

***CHARLES
KINGSLEY***



***PHAETHON:
LOOSE
THOUGHTS
FOR LOOSE
THINKERS***

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Phaethon: Loose Thoughts for Loose Thinkers

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Templeton and I were lounging by the clear limestone stream which crossed his park and wound away round wooded hills toward the distant Severn. A lovelier fishing morning sportsman never saw. A soft gray under-roof of cloud slid on before a soft west wind, and here and there a stray gleam of sunlight shot into the vale across the purple mountain-tops, and awoke into busy life the denizens of the water, already quickened by the mysterious electric influences of the last night's thunder-shower. The long-winged cinnamon-flies spun and fluttered over the pools; the sand-bees hummed merrily round their burrows in the marly bank; and delicate iridescent ephemeræ rose by hundreds from the depths, and, dropping their shells, floated away, each a tiny Venus Anadyomene, down the glassy ripples of the reaches. Every moment a heavy splash beneath some overhanging tuft of milfoil or water hemlock proclaimed the death-doom of a hapless beetle who had dropped into the stream beneath; yet still we fished and fished, and caught nothing, and seemed utterly careless about catching anything; till the old keeper who followed us, sighing and shrugging his shoulders, broke forth into open remonstrance:

"Excuse my liberty, gentlemen, but what ever is the matter with you and master, sir? I never did see you miss so many honest rises before."

"It is too true," said Templeton to me with a laugh. "I must confess I have been dreaming instead of fishing the whole morning. But what has happened to you, who are not as apt as I am to do nothing by trying to do two things at once?"

“My hand may well be somewhat unsteady; for to tell the truth, I sat up all last night writing.”

“A hopeful preparation for a day’s fishing in limestone water! But what can have set you on writing all night after so busy and talkative an evening as the last, ending too, as it did, somewhere about half-past twelve?”

“Perhaps the said talkative evening itself; and I suspect, if you will confess the truth, you will say that your morning’s meditations are running very much in the same channel.”

“Lewis,” said he, after a pause, “go up to the hall, and bring some luncheon for us down to the lower waterfall.”

“And a wheelbarrow to carry home the fish, sir?”

“If you wish to warm yourself, certainly. And now, my good fellow,” said he, as the old keeper toddled away up the park, “I will open my heart—a process for which I have but few opportunities here—to an old college friend. I am disturbed and saddened by last night’s talk and by last night’s guest.”

“By the American professor? How, in the name of English exclusiveness, did such a rampantly heterodox spiritual guerilla invade the respectabilities and conservatisms of Herefordshire?”

“He was returning from a tour through Wales, and had introductions to me from some Manchester friends of mine, to avail himself of which I found he had gone some thirty miles out of his way.”

“Complimentary to you, at least.”

“To Lady Jane, I suspect, rather than to me; for he told me broadly enough that all the flattering attentions which he had received in Manchester—where, you know, all such

prophets are received with open arms, their only credentials being that, whatsoever they believe, they shall not believe the Bible—had not given him the pleasure which he had received from that one introduction to what he called ‘the inner hearth-life of the English landed aristocracy.’ But what did you think of him?”

“Do you really wish to know?”

“I do.”

“Then, honestly, I never heard so much magniloquent un wisdom talked in the same space of time. It was the sense of shame for my race which kept me silent all the evening. I could not trust myself to argue with a gray-haired Saxon man, whose fifty years of life seemed to have left him a child in all but the childlike heart which alone can enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

“You are severe,” said Templeton, smilingly though, as if his estimate were not very different from mine.

“Can one help being severe when one hears irreverence poured forth from reverend lips? I do not mean merely irreverence for the Catholic Creeds; that to my mind—God forgive me if I misjudge him—seemed to me only one fruit of a deep root of irreverence for all things as they are, even for all things as they seem. Did you not remark the audacious contempt for all ages but ‘our glorious nineteenth century,’ and the still deeper contempt for all in the said glorious time who dared to believe that there was any ascertained truth independent of the private fancy and opinion of—for I am afraid it came to that—him, Professor Windrush, and his circle of elect souls? ‘You may believe nothing if you like, and welcome; but if you do take to that unnecessary act,