ago, out upon the old-fashioned garden and meadows beyond, where each lonely tree bowed with drifting garments—I was going to say, like a suppliant, but it was AWAY from its storming enemy—she did not feel inclined to go out. That she was healthy was no reason why she should be unimpressible, any more than that good temper should be a reason for indifference to the behaviour of one's friend. She always felt happier in a new dress, when it was made to her mind and fitted her body; and when the sun shone she was lighter-hearted than when it rained: I had written MERRIER, but Helen was seldom merry, and had she been

made aware of the fact, and questioned why, would have answered—Because she so seldom saw reason.

She was what all her friends called a sensible girl; but, as I say, that was no reason why she should be an insensible girl as well, and be subject to none of the influences of the weather. She did feel those influences, and therefore it was that she turned away from the window with the sense, rather than the conviction, that the fireside in her own room was rendered even, more attractive by the unfriendly aspect of things outside and the roar in the chimney, which happily was not accompanied by a change in the current of the smoke.

The hours between luncheon and tea are confessedly dull, but dullness is not inimical to a certain kind of comfort, and Helen liked to be that way comfortable. Nor had she ever yet been aware of self-rebuke because of the liking. Let us see what kind and degree of comfort she had in the course of an hour and a half attained. And in discovering this I shall be able to present her to my reader with a little more circumstance.

She sat before the fire in a rather masculine posture. I would not willingly be rude, but the fact remains—a posture in which she would not, I think, have sat for her photograph—leaning back in a chintz-covered easy-chair, all the lines of direction about her parallel with the lines of the chair, her arms lying on its arms, and the fingers of each hand folded down over the end of each arm—square, straight, right-angled,—gazing into the fire, with something of the look of a sage, but one who has made no discovery.

She had just finished the novel of the day, and was suffering a mild reaction—the milder, perhaps, that she was not altogether satisfied with the consummation. For the heroine had, after much sorrow and patient endurance, at length married a man whom she could not help knowing to be not worth having. For the author even knew it, only such was his reading of life, and such his theory of artistic duty, that what it was a disappointment to Helen to peruse, it seemed to have been a comfort to him to write. Indeed, her dissatisfaction went so far that, although the fire kept burning away in perfect content before her, enhanced by the bellowing complaint of the wind in the chimney, she yet came nearer thinking than she had

ever been in her life. Now thinking, especially to one who tries it for the first time, is seldom, or never, a quite comfortable operation, and hence Helen was very near becoming actually uncomfortable. She was even on the borders of making the unpleasant discovery that the business of life—and that not only for North Pole expeditions, African explorers, pyramid-inspectors, and such like, but for every man and woman born into the blindness of the planet—is to discover; after which discovery there is little more comfort to be had of the sort with which Helen was chiefly conversant. But she escaped for the time after a very simple and primitive fashion, although it was indeed a narrow escape.

Let me not be misunderstood, however, and supposed to imply that Helen was dull in faculty, or that she contributed nothing to the bubbling of the intellectual pool in the social gatherings at Glaston. Far from it. When I say that she came near thinking, I say more for her than any but the few who know what thinking is will understand, for that which chiefly distinguishes man from those he calls the lower animals is the faculty he most rarely exercises. True, Helen supposed she could think—like other people, because the thoughts of other people had passed through her in tolerable plenty, leaving many a phantom conclusion behind; but this was THEIR thinking, not hers. She had thought no more than was necessary now and then to the persuasion that she saw what a sentence meant, after which, her acceptance or rejection of what was contained in it, never more than lukewarm, depended solely upon its relation to what she had somehow or other, she could seldom have told how, come to regard as the proper style of opinion to hold upon things in general.

The social matrix which up to this time had ministered to her development, had some relations with Mayfair, it is true, but scanty ones indeed with the universe; so that her present condition was like that of the common bees, every one of which Nature fits for a queen, but its nurses, prevent from growing one by providing for it a cell too narrow for the unrolling of royalty, and supplying it with food not potent enough for the nurture of the ideal—with this difference, however, that the cramped and stunted thing comes out, if no queen, then a working bee, and Helen, who might be both, was neither yet. If I were at liberty to mention the books on her table, it

would give a few of my readers no small help towards the settling of her position in the "valued file" of the young women of her generation; but there are reasons against it.

She was the daughter of an officer, who, her mother dying when she was born, committed her to the care of a widowed aunt, and almost immediately left for India, where he rose to high rank, and somehow or other amassed a considerable fortune, partly through his marriage with a Hindoo lady, by whom he had one child, a boy some three years younger than Helen. When he died, he left his fortune equally divided between the two children.

Helen was now three-and-twenty, and her own mistress. Her appearance suggested Norwegian blood, for she was tall, blue-eyed, and dark-haired—but fair-skinned, with regular features, and an over still-some who did not like her said hard—expression of countenance. No one had ever called her NELLY; yet she had long remained a girl, lingering on the broken borderland after several of her school companions had become young matrons. Her drawing-master, a man of some observation and insight, used to say Miss Lingard would wake up somewhere about forty.

The cause of her so nearly touching the borders of thought this afternoon, was, that she became suddenly aware of feeling bored. Now Helen was even seldomer bored than merry, and this time she saw no reason for it, neither had any person to lay the blame upon. She might have said it was the weather, but the weather had never done it before. Nor could it be want of society, for George Bascombe was to dine with them. So was the curate, but he did not count for much. Neither was she weary of herself. That, indeed, might be only a question of time, for the most complete egotist, Julius Caesar, or Napoleon Bonaparte, must at length get weary of his paltry self; but Helen, from the slow rate of her expansion, was not old enough yet. Nor was she in any special sense wrapt up in herself: it was only that she had never yet broken the shell which continues to shut in so many human chickens, long after they imagine themselves citizens of the real world.

Being somewhat bored then, and dimly aware that to be bored was out of harmony with something or other, Helen was on the verge of thinking, but, as I have said, escaped the snare in a very

direct and simple fashion: she went fast asleep, and never woke till her maid brought her the cup of kitchen-tea from which the inmates of some houses derive the strength to prepare for dinner.

CHAPTER II.

THOMAS WINGFOLD.

The morning, whose afternoon was thus stormy, had been fine, and the curate went out for a walk. Had it been just as stormy, however, he would have gone all the same. Not that he was a great walker, or, indeed, fond of exercise of any sort, and his walking, as an Irishman might say, was half sitting—on stiles and stones and fallen trees. He was not in bad health, he was not lazy, or given to self-preservation, but he had little impulse to activity of any sort. The springs in his well of life did not seem to flow quite fast enough.

He strolled through Osterfield park, and down the deep descent to the river, where, chilly as it was, he seated himself upon a large stone on the bank, and knew that he was there, and that he had to answer to Thomas Wingfold; but why he was there, and why he was not called something else, he did not know. On each side of the stream rose a steeply-sloping bank, on which grew many fern-bushes, now half withered, and the sunlight upon them, this November morning, seemed as cold as the wind that blew about their golden and green fronds. Over a rocky bottom the stream went—talking rather than singing—down the valley towards the town, where it seemed to linger a moment to embrace the old abbey church, before it set out on its leisurely slide through the low level to the sea. Its talk was chilly, and its ripples, which came half from the obstructions in its channel below, and half from the wind that ruffled it above, were not smiles, but wrinkles rather—even in the sunshine. Thomas felt cold himself, but the cold was of the sort that

comes from the look rather than the feel of things. He did not, however, much care how he felt—not enough, certainly, to have made him put on a great-coat: he was not deeply interested in himself. With his stick, a very ordinary bit of oak, he kept knocking pebbles into the water, and listlessly watching them splash. The wind blew, the sun shone, the water ran, the ferns waved, the clouds went drifting over his head, but he never looked up, or took any notice of the doings of Mother Nature at her house-work: everything seemed to him to be doing only what it had got to do, because it had got it to do, and not because it cared about it, or had any end in doing it. For he, like every other man, could read nature only by his own lamp, and this was very much how he had hitherto responded to the demands made upon him.

His life had not been a very interesting one, although early passages in it had been painful. He had done fairly well at Oxford: it had been expected of him, and he had answered expectation; he had not distinguished himself, nor cared to do so. He had known from the first that he was intended for the church, and had not objected, but received it as his destiny—had even, in dim obedience, kept before his mental vision the necessity of yielding to the heights and hollows of the mould into which he was being thrust. But he had taken no great interest in the matter.

The church was to him an ancient institution of such approved respectability that it was able to communicate it, possessing emoluments, and requiring observances. He had entered her service; she was his mistress, and in return for the narrow shelter, humble fare, and not quite too shabby garments she allotted him, he would perform her hests—in the spirit of a servant who abideth not in the house for ever. He was now six and twenty years of age, and had never dreamed of marriage, or even been troubled with a thought of its unattainable remoteness. He did not philosophize much upon life or his position in it, taking everything with a cold, hopeless kind of acceptance, and laying no claim to courage, devotion, or even bare suffering. He had a certain dull prejudice in favour of honesty, would not have told the shadow of a lie to be made Archbishop of Canterbury, and yet was so uninstructed in the things that constitute practical honesty that some of his opinions would have considerably astonished St. Paul. He liked reading the prayers, for the

making of them vocal in the church was pleasant to him, and he had a not unmusical voice. He visited the sick—with some repugnance, it is true, but without delay, and spoke to them such religious commonplaces as occurred to him, depending mainly on the prayers belonging to their condition for the right performance of his office. He never thought about being a gentleman, but always behaved like one.

I suspect that at this time there lay somewhere in his mind, keeping generally well out of sight however, that is, below the skin of his consciousness, the unacknowledged feeling that he had been hardly dealt with. But at no time, even when it rose plainest, would he have dared to add—by Providence. Had the temptation come, he would have banished it and the feeling together.

He did not read much, browsed over his newspaper at breakfast with a polite curiosity, sufficient to season the loneliness of his slice of fried bacon, and took more interest in some of the naval intelligence than in anything else. Indeed it would have been difficult for himself even to say in what he did take a large interest. When leisure awoke a question as to how he should employ it, he would generally take up his Horace and read aloud one of his more mournful odes—with such attention to the rhythm, I must add, as, although plentiful enough among scholars in respect of the dead letter, is rarely found with them in respect of the living vocal utterance.

Nor had he now sat long upon his stone, heedless of the world's preparations for winter, before he began repeating to himself the poet's *Æquam memento rebus in arduis*, which he had been trying much, but with small success, to reproduce in similar English cadences, moved thereto in part by the success of Tennyson in his O mighty-mouthed inventor of harmonies—a thing as yet alone in the language, so far as I know. It was perhaps a little strange that the curate should draw the strength of which he was most conscious from the pages of a poet whose hereafter was chiefly servicable to him—in virtue of its unsubstantiality and poverty, the dreamlike thinness of its reality—in enhancing the pleasures of the world of sun and air, cooling shade and songful streams, the world of wine and jest, of forms that melted more slowly from encircling arms,

and eyes that did not so swiftly fade and vanish in the distance. Yet when one reflects but for a moment on the poverty-stricken expectations of Christians from their hereafter, I cease to wonder at Wingfold; for human sympathy is lovely and pleasant, and if a Christian priest and a pagan poet feel much in the same tone concerning the affairs of a universe, why should they not comfort each other by sitting down together in the dust?

"No hair it boots thee whether from Inachus
Ancient descended, or, of the poorest born,
Thy being drags, all bare and roofless —
Victim the same to the heartless Orcus.

All are on one road driven; for each of us
The urn is tossed, and, later or earlier,
The lot will drop and all be sentenced
Into the boat of eternal exile."

Having thus far succeeded with these two stanzas, Wingfold rose, a little pleased with himself, and climbed the bank above him, wading through mingled sun and wind and ferns — so careless of their shivering beauty and their coming exile, that a watcher might have said the prospect of one day leaving behind him the shows of this upper world could have no part in the curate's sympathy with Horace.

CHAPTER III.

THE DINERS.

Mrs. Ramshorn, Helen's aunt, was past the middle age of woman; had been handsome and pleasing, had long ceased to be either; had but sparingly recognised the fact, yet had recognised it, and felt aggrieved. Hence in part it was that her mouth had gathered that peevish and wronged expression which tends to produce a moral nausea in the beholder. If she had but known how much uglier in the eyes of her fellow-mortals her own discontent made her, than the severest operation of the laws of mortal decay could have done, she might have tried to think less of her wrongs and more of her privileges. As it was, her own face wronged her own heart, which was still womanly, and capable of much pity—seldom exercised. Her husband had been dean of Halystone, a man of insufficient weight of character to have the right influence in the formation of his wife's. He had left her tolerably comfortable as to circumstances, but childless. She loved Helen, whose even imperturbability had by mere weight, as it might seem, gained such a power over her that she was really mistress in the house without either of them knowing it.

Naturally desirous of keeping Helen's fortune in the family, and having, as I say, no son of her own, she had yet not far to look to find a cousin capable, as she might well imagine, of rendering himself acceptable to the heiress. He was the son of her younger sister, married, like herself, to a dignitary of the Church, a canon of a northern cathedral. This youth, therefore, George Bascombe by name, whose visible calling at present was to eat his way to the bar,

she often invited to Glaston; and on this Friday afternoon he was on his way from London to spend the Saturday and Sunday with the two ladies. The cousins liked each other, had not had more of each other's society than was favourable to their aunt's designs, who was far too prudent to have made as yet any reference to them, and stood altogether in as suitable a relative position for falling in love with each other as Mrs. Ramshorn could well have desired. Her chief, almost her only uneasiness, arose from the important and but too evident fact, that Helen Lingard was not a girl of the sort to fall readily in love. That, however, was of no consequence, provided it did not come in the way of marrying her cousin, who, her aunt felt confident, was better fitted to rouse her dormant affections than any other youth she had ever seen, or was ever likely to see. Upon this occasion she had asked Thomas Wingfold to meet him, partly with the design that he should act as a foil to her nephew, partly in order to do her duty by the church, to which she felt herself belong not as a lay member, but in some undefined professional capacity, in virtue of her departed dean. Wingfold had but lately come to the parish, and, as he was merely curate, she had not been in haste to invite him. On the other hand, he was the only clergyman officiating in the abbey church, which was grand and old, with a miserable living and a non-resident rector. He, to do him justice, paid nearly the amount of the tithes in salary to his curate, and spent the rest on the church material, of which, for certain reasons, he retained the incumbency, the presentation to which belonged to his own family.

The curate presented himself at the dinner-hour in Mrs. Ramshorn's drawing-room, looking like any other gentleman, satisfied with his share in the administration of things, and affecting nothing of the professional either in dress, manner, or tone. Helen saw him for the first time in private life, and, as she had expected, saw nothing remarkable—a man who looked about thirty, was a little over the middle height, and well enough constructed as men go, had a good forehead, a questionable nose, clear grey eyes, long, mobile, sensitive mouth, large chin, pale complexion, and straight black hair, and might have been a lawyer just as well as a clergyman. A keener, that is, a more interested eye than hers, might have discovered traces of suffering in the forms of the wrinkles which, as he talked, would now and then flit like ripples over his forehead; but

Helen's eyes seldom did more than slip over the faces presented to her; and had it been otherwise, who could be expected to pay much regard to Thomas Wingfold when George Bascombe was present? There, indeed, stood a man by the corner of the mantelpiece!—tall and handsome as an Apollo, and strong as the young Hercules, dressed in the top of the plainest fashion, self-satisfied, but not offensively so, good-natured, ready to smile, as clean in conscience, apparently, and as large in sympathy, as his shirt-front. Everybody who knew him, counted George Bascombe a genuine good fellow, and George himself knew little to the contrary, while Helen knew nothing.

One who had only chanced to get a glimpse of her in her own room, as in imagination my reader has done, would hardly have recognised her again in the drawing-room. For in her own room she was but as she appeared to herself in her mirror—dull, inanimate; but in the drawing-room her reflection from living eyes and presences served to stir up what waking life was in her. When she spoke, her face dawned with a clear, although not warm light; and although it must be owned that when it was at rest, the same overstillness, amounting almost to dulness, the same seeming immobility, ruled as before, yet, even when she was not speaking, the rest was often broken by a smile—a genuine one, for although there was much that was stiff, there was nothing artificial about Helen. Neither was there much of the artificial about her cousin; for his good-nature, and his smile, and whatever else appeared upon him, were all genuine enough—the only thing in this respect not quite satisfactory to the morally fastidious man being his tone in speaking. Whether he had caught it at the university, or amongst his father's clerical friends, or in the professional society he now frequented, I cannot tell, but it had been manufactured somewhere—after a large, scrolly kind of pattern, sounding well-bred and dignified. I wonder how many speak with the voices that really belong to them.

Plainly, to judge from the one Bascombe used, he was accustomed to lay down the law, but in gentlemanly fashion, and not as if he cared a bit about the thing in question himself. By the side of his easy carriage, his broad chest, and towering Greek-shaped head, Thomas Wingfold dwindled almost to vanishing—in a word, looked nobody. And besides his inferiority in size and self-

presentment, he had a slight hesitation of manner, which seemed to anticipate, if not to court, the subordinate position which most men, and most women too, were ready to assign him. He said, "Don't you think?" far oftener than "I think" and was always more ready to fix his attention upon the strong points of an opponent's argument than to re-assert his own in slightly altered phrase like most men, or even in fresh forms like a few; hence—self-assertion, either modestly worn like a shirt of fine chain-armor, or gaunt and obtrusive like plates of steel, being the strength of the ordinary man—what could the curate appear but defenceless, therefore weak, and therefore contemptible? The truth is, he had less self-conceit than a mortal's usual share, and was not yet possessed of any opinions interesting enough to himself to seem worth defending with any approach to vivacity.

Bascombe and he bowed in response to their introduction with proper indifference, after a moment's solemn pause exchanged a sentence or two which resembled an exercise in the proper use of a foreign language, and then gave what attention Englishmen are capable of before dinner to the two ladies—the elder of whom, I may just mention, was dressed in black velvet with heavy Venetian lace, and the younger in black silk, with old Honiton. Neither of them did much towards enlivening the conversation. Mrs. Ramshorn, whose dinner had as yet gained in interest with her years, sat peevishly longing for its arrival, but cast every now and then a look of mild satisfaction upon her nephew, which, however, while it made her eyes sweeter, did not much alter the expression of her mouth. Helen improved, as she fancied, the arrangement of a few green-house flowers in an ugly vase on the table.

At length the butler appeared, the curate took Mrs. Ramshorn, and the cousins followed—making, in the judgment of the butler as he stood in the hall, and the housekeeper as she peeped from the bair-covered door that led to the still-room, as handsome a couple as mortal eyes need wish to see. They looked nearly of an age, the lady the more stately, the gentleman the more graceful, or, perhaps rather, ELEGANT, of the two.

CHAPTER IV.

THEIR TALK.

During dinner, Bascombe had the talk mostly to himself, and rattled well, occasionally rebuked by his aunt for some remark which might to a clergyman appear objectionable; nor as a partisan was she altogether satisfied with the curate that he did not seem inclined to take clerical exception. He ate his dinner, quietly responding to Bascombe's sallies – which had usually more of vivacity than keenness, more of good spirits than wit – with a curious flickering smile, or a single word of agreement. It might have seemed that he was humouring a younger man, but the truth was, the curate had not yet seen cause for opposing him.

How any friend could have come to send Helen poetry I cannot imagine, but that very morning she had received by post a small volume of verse, which, although just out, and by an unknown author, had already been talked of in what are called literary circles. Wingfold had read some extracts from the book that same morning, and was therefore not quite unprepared when Helen asked him if he had seen it. He suggested that the poems, if the few lines he had seen made a fair sample, were rather of the wailful order.

"If there is one thing I despise more than another," said Bascombe, "it is to hear a man, a fellow with legs and arms, pour out his griefs into the bosom of that most discreet of confidantes, Society, bewailing his hard fate, and calling upon youths and maidens to fill their watering-pots with tears, and with him water the sorrowful pansies and undying rue of the race. I believe I am quoting."

"I think you must be, George," said Helen. "I never knew you venture so near the edge of poetry before."

"Ah, that is all you know of me, Miss Lingard!" returned Bascombe. "— And then," he resumed, turning again to Wingfold, "what is it they complain of? That some girls preferred a better man perhaps, or that a penny paper once told the truth of their poetry."

"Or it may be only that it is their humour to be sad," said Wingfold. "But don't you think," he continued, "it is hardly worth while to be indignant with them? Their verses are a relief to them, and do nobody any harm."

"They do all the boys and girls harm that read them, and themselves who write them more harm than anybody, confirming them in tearful habits, and teaching eyes unused to weep. I quote again, I believe, but from whom I am innocent. If I ever had a grief, I should have along with it the decency to keep it to myself."

"I don't doubt you would, George," said his cousin, who seemed more playfully inclined than usual. "But," she added, with a smile, "would your silence be voluntary, or enforced?"

"What!" returned Bascombe, "you think I could not plain my woes to the moon? Why not I as well as another? I could roar you as 'twere any nightingale."

"You have had your sorrows, then, George?"

"Never anything worse yet than a tailor's bill, Helen, and I hope you won't provide me with any. I am not in love with decay. I remember a fellow at Trinity, the merriest of all our set at a wine-party, who, alone with his ink-pot, was for ever enacting the part of the unheeded poet, complaining of the hard hearts and tuneless ears of his generation. I went into his room once, and found him with the tears running down his face, a pot of stout half empty on the table, and his den all but opaque with tobacco-smoke, reciting, with sobs—I had repeated the lines so often before they ceased to amuse me, that I can never forget them—

'Heard'st thou a quiver and clang?

In thy sleep did it make thee start?

'Twas a chord in twain that sprang—