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HESTER

A STORY OF CONTEMPORARY LIFE

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT

"A springy motion in her gait,
A rising step, did indicate
Of pride and joy no common rate
That flush'd her spirit:
I know not by what name beside
I shall it call: if 'twas not pride,
It was a joy to that allied
She did inherit.

* * * * *

She was trained in Nature's school,
Nature had blest her.
A waking eye, a prying mind,
A heart that stirs, is hard to bind:
A hawk's keen sight ye cannot blind,
Ye could not Hester."

CHARLES LAMB.

IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. I

London
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1883

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HESTER.

CHAPTER I.

VERNON'S.

The Banking House of the Vernons was known through all the Home Counties as only second to the Bank of England in stability and strength. That is to say, the people who knew about such matters, the business people, the professional classes, and those who considered themselves to be acquainted with the world, allowed that it ought to be considered second: but this opinion was not shared by the greater proportion of its clients, the shopkeepers in Redborough and the adjacent towns, the farmers of a wide district, and all the smaller people whose many united littles make up so much wealth. To them Vernon's bank was the emblem of stability, the impersonation of solid and substantial wealth. It had risen to its height of fame under John Vernon, the grandfather of the present head of the firm, though it had existed for two or three generations before him. But John Vernon was one of those men in whose hands everything turns to gold. What the special gift is which determines this it is difficult to tell, but there can be little doubt that it is a special gift, just as it is a particular genius which produces a fine picture or a fine poem. There were wiser men than he, and there were men as steady to their work and as constantly in their place, ready for all the claims of business, but not one other in whose hands everything prospered in the same superlative way. His investments always answered, his ships always came home, and under his influence the very cellars of the banking-house, according to the popular imagination, filled with gold. At one period of his career a panic seized the entire district, and there was a run upon the bank, by which it was evident anybody else must, nay, ought, to have been ruined; but John Vernon was not ruined. It was understood afterwards that he himself allowed that he did not understand how he had escaped, and nobody else could understand it: but he did escape, and as a natural consequence became stronger and richer, and more universally credited than ever. His son after him had not the same genius for money, but at least he had the genius for keeping what he had got, which is next best.

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Edward Vernon, however, was not so fortunate in his family as in his affairs. He had two sons, one of whom died young, leaving a little daughter to be brought up by her grandfather; the other "went wrong." Oh, never-ending family tragedy, never ending, still beginning, the darkest anguish that exists in the world! The younger son went wrong, and died also in his father's lifetime, leaving a helpless little family of children, and a poor wife stupefied with trouble. She did her best, poor soul, to bring up her boy to ways the very opposite of those in which his father had stumbled and fallen, and it was supposed that he would marry his cousin Catherine Vernon, and thus unite once more all the money and prestige of the house. He too was John Vernon, and resembled the golden great-grandfather, and great things were hoped of him. He entered the bank in old Mr. Vernon's time, and gave every promise of being a worthy successor as long as the senior partner, the head of the house, lived. But when the old gentleman died and John Vernon became in his turn the head of the house, there very soon appeared signs of change. In the first place the marriage with his cousin never came to pass; things had seemed to promise fairly so long as the grandfather with whom she lived was alive. But after, there was an immediate cooling of sentiment. Whose fault this was nobody knew. She said nothing on the subject even to her dearest friends; nor did he say anything; but he laughed and waved aside all questions as a man who "could an if he would"—. His mother, for her part, said a great deal. She ran between them like an excited hen, shaking her tail-feathers and cackling violently. What did they mean by it? What was it for? She asked her son how he could forget that if Catherine's money went out of the business it would make the most extraordinary difference? and she bade Catherine remember that it would be almost dishonest to enrich another family with money which the Vernons had toiled for. Catherine, who was not by any means an ordinary girl, smiled upon her, perhaps a little sadly, and entered into no explanations. But her son, as was natural, scoffed at his mother. "What should you know about the business?" he said. Poor Mrs. Vernon thought she had heard enough of it to understand it, or at least to understand the intentions of those who understood it. But what is the use of a mother's remonstrances? The new generation will please itself and take its way. She scolded and wept for years after, poor soul, in vain, and yet could never learn that it was in vain, but began anew day after day weeping, entreating, remonstrating, falling into nervous crises of passion a hundred and a hundred times over. How much better for her to have held her tongue! but how could she help it? She was not of that placid and patient nature which can be wise. And gradually things began to go badly with John. He married a young lady belonging to a county family, but with no money to keep up her pretensions. He had his stables full of horses and his house full of company. "What is it all to come to?" cried his poor, anxious, angry, disappointed, despairing mother, seeking opportunities to have a few words with him, to speak to him seriously, to remind him of his duty. To be sure she did a great deal more harm than good. She drew many a blow upon herself which she might have escaped had she been content to allow that his life had passed far beyond her guidance; but the poor lady would not be taught. And it was quite true what John Vernon said. It would take a long time, he told her, before a few horses and pleasant company would affect Vernon's bank. As the head of that establishment he was expected to be hospitable, and keep almost open house; the country which trusted in him knew he could afford it. The Redborough people went further, and liked to see the confidence with which he spent his money. What could that do to Vernon's? He had never lived up to his income yet, he believed. So he told his mother, who was never satisfied, and went on till the day

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of her death always seeking a few words with him—an opportunity of speaking seriously to her son. Poor mother! nothing went very well with her; perhaps she was not clever either at managing her children or her money. The partisans of the Vernons said so at least; they said so of all the wives that were not Vernons, but interlopers, always working harm. They said so also of Mrs. John, and there his mother thought they were not far wrong. But none of her children turned out very satisfactorily; the girls married badly; Edward, her younger son, went into the Church, and never was more than a vicar, and their money matters would not go right. Certainly she was not a fortunate woman. But she died, happily for her, before anything material happened to realise her alarms in respect to John.

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It is astonishing how money grows when it is in the way of growing—when it has got the genuine impulse and rolls every kindred atom near it, according to some occult law of attraction, into itself. But just as wonderfully as money grows does it melt away when the other—the contrary process—has begun. John Vernon was quite right in saying that the bank justified, nay, almost demanded, a certain amount of expenditure from its chief partner. And he was more, much more, than its chief partner. Catherine, though she was as deeply interested in it as himself, took no responsibility whatever—how should she, a girl who knew as much about money as her pony did? She took less interest, indeed, than in ordinary circumstances she would have done, for there was certainly something, whatever it might be, which had interrupted the natural intercourse between the two cousins. They were not at ease with each other like brother and sister, as everything suggested they ought to have been—not sufficiently at ease to consider their mutual interests together, as partners ought to have done. This, one of them at least thought, would have been ridiculous in any case. When his lawyers asked what Catherine thought on this or that subject, he laughed in their faces.

"What should she think? What should she know? Of course she leaves all that to me," he said. "How can a girl understand banking business?"

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But this did not satisfy the respectable firm of solicitors who advised the banker.

"Miss Vernon is not a girl any longer," said Mr. Pounce, who was its head; upon which John Vernon laughed, one of those offensive laughs with which a coarse-minded man waves the banner of his sex over an unmarried woman.

"No," he said, "Catherine's growing an old maid. She must look alive if she means to get a husband."

Mr. Pounce was not a sentimentalist, and no doubt laughed sometimes too at the unfortunate women who had thus failed in the object of their life; but he respected Miss Vernon, and he was very doubtful of her cousin.

"Husband or no husband, I think she ought to be consulted," he said.

"Oh, I will take Catherine in my own hands," was the cousin's reply.

And thus life went on, very gay, fast, amusing, and expensive on one side; very quiet and uneventful on the other. John Vernon built himself a grand new house, in which there were all the latest improvements and scientific luxuries, which the most expensive upholsterers filled with the most costly furniture, and for which the skilfullest gardeners all but created ready-made trees and shrubberies. He filled it with fine company—names which the clerks at the bank felt were a credit to the establishment, and which the townsfolk looked upon with admiring awe: and there was nothing in the county to equal Mrs. John Vernon's dresses and diamonds. What is all that to a great bank, gathering money every hour?—nothing! Even Mr. Pounce acknowledged this. Personal extravagance, as long as it is merely hospitality and show, must go a very long way indeed before it touches the great revenue of such a business. It was not the diamonds nor the feasts that they were afraid of. But to be lavish with money is a dangerous fault with a man who is a business man. It is a very common sin, but there is nothing more perilous. In Manchester or Liverpool, where they turn over a fortune every day, perhaps this large habit of sowing money about does not matter. People there are accustomed to going up and down. Bankruptcy, even, does not mean the end of the world in these regions. But a banker in a country town, who has all the money of a district in his hands, should not get into this reckless way. His clients are pleased—up to a certain limit. But when once the first whisper of suspicion has been roused it flies fast, and the panic with which rural depositors rush upon a bank which has awakened the ghost of an apprehension, is even more cruel and unreflecting than other panics. It went on a long time, and where it was that the first suggestion came from, nobody ever knew. Probably it did not come from any one—it was in the air, it struck two people, all at once, talking to each other, and the electricity of the contact found a single syllable of utterance. When that was done, all was done. Everybody had been waiting for this involuntary signal; and when it came, it flew like lightning through all Redborough, and out into the roads and lanes—to distant farmhouses, into the rectories and vicarages, even to the labourer's cottage. "It's said as Vernon's bank's a-going to break," the ploughmen in the fields said to each other. It did not matter much to them; and perhaps they were not sorry that the farmer, who grew fat (they thought) on their toil, should feel that he was also human. The farmers had something of the same feeling in respect to their landlords, but could not indulge it for the furious terror that took possession of themselves. Vernon's bank! Safer than the Bank of England, was what they had all said exultingly. Very few of them had sufficient command of themselves to wait now and inquire into it and see how far the panic was well founded. To wait would have been to leave the chance of salvation to other men.

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Mrs. John Vernon was considered very refined and elegant according to the language of the day, a young lady with many accomplishments. But it was the fashion of the time to be unpractical just

as it is the fashion of our time that women should understand business and be ready for any emergency. To wear your hair in a high loose knot on the top of your head, with ringlets straying down your cheek, and across the always uncovered whiteness of your shoulders, and to sing the songs of Mr. Haynes Bayley, "Oh no, we never mention her," or "The Soldier's Tear"—could anything be more entirely inconsistent with business habits? Mrs. John would have considered it a slight to the delicacy of her mind to have been supposed to know anything about the bank; and when the head clerk demanded an audience at an unseasonable hour one summer evening she was entirely taken aback.

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"Me! do you mean that it is me Mr. Rule wants to see?" she asked of the servant in consternation.

"He did ask for master, ma'am," said the man, "but as master's from home he said he must see my lady. He looks very flustered. I'll say that for him," he added.

To be sure William had heard the whisper in the air, and was more or less gratified that Mr. Rule should be flustered; but as for his lady, she saw no connection whatever between Mr. Rule's excitement and herself.

"I do not see what good I can do him, William; and it's not an hour at which I ever receive people. I am sure I don't know what he can want with me."

"It's business, I think, ma'am," said the servant, with a little eagerness. He wanted immensely himself to know what it was, and it did not occur to him as possible that his mistress, so much more interested than he, should be without anxiety or concern.

"Business!" said Mrs. John, "what do I know about business? However," she added, "if he is so desirous, perhaps you had better show him up. Your master is always pleased when I pay a little attention to the clerks. He says it does good."

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"Yes, ma'am," said William.

Being a reasonable human creature he was touched in spite of himself by the extraordinary sight of this poor, fine lady, sitting in her short sleeves on the edge of the volcano, and knowing nothing about it. It was too bad of master, William thought, if so be— To leave the poor lady entirely in the dark so that she did not know no more than a baby what the clerk could want with her. William speculated, too, on his own circumstances as he went down stairs. If so be— It was a good place, and he would be sorry to lose it. But he remembered that somebody had said the Sandersons were looking out for a butler.

"Mrs. Vernon will see you, sir," he said in the midst of these thoughts; and Mr. Rule followed him eagerly up stairs.

But what could Mrs. John do? Her dress was spotted muslin, as most dresses were in those days; it was cut rather low on the shoulders, though she was not dressed for company. She had pretty little ringlets falling upon her cheeks, and short sleeves, and a band round her waist with a shining clasp. She was considered brilliant in conversation, and sang, "We met, 'twas in a crowd," and the songs previously mentioned, with so much feeling that people had been known to weep as they listened. The clerk had heard of all these accomplishments, and as he hurried in, his eye was caught by the harp in its corner, which was also one of the fashions of the time. He could not help being a little overawed by it, notwithstanding his dreadful anxiety. Poor lady! the thought passed through his mind as similar thoughts had passed through William's—Would all this be sold away from her? White muslin dresses with low necks have the advantage that they quite seem to separate their wearers from everyday life. We have no doubt that the dying out of chivalry, and the way in which women nowadays insist on doing their own business, and most likely other people's too, is in great part to be put down to high dresses and long sleeves. In these habiliments a lady looks not so very much different from other people. She feels herself free to go into common life. But Mrs. John sat there helpless, ignorant, quite composed and easy in her mind, with pretty feet in sandalled slippers peeping from under her dress. Mr. Rule had time for all this distressed, regretful sympathy before he could stammer out in a hurry his anxious question—or rather his hope—that Mr. Vernon would be home to-morrow—early?

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"I am sure I don't know," said Mrs. John. "It would be scarcely worth his while to go away if he was to be back so soon. He said perhaps to-morrow, but more likely next week."

"Next week!" cried Mr. Rule; "then he may just as well stay away altogether; it will then be too late."

"Dear me!" said Mrs. John, politely, willing to show an interest; but she did not know what more to say.

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"Perhaps you know where he is, ma'am?" said the anxious clerk: for this was the time when people said ma'am. "We might send an express after him. If he were here, things might still be tided over. Excuse me, Mrs. Vernon, but if you can give me any information——"

"Dear me," said Mrs. John, "my husband was going to London, I think. Is it about business, or anything I may know?"

"All the world will know to-morrow," cried the agitated clerk, "unless you can give me some assistance. I don't like to trouble a lady, but what can I do? Mrs. Vernon, to-morrow is market day, and as sure as that day comes if he is not here to make some provision for it, we shall have a run on the bank."

"A run on the bank!" said Mrs. John, dismayed. "What does that mean?"

"It means that we shall have to pay every note that is presented us in gold: and that everybody

will rush upon us with our notes in their hands: and all the people who have deposit accounts will withdraw their money. It means Ruin," said Mr. Rule, very much flustered indeed, wiping the perspiration from his brow. He had an account himself, and a considerable sum to his credit. Oh, the fool he had been to let it lie there instead of investing it! but then, he had been waiting for a good investment, and in the meantime, Vernon's was as safe, safer than the Bank of England. He had believed that till to-day.

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Mrs. John sat looking at him with bewildered eyes.

"I don't understand," she said. "The bank of course is for that, isn't it? I never understand how you do it," she added, with a little of the sprightliness for which she was distinguished. "It has always been a mystery to me what good it can do you to take all the trouble of paying people's bills for them, and locking up their money, and having all that responsibility; but I cannot deny that it seems to answer," she concluded with a little simper.

The harassed clerk looked at her with a pity that was almost tragic. If she had not been so handsome and so fine, and surrounded with all these luxuries, it is very likely he would have been impatient, and considered her a fool.

He replied gently—

"I dare say, ma'am, it is difficult for you to form an idea of business; but I am almost forgetting, sitting talking to you, how dreadfully serious it is. If I knew where Mr. Vernon was, I would send a post-chaise directly. We are lost if he is not here. They will say—God knows what they may not say. For God's sake, ma'am, tell me how I am to find him?"

"Indeed, Mr. Rule, I am very, very sorry. If I had known! but I rather encouraged him to go. He was looking so poorly. He was going to town, I am sure—first: and then perhaps to Bath: or he might go across to France. He has been talking of that. France—yes, I suggested it. He has never been on the Continent. But now I think of it, I don't think he will go there, for he said he might be home to-morrow—though more likely next week."

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"It seems very vague," said Mr. Rule, looking at her with a steady look that began to show a gleam of suspicion; but this was entirely out of place. Mrs. John answered lightly without any perception even of what he could mean.

"Oh yes, it was vague! it is so much better not to be tied down. I told him he ought to take me; but it was settled in a hurry, he was feeling so poorly."

"Then he has forsaken us!" cried the clerk in a terrible voice, which shook even her obtuse perceptions. She gazed at him with a little glow of anger.

"Forsaken you! Dear me, surely a little holiday never can matter. Why, the servants could go on without me for a time. It would never come into Mr. Vernon's head that you could not manage by yourselves even for a single day."

The clerk did not answer; it was all such a terrible muddle of ignorance and innocence, and perhaps of deep and deliberate guilt. But anyhow, there was the result beyond all uncertainty. The bank must come down. Vernon's, which it had taken the work of generations to build up; Vernon's, which was safer than the Bank of England. Mr. Rule had been a clerk there, man and boy, for about twenty years. He had been one of old Mr. Vernon's staff. He had a pride in the bank as if it had been his own. To give up Vernon's to destruction seemed more than giving himself up. But what could the clerks do without the principal? A lieutenant may fight his ship if the captain fails, or a subaltern replace his leader, but what can the clerks do without the head of the establishment? And he had no authority to act even if he had known how to act; and every two or three minutes there would come across him a poignant recollection of his own deposit. Oh, the Alnaschar hopes he had built upon that little fortune, the ways in which it was to serve him! He tried honestly, however, to put it away from his mind.

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"We could have done well enough on an ordinary occasion," he said, "and Mr. Vernon generally settles everything before he goes; but I thought he was only absent for the day. Mrs. Vernon," he cried, suddenly, "can't you help us? can't you help us? It will be ruin for you too."

She stared at him for a moment without speaking, and then—

"You make me quite wretched. I don't understand. I have only a little money in the house. Would that do any good?" she said.

"How much have you?" said the clerk in his trouble.

She ran to a pretty ornamental desk and opened it nervously.

"I dare say there may be about twenty pounds," she said.

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He laughed loudly, harshly, a laugh that seemed to echo through the large, unoccupied room.

"If it were twenty thousand it might do something," he said.

"Sir!" said Mrs. John Vernon, standing in a fine attitude of displeasure by her desk, holding it open with one hand. She looked like a picture by Sir Thomas Lawrence, her scarf, for she wore a scarf, hanging half off her pretty white shoulders, caught upon one equally white arm, her ringlets waving on her cheek. His laugh was rude, and then he was only a clerk. She was all angry scorn from the high knot of brown hair on the top of her head to the point of her sandalled shoe.

Poor Mr. Rule was as penitent as man could be. He was shocked beyond measure by his own brutality. He had forgotten himself—and before a lady! He made the most abject apologies.

"But my interest in the bank will, I hope, be some excuse. I feel half distracted," he said; and he added, as he backed out at the door with painful bows, "Perhaps, ma'am, if you can think of any means of communicating with Mr. Vernon, you would let me know; or I will call later, if we could send an express; nothing is too much for the chance of having him back to-morrow."

"Well," said the lady, "you are strange managers, I must say, that cannot get on without my husband one day." [Pg 18]

"It is not that, ma'am; it is not that."

"I don't know what it is. I begin to think it is only making a fuss," Mrs. John said.

CHAPTER II.

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MISS CATHERINE.

Poor Mr. Rule rushed out into the night in a state of despair. It was a summer night, and the streets of Redborough were still full of the murmur of life and movement. He came down from the slope on which Mr. John Vernon's grand new house was situated, into the town, turning over everything that it was possible to do. Should he go to the Old Bank, the life-long rival of Vernon's, and ask their help to pull through? Even such a humiliation he would have endured had there been any chance of success. Should he go to the agent of the Bank of England? He could not but feel that it was quite doubtful whether between them they could make up enough to meet the rush he expected; and were they likely to do it? Would not the first question be, "Where is Mr. Vernon?" And where was Mr. Vernon? Perhaps gone to Bath; perhaps to France, his wife said. Why should he go to France without letting any one at the bank know, saying he was only to be absent for a day? There was no telegraph in those days, and if he confided Mr. Vernon's story to the other banks, what would they think of him? They would say that Vernon was mad, or that he had—gone away. There could be no doubt of what they would say. Rule was faithful to his old service, and to the honour of the house which had trained him. He would say nothing about France or Bath. He would allow it to be understood that Mr. Vernon had gone to London to get the assistance necessary, and would come back in a post-chaise before the offices were open in the morning. And perhaps, he said to himself, perhaps it was so. God grant it might be so! Very likely he had not thought it necessary to enter into the matter to a lady. Poor thing, with her twenty pounds! that showed how much she knew of business; but it was very high-minded and innocent of her to offer all she had. It showed there was at least no harm in her thoughts. It gave a momentary ease to the clerk's mind to think that perhaps this was what Mr. Vernon must mean. He must have known for some time how badly things were going, and who could tell that the sudden expedition of which he had made so little, only saying when he left the bank the day before "I shall not be here to-morrow," who could tell that it was not to help to surmount the crisis, that he had gone away? Rule turned towards his own house under the solace of this thought, feeling that anyhow it was better to get a night's rest, and be strong for whatever was to happen to-morrow. It would be a miserable to-morrow if Mr. Vernon did not bring help. Not only the bank that would go, but so many men with families that would be thrown upon the world. God help them! and that money which stood to his own credit, that balance of which two or three days before he had been so proud, to see it standing in his name on those well-kept beautiful books! All this hanging upon the chance that Mr. Vernon might have gone to town to get money! No, he could not go in, and sit down at the peaceful table where Mrs. Rule perhaps would be hemming a cambric ruffle for his shirt, or plaiting it delicately with her own fingers, a thing no laundress could do to please her—and the children learning their lessons. He felt sure that he could not rest; he would only make her anxious, and why should she be made anxious as long as he could keep it from her. It is difficult to say how it was that the first suggestion of a new possibility took hold of Mr. Rule's mind. He turned away when he was within a stone's throw of his own house, saying to himself that he could not go in, that it was impossible, and walked in the opposite direction, where he had not gone far until he came in sight of the bank, that centre of so many years' hard work, that pride of Redborough, and of everybody connected with it. Vernon's! To think that Ruin should be possible, that so dark a shadow could hover over that sacred place. What would old Mr. Vernon have said, he who received it from his father and handed it down always flourishing, always prosperous to—not to his son. If his son had lived, the eldest one, not he who had gone wrong, but the eldest, who was John too, called after his grandfather, he who was the father of— It was at this point that Mr. Rule came to a dead stop, and then after a pause wheeled right round, and without saying another word to himself walked straight up Wilton Street, which as everybody knows was quite out of his way.

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The father of — Yes, indeed, indeed, and that was true! The recollection which called forth this fervour of affirmation was a pleasant one. All the youth of Redborough at one time had been in love with Catherine Vernon. The bank clerks to a man adored her. When she used to come and go with her grandfather—and she did so constantly, bringing him down in the morning in her pony carriage, calling for him in the afternoon, running in in the middle of the day to see that the old gentleman had taken his biscuits and his wine—she walked over their hearts as she crossed the outer office, but so lightly, so smoothly, so gracefully, that the hearts were only thrilled, not crushed by her footfall, so firm and swift, but so airy as it was. She knew them all in the office, and would give her hand to the head clerk, and send a friendly glance all round, unaware of the harm she was doing to the hapless young men. But after all it was not harm. It was a generous love they felt for

her, like the love of chivalry for a lady unapproachable. That young princess was not for them. None of them grew mad with foolish hopes, but they thought of her as they never thought of any one else. Mr. Rule was at the end of Wilton Street, just where it meanders out towards the edge of the common, before he took breath, and began to ask himself what Miss Vernon could do for him. Was not one lady enough to appeal to? She whom he had already seen had nothing for him—no help, no advice, not a suggestion even. And yet she was more closely connected with the bank than Catherine Vernon, who had disappeared from all visible connection with it at her grandfather's death, notwithstanding that a great deal of her money was in it, and that she had in fact a right to be consulted as a partner. So it had been settled, it was said, by the old man in his will. But she had never, so far as anybody knew, taken up this privilege. She had never come to the bank, never given a sign of having any active interest in it. What then could she be expected to do? What could she do even if she wished to help them? Mr. Rule was aware that there was no very cordial feeling between her cousin's house and hers. They were friends, perfectly good friends, but they were not cordial. While he turned over these thoughts in his mind, however, he walked on steadily and quickly without the least hesitation in his step. There was even a sort of exhilarated excitement in him, a sentiment quite different from that with which he had been disconsolately straying about, and painfully turning over possibilities, or rather impossibilities. Perhaps it was a half romantic pleasure in the idea of speaking to Miss Vernon again, but really there was something besides that, a sense of satisfaction in finding a new and capable mind to consult with at least, if no more.

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Miss Vernon lived in the house which her grandfather had lived in and his father before him. To reach it you had to make your way through the delta of little streets into which Wilton Street ran, and across a corner of the common. The Grange was an old house with dark red gables appearing out of the midst of a clump of trees. In winter you saw the whole mass of it, chiefly old bricks, though these were thrown up and made picturesque by the fact that the oldest part was in grey stone. Broad large Elizabethan windows glimmered, lighted up, through the thick foliage this evening; for by this time the summer night was beginning to get dark, and a good deal too late for a visit. Mr. Rule thought as he knocked at the door that it was very likely she would not see him. But this was not the case. When he sent in his name as the head clerk at the bank he was received immediately, and shown into the room with the Elizabethan windows where she was sitting. By this time she was of mature years, and naturally much changed from the young girl he had known. He had been one of the young clerks in the outer office, whom she would recognise with a friendly smiling look, and a nod of her head all round. Now, however, Miss Vernon came up to him, and held out her hand to Mr. Rule. "You need not have sent me word who you were," she said with a smile. "I knew quite well who you were. I never forget faces nor names. You have not come to me at this time of night on a mere visit of civility. Don't be afraid to tell me at once whatever there may be to say."

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"From the way you speak, ma'am," said Mr. Rule, "I conclude that you have heard some of the wicked reports that are flying about?"

"That is exactly what I want to know," she said, with all her old vivacity. "Are they wicked reports?"

"A report is always wicked," said Mr. Rule sententiously, "which is likely to bring about the evil it imagines."

"Ah!" she cried. "Then it is no further gone than that; and yet it is as far gone as that?" she added, looking anxiously in his face.

"Miss Vernon," said Rule solemnly, "I expect a run upon the bank to-morrow."

"Good God!" she said, clasping her hands; which was not a profane exclamation, but the kind of half-conscious appeal which nature makes instinctively. "But you have made all preparations? Surely you can meet that."

He shook his head solemnly. The credit of the bank was so much to him that when thus face to face with the event he dreaded, poor Rule could not articulate anything, and the water stood in his eyes.

"Good God!" she said again: but her face was not awe-stricken; it was that of a soldier springing instantly to the alert, rallying all his resources at the first word of danger; "but you don't mean to say that my cousin—does not John know this? They say everybody knows these things before the person concerned. Why, why did you not warn him, Mr. Rule?"

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Rule shook his head.

"It isn't possible that he could have been ignorant. How could he be ignorant, ma'am? God knows I have not a word to say against Mr. Vernon—but to think he should forsake us in our moment of trial!"

"Forsake you!" A sudden flush flew over Miss Vernon's face—a spark shot out of her eyes. Indignation and yet doubt was in her face. "That is not possible," she cried, holding her head high; and then she said anxiously, "Mr. Rule, tell me what you mean?"

"I dare say it is the falsity of appearances," said poor Rule. "I am sure I hope so. I hope Mr. Vernon has gone away to get help, personally: you can do that so much better than writing: and that he may be back in time to-morrow."

"Has he gone away?" she said in a low tone.

"Unfortunately, Miss Vernon—I can't help saying unfortunately, for it paralyses everybody else."

We can do nothing at the bank. But I cling to the hope that he will be back before the bank is opened. Oh, yes, I cling to the hope. Without that——"

"Everything will be lost?"

"Everything!" cried he, who was so proud of being the head clerk at Vernon's, with tears in his eyes.

And then there was a pause. For a minute or two not a word was said. The daughter of the house was as much overcome by the thought as was its faithful servant. At last she said faintly, but firmly—

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"Mr. Rule, I cannot believe but that you will see John to-morrow when the bank is opened, with means to meet every demand."

"Yes, Miss Vernon, that is my conviction too."

But in what a faltering voice was this conviction stated! The room was not very light, and they did not distinguish very clearly each other's faces.

"But in case of any failure—" she said, "for of course one never can tell, the most tiresome nothings may detain you just when speed is most important; or he might not have succeeded as he hoped. In case of any—delay—I shall be there, Mr. Rule; you may calculate upon me, with every penny I can muster——"

"You, Miss Vernon!" the clerk said, with a cry of relief and joy.

"Certainly; who else, when the credit of the bank is at stake? I have been living very quietly, you know. I spend next to nothing; my mother's money has accumulated till it is quite a little fortune, I believe. What had I best do? send to Mr. Sellon and ask him to help us on that security? I don't think he will refuse."

"If you do that we are saved," said Rule, half crying. "That is the thing to do. What a head for business you have!"

She smiled, and gave him a little nod, like one of those happy nods she used to give to the young clerks in her fine youthful days, in which there was a kind acknowledgment of their admiration, a friendly good fellowship with themselves.

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"I hope I am not old Edward Vernon's grand-daughter for nothing," she said, beginning to walk up and down the room with a buoyant impatience, as though longing for the moment of exertion to come. "I had better write to Mr. Sellon at once; there is no time to lose."

"And if you will let me I will take the note directly, and bring you an answer."

"Bravo! that is promptitude," cried Miss Vernon; and she went up to him and held out her hand. "Between us we will keep the old place going," she said, "whoever may give in."

If Mr. Rule had not been the steady, bashful Englishman he was, he would have kissed that hand. He felt that there was in it enough to save everything—the bank first, and then his own little bit of money, and his situation, and his children's bread. He had not allowed himself to think of these things in the greatness of his anxiety in respect to Vernon's; but he did think of them now, and was ready to cry in the relief of his soul.

Never was an evening more full of occupation. Mr. Sellon, who was the agent of the Bank of England in Redborough, was fortunately at home, and responded at once to Miss Vernon's appeal. Mr. Rule had the gratification of walking back with him to the Grange, whither he hastened to reply in person, and of assisting at the interview afterwards with a sense of pride and personal advancement which heightened the satisfaction of his soul. Miss Vernon insisted strongly on the point that all these preparations were by way of precaution merely.

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"My cousin will no doubt be back in time, fully provided; but of course you never can be perfectly certain. Horses may break down, shafts be broken; the least little accident may spoil everything. Of course John put off such a step till the last moment, and thought it better to keep it entirely to himself."

"Of course," cried Rule, speaking out of his corner; and "Of course," but much more faintly, Mr. Sellon said.

"That is so evident that it requires no repetition: but just as naturally Mr. Rule was alarmed, and had the good sense to come to me."

All this was by way of convincing Mr. Sellon that the whole matter was perfectly simple, and that probably his resources would not be called upon at all. To be sure, as in every case of a similar kind, Miss Vernon might have saved herself the trouble, the circumstances being far more clearly known to Mr. Sellon than to herself. He was very sure that John Vernon would not return, and that his intention was to get himself out of it. Everybody had known it was coming. It was just as well to humour a lady, and accept her version as the right one; but he was not for a moment deceived.

"Of course the bank," he said, "will make it up to you afterwards."

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"Of course," she said; "and if not, I don't know who is to stop me from doing what I like with my own."

He asked a few questions further, in which there was a good deal of significance, as for instance something about Mrs. John Vernon's marriage settlements, which neither of the others for the moment understood. Rule saw Mr. Sellon to the door, by Miss Vernon's request, with great pride,

and went back to her afterwards, "as if he were one of the family," he described to his wife afterwards.

"Well," she said, "are you satisfied?"

"Oh, more than satisfied, happier than I can tell you," cried the clerk. "The bank is saved!"

And then she, so triumphant, buoyant, inspired as she was, sank down upon a chair, and put her head in her hands, and he thought cried; but Rule was not a man to spy upon a lady in the revulsion of her feelings. When she looked up again she said to him quickly—

"In any case, Mr. Rule, we are both sure that my cousin is doing all he can for the bank; if he succeeds or not is in other hands."

"Oh yes, Miss Vernon, quite sure," Rule replied promptly. He understood that she meant it to be understood so, and determined within himself that he was ready to go to the stake for the new dogma. And then he related to her his interview with Mrs. John, and her willingness to give him up her twenty pounds to save the bank.

Miss Vernon's first flush of indignation soon yielded to amusement and sympathy. She laughed and she cried. [Pg 31]

"That shall always be remembered to her credit," she said. "I did not think she had any feeling for the bank. Let us always remember it to her credit. She was ready to give all she had, and who can do any more?"

Mr. Rule was somewhat intoxicated with all these confidences, and with the way in which Miss Vernon said "we"—his head was a little turned by it. She was a woman who understood what it was to have a faithful servant. No doubt, after the sacrifice she was making, she would, in future, have more to do with the business, and Rule could scarcely keep his imagination from straying into a consideration of changes that might be. Instead of merely being head clerk, it was quite possible that a manager might be required; but he pulled himself up, and would not allow his thoughts to carry him so far.

Next day everything happened as had been foreseen. There was a run on the bank, and a moment of great excitement; but when Miss Vernon was seen at the door of the inner office smiling, with her smile of triumphant energy and capability, upon the crowd, and when the Bank of England porters appeared bringing in those heavy boxes, the run and all the excitement subsided as by magic. The bank was saved; but not by John Vernon. The outside world never was aware how the matter was settled. But John did not come back. He would have met nothing but averted looks and biting words, for there could be no doubt that he had abandoned his post, and left Vernon's to its fate. Messrs. Pounce and Seeling had a good deal to do about the matter, and new deeds were drawn, and old deeds cancelled to a serious extent; but the bank ever after remained in the hands of Miss Vernon, who, it turned out, had more than her grandfather's steady power of holding on, and was, indeed, the heir of her great-grandfather's genius for business. The bank throve in her hands as it had done in his days, and everything it touched prospered. She deserved it, to be sure, but everybody who deserves does not get this fine reward. There is something beyond, which we call good luck or good fortune, or the favour of Heaven; but as Heaven does not favour all, or even most of the best people in this way, we have to fall back upon a less pious phraseology. Is it, perhaps, genius for business, as distinct as genius in poetry, which makes everything succeed? But this is more than any man can be expected to understand. Rule attained all the heights of those hopes which had vaguely dawned on him out of the mist on that July evening when his good angel suggested to him Catherine Vernon's name. He was raised to the dignity of manager as he had foreseen. His salary was doubled, his sons were provided for, and he grew old in such comfort and general esteem as he had never dreamed of. "This is the man that saved the bank," Miss Vernon would say. And though, of course, he deprecated such high praise, and declared that he was nothing but the humblest instrument, yet there can be no doubt that he came to believe it in the end, as his wife and all his children did from the beginning. [Pg 33]

Miss Vernon's was a reign of great benevolence, of great liberality, but of great firmness too. As she got older she became almost the most important person in Redborough. The people spoke of her, as they sometimes do of a very popular man, by her Christian name. Catherine Vernon did this and that, they said. Catherine Vernon was the first thought when anything was wanted either by the poor who needed help, or the philanthropist who wanted to give it. The Vernon Almshouses, which had been established a hundred years before, but had fallen into great decay till she took them in hand, were always known as Catherine Vernon's Almshouses. Her name was put to everything. Catherine Street, Catherine Square, Catherine places without number. The people who built little houses on the outskirts exhausted their invention in varying the uses of it. Catherine Villas, Catherine Cottage, Catherine Mansion, were on all sides; and when it occurred to the High Church rector to dedicate the new church to St. Catherine of Alexandria, the common people, with one accord, transferred the invocation to their living patroness. She was, at least, a saint more easily within reach, and more certain to lend a favourable ear.

CHAPTER III.

THE VERNONRY.

These things all happened a great number of years before the beginning of this history. Catherine Vernon had become an old woman—at least she was sixty-five; you can call that an old woman if you please. Sometimes it may mean the extreme of age, decrepitude and exhaustion: but sometimes also it means a softer and more composed middle age—a lovely autumnal season in which all the faculties retain their force without any of their harshness, and toleration and Christian charity replace all sharpness of criticism or sternness of opinion. Sometimes this beautiful age will fall to the lot of those who have experienced a large share of the miseries of life and learnt its bitterest lessons, but often—and this seems most natural—it is the peaceful souls who have suffered little to whom this crown of continuance is given. Catherine Vernon belonged to the last class. If her youth had not been altogether happy, there had been fewer sorrows and still fewer struggles in her life. She had gone along peacefully, her own mistress, nobody making her afraid, no one to be anxious about, no one dear enough to rend her heart. Most people who have gone through the natural experiences of life are of opinion with the Laureate, that it is

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"Better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all."

But then we do not allow the other people to speak who know the other side of the question. If love brings great happiness it brings many woes. Catherine Vernon was like Queen Elizabeth, a dry tree—while other women had sons and daughters. But when the hearts of the mothers were torn with anxiety, she went free. She had the good of other people's children in a wonderful degree, but it was impossible she could have the harm of them—for those whom she took to were the good children, as was natural, the elect of this world. Her life had been full of exertion and occupation since that night when Rule called upon her at the Grange and set all the world of her being in movement. What flagging and loneliness might have been hers—what weariness and longing had ended at that time. Since then how much she had found to do! The work of a successful man of business increased, yet softened by all the countless nothings that make business for a woman, had filled her days. She was an old maid, to be sure, but an old maid who never was alone. Her house had been gay with young friends and tender friendship. She had been the first love of more girls than she could count. By the time she was sixty-five she was a sort of amateur grandmother in numbers of young households. A woman with plenty of money, with a handsome, cheerful house, and a happy disposition, she had—at least since her youth was over—never had occasion to remember the want of those absorbing affections which bind a married woman within her own circle. The children of the barren in her case were more than those of any wife. If ever in her heart she said to herself, like Matthew in the poem—

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"Many love me, yet by none
Am I enough beloved,"

the sentiment never showed, and must have occurred only as Matthew's did, in moods as evanescent as the clouds. Her face was not without lines, for that would be to say that it was without expression; nor did she look too young for her age: but her eye was not dim, nor her natural force abated. She had a finer colour than in her girlhood, though the red was not so smooth, but a little broken in her soft cheek. Her hair was white and beautiful, her figure ample, but graceful still. At sixty she had given up work, entering upon, she said, the Sabbatical period of her life. For the rest of her days she meant to keep Sunday, resting from her labours—and indeed, with perhaps too close a following of the divine example for any human creature to venture upon, finding them very good.

It follows as a matter of course that she had found somebody to replace her in the bank. There were so many Vernons, that this was not very difficult to do. At least it was not difficult to find candidates for so important a post. Descendants of the brothers and sisters of the great John Vernon, who had first made the bank what it was, were plentiful, and from among them Catherine Vernon selected two hopeful young men to carry on her work. One of them, Harry Vernon, was descended from the daughter of the great John, who had married a relation and continued to bear the family name. The other went further back and traced his descent from a brother of that great John. The parents of these fortunate young men acquiesced with delight in the proposals she made to them. It was a certain fortune—an established living at once—far better than the chances of the Bar, or the Indian Civil Examinations, or Colorado, which had begun to be the alternative for young men. Indeed it was only Edward Vernon who had parents to be consulted. Harry had but a sister, who had come to live with him in the fine house which the last John, the one who had put the bank in such deadly peril, had built. Edward lived with Miss Vernon herself. Five years had passed since their inauguration as partners and managers, with very little change in their feelings towards the old cousin, who had done so much for them, and whom they called Aunt Catherine. She was Aunt Catherine to a great many people, but these three, who were the nearest to her in blood, were disposed to give themselves airs, and to punish intruders who presumed upon a fictitious relationship. They were to all appearance quite satisfactory young people, if perhaps not brilliant; and pious persons said that Miss Vernon had got her reward for her kindness to the poor, and her more than kindness to her poor relations. She was surrounded by those who were to her like children of her own. No mother could have had sons more respectful and devoted. Good and virtuous and kind children—what could a woman have more?

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Perhaps this was rather a flattering and ideal statement of the case; but at all events one of the young men satisfied all Miss Vernon's requirements, and they were both steady-going, fine young

fellows, paying every attention to business, keeping everything going. Ellen perhaps was not quite so satisfactory. She was young and headstrong, and not sure that Catherine Vernon was all that people made her out to be. There was nothing wonderful in this. To hear one person for ever applauded is more likely than anything else to set an impatient mind against that person—and Ellen kept her old cousin at arm's length, and showed her little affection. Nobody could doubt that this must have vexed Miss Vernon, but she took it with wonderful calm.

"Your sister does not like me," she said to Harry; "never mind, she is young, and she will know better one day."

"You must not think so," Harry said. "Ellen is foolish and headstrong, but she has a very good heart." [Pg 39]

Catherine Vernon nodded a little and shook her head.

"It is not a heart," she said, "that is disposed towards me. But never mind; she will think better of it one day."

Thus you will see that Miss Vernon escaped from the worst, and had the best, of motherhood. What a bitterness to her heart would this alienation have been, had Ellen been her child! but as the troublesome girl was not her child in reality, the unkindness vexed her in a very much less degree. She was able to think of the boys, who were so good, without being disturbed by the image of the girl, who was not so good. And so all things went on serenely, and the years went by, gentle, unremarkable, tranquil years.

Several years before this, before indeed the young people had entered into her life, the old house, called the Heronry, came into Miss Vernon's hands. It was at some distance on the same side of the Common, but a little further out towards the country than the Grange—a large old red-brick house, in the midst of a thin but lofty group of trees. Though it was so near the town, there was something forlorn in it, standing out against the west, the tall trees dark against the light, the irregular outline of the old house flush against the sky, for it was a flat country, no hills or undulations, but everything that was tall enough showing direct against the horizon in a way that was sometimes very impressive. This great old house Miss Vernon made a curious use of. It contained a multitude of rooms, not any very large except that which occupied the centre of the area, a sort of hall, with a great staircase going out of it. From the moment it came into her hands, she made, everybody thought, a toy of the Heronry. She divided it into about half a dozen compartments, each with a separate entrance. It was very cleverly done, so as not to interfere in any way with the appearance of the place. The doors were not new and unsightly, but adapted with great care, some of them being windows a little enlarged. What was it for? All kinds of rumours ran about the town. It was some sort of a convent which she was going to institute, a community of an apostolical kind, a sisterhood, a hospital, a set of almshouses. Some went so far as to call it Catherine Vernon's Folly. She spent a great deal of money upon it, elaborating her whim, whatever it might be. It was fitted up with apparatus for warming, which would make the dwellers in it independent of fires, people said, and this looked like a hospital everybody allowed. There was no end to the conveniences, the comforts of the place. The old-fashioned gardens were put in order, and the greatest trouble taken to make the old pool—which had got the place its name, and where it was said that herons had actually been seen in the lifetime of some old inhabitants—wholesome and without prejudice to the health of the house. The pool itself was very weird, and strange to be so near the dwelling of ordinary life. It lay in the centre of the clump of trees which had once been a wood, and which round it had grown tall and bare, with clumps of foliage on the top, and straight, long stems mounting to the sky, and shining in long lines of reflection in the still, dark water. Several gaunt and ghostly old firs were among them, which in the sunset were full of colour, but in twilight stood up black and wild against the clear, pale sky. This pool was about as far from the Grange as Miss Vernon could walk with comfort, and it was a walk she was very fond of taking on summer nights. The Common lay between the house and the town; beyond it spread the long levels of the flat country. In the summer all was golden about, with gorse and patches of purple heather, and the abundant growth of wild, uncultivated nature. What did Catherine Vernon mean to do with this house? That was what all Redborough wanted to know. [Pg 40]

By the time at which this story properly begins, Redborough had been acquainted for years with Miss Vernon's intentions; they were indeed no longer intentions, but had been carried out. The Heronry had changed its name, if not formally, yet in familiar parlance, throughout all the neighbourhood, and was called the Vernonry even by people who did not know why. The six dwellings which had been contrived so cleverly were all occupied by relations and dependents of the family, members of the house of Vernon, or connections of the same. They made a little community among themselves, but not the community of a sisterhood or a hospital. It was said that they had their little internal feuds and squabbles, as people living so close together are always supposed to have, but they were sufficiently well bred, or sufficiently in awe of their cousin and patroness, to keep these quarrels decorously to themselves. How far they were indebted to her for their living, as well as their lodging, nobody knew, which was not for want of many a strenuous investigation on the part of the neighbourhood; but the inmates of the Vernonry were clever enough to keep their own counsel on a matter which involved their own consequence and credit. Disagreeable things were indeed said about "genteel almshouses," and "poor relations," when it first became a question in Redborough about calling on the new residents. But, as it turned out, they were all persons of pretensions, expecting to be called upon by the county, and contemptuous of the townspeople. Five of the six apartments into which the old house had been divided were occupied, when Redborough was startled by the extraordinary intelligence that the last and best had been reserved for no less interesting an inmate than Mrs. [Pg 41]

John Vernon, she who had left the town in circumstances so painful. John Vernon, the unfortunate or the culpable, who had all but ruined the bank, and left it to its ruin, had died abroad. His wife's marriage settlement had secured their income, but he had spent as much as it was possible to spend of that, and forestalled every penny that he could manage to forestall. His debts were such that his widow's income was sadly crippled by the necessity of paying them, which it was said she would not herself have seen so clearly but for the determined way in which it was taken up by her child, a very young girl, born long after the catastrophe, but one who was apparently of the old stock, with a head for business, and a decision of character quite unusual in a child. Mrs. John's return caused a great sensation in Redborough. She was very well connected, and there could be no question on anybody's mind as to the propriety of calling on a woman who was aunt to Sir John Southwood, and first cousin to Lady Hartingale. How she could like to come back there, to live within sight of her own beautiful house, and to be indebted for shelter to Catherine Vernon, was a much more difficult matter to understand. But as everybody said, that of course was Mrs. John's own concern. If she could make up her mind to it, certainly nobody else had any call to interfere.

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But what a change it was from the fatal day when poor Mr. Rule, all anxious and miserable, was shown in by the curious servant to the costly drawing-room in which John Vernon's wife, in her spotted muslin, sat ignorant of business, but confident and satisfied in her good fortune and in the certainty that all would go well with her! Poor lady! she had learned some few things since that day, but never had grasped the mystery of her downfall, nor known how it was that everything had collapsed in a moment, tumbling down like a house of cards. She had not, indeed, tried to understand at that terrible time when it all burst upon her—when the fact that she had to leave her house, and that her furniture was going to be sold in spite of all her indignant protestations, compelled her understanding, such as it was, into the knowledge that her husband was ruined. She had too much to do then, in crying, in packing, in appealing to heaven and earth to know what she had done to be so cruelly used, and in trying to make out how she was to travel, to be able to face the problem how it had all come about. And after she went away the strangeness and novelty of everything swept thought out of her mind, if, indeed, it ever entered there at all. Perhaps it was only after that life was over, and when widowed and growing old she came back to the strange little house which Catherine Vernon had written to offer her, that she remembered once more to ask herself the question. Or, perhaps, even then it was not she who asked it, but Hester, who, greatly excited, with eyes large with curiosity and interest, clinging to her mother's arm in a way she had, which looked like dependence, and was control, went all over the new-old place with her, drinking in information. Hester led her mother wherever she pleased, holding her arm embraced in her own two clasped hands. It was her way of holding the helm. She was a tall girl of fourteen when she came to the Heronry, outgrowing all her frocks, and all her previous knowledge, and thirsting to understand everything. She had never been in England before, though she prided herself on being an English girl. She knew scarcely anything about her family, why it was they lived abroad, what was their history, or by what means they were so severed from all relationships and friendships. The letter of Catherine Vernon offering them a house to live in had roused her, with all the double charm of novelty and mysterious, unknown relationship. "Who is she? Cousin Catherine? Papa's cousin! Why is she so kind? Oh yes, of course she must be kind—very kind, or she would not offer us a house. And that is where you used to live? Redborough. I should think in a week—say a week—we might be ready to go." It was thus that she carried her mother along, who at the first did not at all intend to go. Hester arrived at the curious old house, which was unlike anything she had ever seen before, with eyes like two notes of interrogation, brilliant, flaming, inquiring into everything; and as soon as her mother had rested, and had taken that cup of tea which is an Englishwoman's comfort, the girl had her out to see what was to be seen, and led her about, turning the helm now one way, now another. The Grange was visible as soon as they got beyond their gate, and on the other side of the red roofs of Wilton Street, standing on the only height that exists in the neighbourhood, there was the white and splendid "elevation" of the White House, still splendid, though a little the worse for wear.

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Mrs. John stood still, resisting the action of the helm unconsciously, and all at once began to cry. "That is where we used to live," she said, with little sobs breaking in, "that—that is where we lived when we married. It was built for me; and now to think I have nothing to do with it—nothing!"

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It was then that the question arose, large, embracing the entire past, and so many things that were beyond the mother's knowledge—"Why did papa go away?" Mrs. John cried, she could not help it, feeling in a moment all the difference, the wonderful change, the downfall and reversal of everything that in those days she had expected and hoped. She dried her eyes half a dozen times, and then burst out again. "Oh, what have I done that so much should happen to me! and Catherine Vernon always the same," she said. After a while Hester ceased to ask any questions, ceased to impel her mother this way or that by her arm, but led her home quietly to the strange house, with its dark wainscot, which was so unfamiliar, and made her lie down upon the sofa. Mrs. John was not a person of original impulses. What she did to-day she had done a great many times before. Her daughter knew all her little ways by heart. She knew about how long she would cry, and when she would cheer up again; and in the meantime she did her best to put two and two together and make out for herself the outline of the history. Of course she was all wrong. She had heard that her father was the victim of a conspiracy, and she had never seen him on any but his best side. Her idea was he had been wronged; perhaps he was too clever, perhaps too good, for the designing people round him, and they had laid their heads together and procured his ruin. The only thing that puzzled Hester was the share that the unknown Cousin Catherine had in it. Had she been against him too? But, if so, why was she kind to his wife and child? Perhaps out of remorse and compunction? Perhaps because she was an old woman, and wanted to make up a

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little for what she had done? But this was all vague, and Hester was prudent enough not to make up her mind about it until further inquiries. She put her mother to bed in the meantime, and did all the little things for her which were part of Mrs. John's system. She brushed her hair, still so pretty; she tied nicely, as if it were an article of full dress, the strings of her nightcap; she put all her little things by her on the table by her bedside—her Bible and prayer-book, the novel she had been reading on the journey, a biscuit in case she should wake up feeling faint in the night. There was quite an array of small matters. And then Hester kissed her mother and bid her go to sleep. "You will not be long of coming to bed, dear?" Mrs. John said; and the girl promised. But she went away, carrying her candle into one wainscoted room after another, asking herself if she liked them. She had been used to big white rooms in France. She saw gleams of her own face, and reflections of her light in the deep brown of these walls with a pleasant little thrill of alarm. It was all very strange, she had never seen anything like it before; but what was the reason why papa left? What had he done? What had been done to him? One of the down stairs rooms opened upon a pretty verandah, into which she was just about stepping, notwithstanding her dread that the wind would blow her candle out, when suddenly she was met by a large and stately figure which made the heart jump in Hester's breast. Miss Catherine had come out, as she did so often at night, with a white shawl thrown over her cap. The road was so quiet—and if it had been ever so noisy Catherine Vernon could surely dress as she pleased, and go as she pleased, from one place to another in Redborough and its neighbourhood. She saw coming out upon her in the light of a candle a pair of brown eyes, large and wide open, full of eager curiosity, with a tall girl behind them, somewhat high-shouldered, with clustering curly short hair. Catherine Vernon was not without prejudices, and she did not like Mrs. John, nor did she expect (or perhaps intend) to like her daughter. There was something in the girl's face which disarmed her suspicion; but she was not a person to give in, and give up her foregone conclusion on any such trifling occasion as that.

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CHAPTER IV.

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A FIRST MEETING.

Catherine Vernon had come to see with her own eyes that her guests or tenants had arrived, and that they were comfortable. They were relations, which justified the want of ceremony; but, perhaps, if they had not been poor, and she had not been their benefactor, she would scarcely, in so very easy a way, with a shawl over her cap, and at an hour not adapted for visits, have made the first call upon them. She would have been more indignant than any one at such a suggestion; but human motives are very subtle, and, no doubt, though she was not in the least aware of it, this was true. To be sure, there were circumstances in which such a visit would have seemed, of all things, the most kind, but not, perhaps, with persons so little in sympathy as Catherine Vernon and Mrs. John. She knew she had been substantially kind. It is so much easier to be substantially kind than to show that tender regard for other people's feelings which is the only thing which ever calls forth true gratitude; and perhaps Catherine had not altogether escaped the deteriorating influences of too much prosperity. In her solitude she had become a great observer of men—and women: and was disposed to find much amusement in this observation. Miss Vernon was half aware that other motives than those of pure benevolence affected her mind as she went that evening to the Vernonry. Curiosity was in it. She could not but wonder how Mrs. John was feeling, what she thought of all these changes. She was glad that her cousin's widow had come home where she could be looked after, and where it would be seen that nothing happened to her; but she had wondered above measure when her offer of shelter and a home had been accepted, not knowing, of course, anything about that very active factor in Mrs. John's affairs, who was known to the people in Redborough only as "the little girl." Catherine Vernon thought that she herself, in Mrs. John's position, would have starved or worked her fingers to the bone rather than have come back in such a humiliated condition to the neighbourhood where she had held so different a place. She was rather glad to feel herself justified in her contempt of her cousin's wife by this failure in her of all "proper pride"; and she allowed curiosity and a sense of superiority and her low estimate of Mrs. John's capacity of feeling, to carry the day over her natural sense of courtesy. What so natural, she said to herself, as that she should run out and see whether they had arrived, and if they were comfortable, and establish friendly, easy relations at once, without waiting for formalities? *Qui s'excuse s'accuse*. Miss Vernon certainly knew, at the bottom of her heart, that sorrow and downfall merited a more respectful accost; but then Mrs. John had none of those delicacies of feeling, or it was not in nature that she would have come at all. And nothing could be more substantially kind than Catherine knew she had been. She had engaged an excellent servant for them—a woman who had been in her own house, and who was a capital cook, and capable of taking a kind of charge as housekeeper if Mrs. John still remained incapable as of old; and, no doubt, Miss Vernon thought, there would be a foreign *bonne* of some sort or other to take care of "the little girl." Her own maid accompanied her to the gate, then went round to the humbler entrance while Miss Vernon walked through the garden to the pretty verandah newly put up (but in excellent taste and keeping, everybody said), which was intended to form a sort of conservatory in a sunny corner, and give the inhabitants a little more elegance and modern prettiness than the other houses afforded. She had done this on purpose for Mrs. John, who had got used, no doubt, to foreign ways, sitting out of doors, and indulgences of that kind. Could anything have been more kind? And yet, at the bottom of her heart, Miss Vernon was

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aware that if she had resisted her impulse to come and spy upon the poor traveller this first night, and investigate her feelings, and how she was supporting the change, and all the recollections to be called forth by her return, she would have been far more really kind. She felt this, yet she came. What is there in the human bosom more strong than the desire to see how the gladiators die? Poor Mrs. John was no gladiator, but she was upon the point of that sword of suffering which some writhe and struggle upon, and some allow themselves to be wounded by, in silence. Miss Vernon was very anxious to know how she was bearing it. The daylight, which had come to an end altogether in the dark wainscoted rooms inside, was still lingering without. Behind the trees there was a golden clearness upon the horizon, against which every branch stood out. The stars were only half visible in the faint blue. The walk had been delightful. It was the time she preferred to be abroad, her mind undisturbed by those cares which pursue less peaceful people, yielding itself up entirely to the spell of universal tranquillity and repose.

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But when Miss Vernon, opening the glass door of the verandah, suddenly came in sight of a figure which was quite unexpected, which she could not identify or recognise, she was, for the moment, too much startled to speak. A tall girl of fourteen, in that large development which so many girls attain at that early age, to be "fined down" into slim grace and delicacy afterwards—with rather high shoulders, increased by the simple form of her dress; hair of a chestnut colour, cut short, and clustering in natural rings and twists—not curled in the ordinary sense of the word; a complexion in which white predominated, the creamy whiteness of a sanguine temperament, with but little of the rose; and two large, eager brown eyes, full of curiosity, full of life, evidently interrogating everything, coming out, even upon the twilight and the tears of departing day, with her lighted candle and all-questioning eyes. There was so much warmth of life and movement about Hester, that it was difficult not to feel a certain interest in her; and there was something wonderfully characteristic in her attitude, arrested, as she stepped out, like an explorer, with her candle in her hand.

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"I don't know you," said Catherine Vernon, who, from her general popularity and the worship administered to her all round, had, perhaps without knowing it, acquired the familiar ease of expression which belonged to kind and well-intentioned despots. The tone of her voice, Hester thought, who was accustomed to that distinction, was as if she said "*tu*." And it depends a great deal upon circumstances whether it is affection or insult to *tutoyer* a stranger. "I don't know you," she said, coming in without any invitation, and closing the glass door behind her. "I suppose you must have come with Mrs. John Vernon. It is not possible," she cried a moment after, "that you are the little girl?"

"I am all the girl there is. I am Hester: but I don't know you either," the girl said, determined not to show any poltroonery or to veil her pretensions for any one. "Are you Cousin Catherine?" she added after a moment, with a quick drawn breath.

"Yes, I am Cousin Catherine. I came to see how you have got through your journey, and how your mother is. I suppose she is your mother? It is quite astonishing to me to see you look almost like a grown up young woman, you whom I have always thought of as the little girl."

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"I am fourteen," said Hester. "I never was very little since I can remember;" and then they stood and looked at each other under the glass roof, which still let in some light among the flowers, their two faces lit up by the flame of the candle. Hester stood in front of the door which led into the house, and, indeed, had something the aspect of a guardian of the house preventing the visitor from going in. There was a sort of resemblance to each other in their faces and somewhat largely developed figures; but this, which ought to have been a comfortable and soothing thought, did not occur to either. And it cannot be denied that the first encounter was hostile on both sides.

"I should like to see your mother: to—welcome her—home."

"She has gone to bed. She was—tired," Hester said; and then, with an effort—"I do not suppose it is quite happy for her, just the first night, coming back to the place she used to live in. I made her go to bed."

"You take good care of her," said Miss Vernon; "that is right. She always wanted taking care of." Then, with a smile, she added, "Am I not to go in? I came to see if you were comfortable and had everything you want."

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"Mother will be much obliged," said Hester, stiffly. She did not know any better. She was not accustomed to visitors, and was altogether at a loss what to do—not to speak of the instinct of opposition which sprang up in her mind to this first new actor in the new life which lay vaguely existing and unknown before her feet. It seemed to her, she could scarcely tell how, that here was an enemy, some one to be held at arm's length. As for Catherine Vernon, she was more completely taken aback by this encounter than by anything which had happened for years. Few people opposed her or met her with suspicion, much less hostility; and the aspect of this girl standing in the doorway, defending it, as it were, preventing her from entering, was half comic, half exasperating. Keeping her out of her own house! It was one of the drawbacks of her easy beneficence, the *defauts de ses qualités*, that she felt a little too distinctly that it was her own house, which, seeing she had given it to Mrs. John, was an ungenerosity in the midst of her generosity. But she was human, like the rest of us. She began to laugh, bewildered, half angry, yet highly tickled with the position, while Hester stood in front of her, regarding her curiously with those big eyes. "I must rest here, if I am not to go in," she said. "I hope you don't object to that; for it is as much as I can do to walk from the Grange here."

Hester felt as if her lips were sealed. She could not say anything; indeed she did not know what

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she ought to say. A vague sense that she was behaving badly made her uncomfortable; but she was not going to submit, to yield to the first comer, to let anybody enter who chose. Was she not the guardian of her mother, and of her quiet and repose? She shifted her position a little as Miss Vernon sat down on one of the creaking basket chairs, but did not even put her candle out of her hand, or relax in her defensive attitude. When her visitor laughed again, Hester felt a flush of hot anger, like a flame, going over her. To be ludicrous is the last thing a girl can bear: but even for that she would not give in.

"You are a capital guardian," Catherine said, "but I assure you I am not an enemy. I shall have to call my maid Jennings, who has gone to the kitchen to see Betsey, before I go home, for I am not fond of walking alone. You must try and learn that we are all friends here. I suppose your mother has told you a great deal about the Vernons—and me?"

"I don't know about any Vernons—except ourselves," Hester said.

"My dear," said Miss Vernon, hastily, "you must not get it into your little head that you are by any means at the head of the house, or near it. Your grandfather was only the second son, and you are only a girl—if you had been a boy it might have been different; and even my great-grandfather, John Vernon, who is the head of our branch, was nothing more than a cadet of the principal family. So don't give yourself any airs on that score. All your neighbours here are better Vernons than you——"

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"I never give myself any airs—I don't know what you mean," said Hester, feeling a wish to cry, but mastering herself with all the strength of passion.

"Don't you, my poor child? I think you do. You are behaving in a silly way, you know, meeting me like this. Your mother should have taught you better manners. I have no desire but to be kind to you. But never mind, I will not say anything about it, for I dare say you are all put the wrong way with fatigue and excitement; otherwise I should think you were excessively uncivil, do you know," Miss Vernon said.

And Hester stood, fiery-red, and listened. If she had spoken she must have cried—there was no alternative. The candle flickered between the two antagonists. They were antagonists already, as much as if they had been on terms of equality. When Miss Vernon had rested as long as she thought necessary, she got up and bade her young enemy good-night. "Tell your mother that I have done my duty in the way of calling, and that it is she now who must come to me," she said.

Hester stood at the door of the verandah, with her candle flaring into the night, while Catherine went round to the other door to call Jennings, her maid, and then watched the two walking away together with a mixture of confused feeling which filled her childish soul to overflowing. She wanted to cry, to stamp with her feet, and clench her fists, and grind her teeth. She was like a child in the unreasoning force of her passion, which was bitter shame as well. She had behaved like a savage, like a fool, she knew, like a little silly, ill-tempered child. She ought to be whipped for her rudeness, and—oh, far worse!—she would be laughed at. Does not every one remember the overwhelming, intolerable shame and mortification which envelope a young creature like a sudden flame when she perceives that her conduct has been ludicrous as well as wrong, and that she has laid herself open to derision and laughter? Oh, if she could but wipe that hour out of her life! But Hester felt that never, never could it be wiped out of her life. She would remember it if she lived to be a hundred, Miss Vernon would remember it, and tell everybody what a senseless, rude, ignorant being she was. Oh, if the earth would open and swallow her up! She did not wish to live any longer with the consciousness of this mistake. The first time, the first time she had been tried—and she had made herself ridiculous! The tears came pouring from her eyes like hail-drops, hot and stinging. Oh, how she stamped upon the floor! Never more could she hold up her head in this new place. She had covered herself with shame the very first hour. All the self-restraint she could exercise was to keep herself from flying up stairs and waking her mother in order to tell her all that had happened. She was not what people call unselfish—the one quality which is supposed to be appropriate to feminine natures. She was kind and warm-hearted and affectionate, but she was not without thought of herself. Her own little affairs naturally bulked more largely to her than everything else in the world. She could scarcely endure to keep all this to herself till to-morrow. She had indeed flown up stairs with a cry of "Mother, mother!" open-mouthed: and then it had occurred to her that to wake her mother would be cruel. She was very tired, and she had been more "upset" than Hester had ever seen her. Probably she would be still upset in the morning if she were disturbed now in her slumber. Hester's fortitude was not sufficient to make her go to bed quietly. She was almost noisy in her undressing, letting her hair-brush fall, and pushing the furniture about, hoping every moment that her mother would wake. But Mrs. John was very tired, and she was a good sleeper. She lay perfectly still notwithstanding this commotion; and Hester, with her heart swelling, had to put herself to bed at last, where she soon fell asleep too, worn out with passion and pain—things which weary the spirit more than even a day on the railway or crossing the Channel when there are storms at sea.

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Miss Vernon went home half amused, but more than half angry. Edward Vernon had not very long before taken up his abode at the Grange, and he was very attentive to Aunt Catherine, as many of the family called her. He came out to meet her when she appeared, and blamed her tenderly for not calling him when she went out.

"I do not think you would have been the worse for my arm," he said. He was a slim young man with a black beard, though he was still quite young, and a gentle expression in his eyes. He was one of those of whom it is said he never gave his parents an anxious hour; but there was something in his face which made one wonder whether this was from genuine goodness, or because he had never yet come under temptation. This doubt had passed through Catherine

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Vernon's mind when she heard all that his enthusiastic family had to say of him; but it had worn away in beholding the sweetness of his disposition, and his gentle, regular life. To see him so dutiful and gentle was a relief and comfort to her after the encounter she had just had.

"It would have given you a sensation," she said, "I promise you, if you had come with me, Edward. I have just had a meeting with a little spitfire, a little tiger-cat."

"Who is that, Aunt Catherine?"

Miss Vernon threw her shawl off her cap, and sat down on the sofa to take breath. She had walked home faster than usual in the excitement of the moment.

"If you will believe me," she said, "I don't even know her name—except of course that it is Vernon, John Vernon's daughter. I suppose she must have been warned against me, and instructed to keep me at arm's length."

"To keep *you* at arm's length? That is not possible."

"Well, it does not look likely, does it?" she said, somewhat mollified. "People are not generally afraid of Catherine Vernon: but it is singular sometimes how you will find your own family steeled against you, when everybody else likes you well enough. They see you too near at hand, where there is no illusion possible, I suppose; but that could not be the case with this little thing, who never set eyes on me before. She let me know that her mother was not to be disturbed, and even refused me admission—what do you think?—to my own house."

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"Are you quite sure there is no mistake?" said Edward; "it seems incomprehensible to me."

"Oh, I do not find it incomprehensible. She is Mrs. John's daughter, and there never was any love lost between us. I always felt her to be a vacant, foolish creature; and no one can tell what a venturesome, ridiculous hoyden she thought me."

Here Catherine Vernon felt herself grow hot all over, as Hester had done, bethinking herself of an encounter not altogether unlike the present, in which she had enacted Hester's part, and exposed herself to the ridicule of Mrs. John. Though this was nearly half a century ago, it had still power to move her with that overwhelming sense of mortification. There are things which no one ever forgets.

"When I heard of that woman coming home, I knew mischief would come of it," Miss Vernon said.

"But forgive me, Aunt Catherine, was it not you that asked her to come?"

Catherine Vernon laughed.

"You have me there," she said. "I see you are quick, and I see you are honest, Edward. Most people hearing me say that would have been bewildered, and thought it not possible. No, I did not bring her. I only said to her, if you are coming, there is a house here which you are welcome to if you please. What else could I do?"

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"She is not penniless, I suppose. You might have let her settle where she pleased."

"She is not penniless, but she is heedless and heartless," said Miss Vernon with a sigh; "and as for settling where she pleased, of course anyhow she would have come here. And then, I never expected she would take it."

"You thought she would come here, and yet you never expected she would take it; and you knew she would make mischief, yet you invited her to come. That is a jumble. I don't make head or tail of it."

"Nor I," cried Miss Vernon, with another laugh. "You shall carry the problem a little further, if you please. I feared that her coming would disturb us all, and yet I am half pleased in my heart, being such a bad woman, that she is going to make a disturbance to prove me right. You see I don't spare myself."

"It amuses you to make out your own motives as well as other people's: and to show how they contradict each other," Edward said, shaking his head.

This little bit of metaphysics refreshed Miss Vernon. She became quite herself again, as she told him her story.

"The little firebrand!" she said, "the little spitfire! facing me on my own ground, defying me, Catherine Vernon, in the very Vernonly, my own creation!"

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"I wonder what the child could mean by it; it must have been ignorance."

"Very likely it was ignorance: but it was more; it was opposition, firm, healthy, instinctive opposition, without any cause for it; that is a sort of thing which it refreshes one to see. It must have been born in her, don't you see? for she didn't know me, never set eyes on me. The little wild cat! She felt in every nerve of her that we were in opposition, she and I."

"Don't you think you give too much importance to the nonsense of a girl? I know," said Edward, with a very serious nod of his head, "what girls are. I have six sisters. They are strange beings. They will go all off at a tangent in a moment. Pull a wrong string, touch a wrong stop, and they are all off—in a moment."

"You forget that I was once a girl myself."

"It is a long time ago, Aunt Catherine," said the ruthless young man. "I dare say you have forgotten: whereas I, you know, have studied the subject up to its very last development."

Miss Vernon shook her head at him with a playful menace, and then the tea was brought in, and lights. As he went on talking, she could not refrain from a little self-congratulation. What a wise choice she had made! Many young men hurried out in the evenings, made acquaintances that were not desirable, involved themselves in indifferent society. Edward seemed to wish for nothing better than this soft home atmosphere, her own company, his books and occupations. What a lucky choice! and at the same time a choice that reflected much credit on herself. She might just as well have chosen his brother, who was not so irreproachable. As she sat on the sofa and took her tea, her eyes sought the figure of the young man, pacing quietly up and down in the dim space, filling the house and the room and her mind with a sensation of family completeness. She was better off with Edward than many a mother with her son. It was scarcely possible for Miss Vernon to divest herself of a certain feeling of complacency. Even the little adventure with the stranger at the Heronry enhanced this. Mrs. John, to whom she had been so magnanimous, to whom she had offered shelter, had always been against her; she had foreseen it, and if not content with this incident, was so with herself.

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CHAPTER V.

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NEXT MORNING.

When Mrs. John awoke, confused and not knowing where she was, very early on the next morning, she was dismayed by the story which was instantly poured into her half-awakened ears. Hester, it is to be feared, had not shown that respect for her mother's slumbers which she had enforced upon Miss Vernon. The girl was too impatient, too eager to tell all that had happened. "Of course I was not going to let her come in and disturb you," she cried. "Is that how people behave in England? She had not even a bonnet on. No. I did not ask her to come in. It was so late: and besides, I never heard of people making calls at night; people you don't know."

"Oh, my dear!" said Mrs. John, in dismay. "Oh, Hester! what have you done? Catherine Vernon turned away from the door! She will never forgive you, never, as long as she lives."

"I don't care," said Hester, almost sullenly. "How was I to know? Even if I had been quite sure it was Cousin Catherine, I should not have let the Queen come in, to disturb you."

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"The Queen of course would never want to come," said Mrs. John, who was very literal, "but Catherine Vernon! she is more than the Queen; the house belongs to her, and the furniture, and everything. It is all warmed with hot-water pipes, and servants kept, and every comfort. I shouldn't wonder if she turned us out after what you have done."

"If she does, mother, I will be your servant. I will keep good fires and keep you warm, never fear," cried Hester, paling and reddening in panic, yet courage.

"Good fires!" said Mrs. John; "do you think fires can be got for nothing? and we have so little money." She looked very pale and worn, supported among her pillows in the early morning light so penetrating and so clear; and at this she began to cry. "Oh, why was I so foolish as to leave you to mismanage everything? I might have known! Whatever Catherine Vernon wanted, you ought to have let her have it. She can turn us out in a moment if she pleases, and she will never forgive you, never. And just when we were going to be so comfortable!" the poor woman cried.

"Don't cry, don't cry, mamma. You know I always said I should give lessons. We will get two nice little rooms somewhere, much nicer than these. If she is such a hard woman, I don't want to be obliged to her. Oh, mother, mother, don't cry! *I* can take care of you."

"Oh, hold your tongue, hold your tongue, child! what do you know about it? Let me get up. I must go to her at once and tell her you are only a child, and constantly doing silly things."

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This to Hester, who was so conscious of being not only her mother's prop and support, but her real guide in life. She was so utterly aghast, that she did not know how to reply.

"Put me out my best crape," said her mother. "Catherine will like to see that even in a foreign place, where it is so difficult to get things as one ought, proper respect was paid. Everybody said that she meant to marry your poor papa when she was young; but he saw me—Oh, dear, dear, when I think of all that has happened since then—and she never has liked me. I think that was quite natural: and now that you have gone and made everything worse—Put me out my best dress with the crape."

"It is only five o'clock," said Hester, half penitent, half irritated, "there is nobody up. The people in England must be very lazy in the morning. Does no one go to early mass?"

"Five o'clock!" said Mrs. John, fretfully. "I think you must be going out of your senses, Hester. Is that an hour to wake me, when I have not had my first sleep out? Draw down the blinds and close the shutters, and let me get a proper rest. And for goodness' sake," she cried, raising her head before she settled down comfortably among the pillows, "for goodness' sake! don't go about talking of early mass here."

Hester did as her mother ordered, but with an impatient heart. It was bitter to have thus put into the hands of the poor lady who was her kingdom, and for whom she had legislated for years, the means of shaking off her sway—a sway which Hester was firmly persuaded was for her good. John Vernon had not been much of a guide for either mother or child. He had not cared very

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much about them. His wife's monotonous feebleness which might have been well enough in the tranquillity of the luxurious sheltered life at home to which she was born, was nothing but tiresome in circumstances where an energetic woman might have been of some use; and his daughter was a creature he did not understand—a child, a chit, who ventured to look disapproval at him, to his indignation and wonder. What you are used to from your birth does not affect you much, and Hester had not suffered any heartache from her father's neglect. She accepted it as the order of nature, but the result had been that from her earliest consciousness almost, she had taken upon herself the charge of her mother; and to be thus threatened with deposition, and criticised by her helpless subject, appalled her. So active and young as she was, and full of superfluous strength, it was impossible for her to return to her pillow as her mother had done. When she had closed the shutters and drawn the curtains, she stole softly out on tiptoe down the old oak staircase which creaked at every footfall. In the glory of the early morning the house was not dark. In rooms which the sun had reached, the black old wainscot was glimmering full of reflections, and all the world out of doors lay resplendent in that early gladness. Hester had heard all her life from many a discontented mouth, of the gloomy skies and dark days of England, of a climate always obscured with fog, and a sky where there was no blue. Accordingly it was with a kind of indignant ecstasy that she stepped out into the intense delicious radiance, so soft and fresh, yet so all-powerful. The birds had got their early morning twitterings over, and were in full outburst of song. The flowers were all in intensest dewy bloom, and everything taking the good of that sweet prime of the morning in which they bloomed and sang for themselves, and not officially on behalf of the world. The girl forgot her vexation as she came out to the incense-breathing garden, to the trees no longer standing out black upon the sunset, but in all their sweet natural variations of colour, basking in the morning light. The pond even, that had looked so black, was like a basin of pure gold, rimmed with rich browns and greens. She opened the gate and looked out upon the road which was all silent, not a shadow upon it, swept by the broad early blaze of the morning sun. Not a sound except the chorus of the birds, the crackle of the furze bushes in the stillness, the hum of insects. She had all the world to herself, as the poet had on that immortal morning when the houses of quiet London all lay asleep, and the Thames flowed onward at his own sweet will. Standing apart from the road, among its shrubberies, was the Grange with its red gables and its eyelids closed—farther off the light rebounded softly from the roofs of the town, and behind the town, revealed in partial shadow, rose the white distant front of the house in which her mother had told Hester her early married life had been passed. She had it all to herself, nobody to disturb or interrupt. And what in human form could have given a more complete impersonation of the morning than this girl, fresh, fair, and strong, with such a world of latent possibilities in her? The cloud of last night's perversity blew away. She met the eye of the day with a gaze as open and as confident. Neither Nature nor Hester had any fear. She was like her namesake in the poem, whom the "gentle-hearted Charles" beloved of all men, could not, though she was dead, give up the expectation of meeting as heretofore, "some summer morning."

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"When from thy cheerful eyes a ray
Had struck a bliss upon the day,
A bliss that would not go away,
A sweet forewarning."

And this glorified world, this land of light and dews, this quiet sweetness and silence and ecstatic life, was the dull England of which all the shabby exiles spoke with scorn! Hester felt a delightful indignation flood her soul. She went out all by herself with a little awe, and walked round the Common which was all agleam with blobs of moisture shining like diamonds in the sun:—

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"A springy motion in her gait
A rising step did indicate,
Of pride and joy no common rate
That flushed her spirit.

"I know not by what name beside
I shall it call: if 'twas not pride
It was a joy to that allied
She did inherit."

Hester was a great deal too young for a heroine, but as it chanced there could not be a better portrait of her than that of Lamb's "sprightly neighbour." She went out with that springing motion, stepping on air, with the pride of life and youth and conscious energy in every vein. A certain youthful contempt for the inferior beings who lay stupid behind those closed shutters, losing all this bloom and glory, was in her heart. She was very black in the midst of the bright landscape in her mourning frock, with a white kerchief tied round her throat like a French girl, but her curly locks shining like everything else in the sun. She did not mind the sun. She had not yet learned that she had a complexion to care for; besides, the sun could do nothing to the creamy-white of her tint. Perhaps she was not very sensitive, not thin-skinned at all, either in body or soul.

Now it happened, curiously enough, that as Hester passed the gate of the Grange, at which she gazed very anxiously with a half-formed intention of making her way in, in face of every obstacle, and making her peace with Cousin Catherine—a project which only the early hour prevented her from carrying out—the said gate opened softly and a man appeared. Hester was more startled

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than she could explain to herself. Why should she be startled? It was not so early now—six o'clock or later. He was a young man of middle height, with a very dark beard and bright eyes. Hester felt that he was somewhat unsuitable to the scene, not English in her opinion—Englishmen had fair hair, rosy complexions, blue eyes—they were all *blonds*: now this man looked like those to whom she was accustomed. Was he, she wondered, going to early mass? He had a portfolio in his hand, a small box strapped to his shoulders. The first Englishman she had seen; what was he going to do? What he did first was to look at her with considerable curiosity. She had hastily put on her hat on seeing him, that there might be no impropriety in her appearance, an action which put out, so to speak, one of the lights in the landscape, for her hair was shining almost as brightly as the blobs of dew. He crossed the road to the Common, and then he paused a moment on the edge of it and looked at her again.

"I wonder if you are my little cousin," he said.

It was on Hester's lips to protest that she was not little at all, but quite as tall as he was, but she waived this point on second thoughts.

"Are you a Vernon—*too*?" she said.

"Yes, I am a Vernon—*too*. Edward, at your service. I am glad to see you keep such early hours."

"Why?" she asked, but did not wait for any reply. "What are you going to do?"

"I am going," he said, "out upon the Common to look for a rare flower that grows here, only I have never been able to find it. Will you come and help me?" [Pg 73]

"A flower!" said Hester, confounded. "Do Englishmen look for flowers?"

"Englishmen as well as others—when they happen to be botanists. Does that surprise you? I am obliged to get up early, for I have no time in the day."

"What do you do in the day?" the girl asked.

"I am at the bank. Have you never heard of Vernon's Bank? the business from which we all take our importance here. The Vernons are great or they are small, don't you know? according to their connection with the bank."

"Then you are one of the great ones," said Hester with decision. "Do any of the Vernons live in that great white house—that one, do you see?—on the other side of the red roofs?"

"The White House? Oh yes, Harry lives there, another cousin, and his sister."

"Are they in the bank too?"

"Harry is; he and I do the work between us. Ladies in this country have nothing to do with business—by the way, I am forgetting Aunt Catherine."

"That is a pity," said Hester, not noticing his exclamation. "Then I suppose my father must have had something to do with it, for do you know, though we are poor now, he once lived there?"

"Yes, I know."

"Then why did he go away?" said Hester musingly; "that is what I should like to find out. Do you know Cousin Catherine? you must, if you live in her house." [Pg 74]

"I call her Aunt Catherine," said the young man.

"Why? Is she your aunt? And I call her cousin; but she cannot be my cousin. She is so much older. Was she angry—do you know—last night? I did not know who she was—and I was—rude."

He laughed, and she, after a doubtful glance, laughed too.

"Oh yes, I am afraid I did know who she was—that she was Cousin Catherine; but then, who is Cousin Catherine? I had never seen her before. Mother thinks she will be very angry. Could I let her come in and disturb my mother after she was in bed? Mother thinks she will not let us stay."

"Should you be sorry to go?"

Hester cast a long look all round from east to west, taking in the breadth of the Common glistening in the morning dew, the dark roofs of the Heronry against the trees, the glittering vanes and windows of the town on the other side.

"It is very pretty," she said with a little sigh. "And to think what they say of England! They say it is always fog, and the sun never shines. How can people tell such lies? We should not go, we should take some small rooms in the town, and I would teach."

"What could you teach?" [Pg 75]

Hester looked at him with half resentment.

"Do you know many languages?" she said.

"Many languages? no!—a smattering of Greek and Latin."

"I don't call them languages. I mean French and Italian and German: for I know them all. I know them as well as English. I haven't a bit of the accent *Britannique*: Madame Alphonse said so, and I hope she is a good authority. I will give *cours*, as many as they please: French one day and the others the next. Not only should I be able to help mother, but I should make a fortune, they all said. Three *cours* always going: I should make a great deal of money, and then in ten years or so I could retire, you know. In ten years I should only be"—here she paused in the fervour of conversation and eyed him a little with doubt in her face. Then she said quite calmly, "I forget the

rest."

Edward Vernon listened with great edification; he forgot the flower which he was going to search for.

"I am very sorry to discourage you in your plans: but I don't think Aunt Catherine will turn you out."

"Don't you think so?"

Hester, after her brag, which was perfectly sincere, and of which she believed every word, felt a little disappointed to be thus brought down again.

"No, I don't think so. She told me that you were rude, but she was not angry; she only laughed."

At this Hester grew wildly red, and stamped her foot. "She shall not—she shall not—nobody shall laugh at me!" she cried. "I will tell mother we must go away." [Pg 76]

"Don't go away. You must consider that your mother will be a great deal more comfortable here than in lodgings in town. And you know you are very young. You had better be a little older before you begin to give *cours*. Don't be angry: but if you were to mount up to the desk with your short frock" (here Hester looked down at her feet, and in a sudden agony perceived the difference between her broad, old-fashioned shoes, and the pointed toes of her companion) "and short hair——" But this was more than she could bear.

"You are laughing at me! You too!" she said, with a poignant tone of mortification.

"No, my little cousin, I will not laugh; but you must let me be your friend, and show you what is best; for you *are* very young, you know. One can't know everything at——"

"Fourteen," said Hester. "Fourteen is not so very young; and girls are older than boys. Perhaps you are thinking that a boy of fourteen is not much? That is very true; but it is different with me. Mother is not strong. I have to do most of the settling, not to tire her. What I think is always what will be the best——"

"For her? To be sure," said Edward; "so you must make up your mind to be civil to everybody, and not to quarrel."

"Quarrel! I never quarrel. I would not for anything in the world; it is so childish." [Pg 77]

"I don't think I shall find my flower this morning," he said. "I will walk home with you if you will let me, and we can talk about everything. Have you seen the other people who live in the Heronry? Some of them will amuse you. There are two old ladies—Vernons, like the rest of us."

"Is it Cousin Catherine that has brought us all here?"

"All of us. She is not a person to be made light of, you see."

"And why did she bring *you*? Were you poor? Had you no father like me? Is she fond of you that she has you to live in her house? Do you love her?" said Hester, fixing her large curious eyes on the young man's face.

He laughed. "Where am I to begin?" he said. "I have a father and mother, little cousin. They are not poor precisely, but neither are they rich. I can't tell you whether Aunt Catherine is fond of me. She brought me here to work in the bank; the bank is everybody's first thought; that must be kept up whatever fails; and she was so good as to think I would do. It was a great advancement for me. If I had stayed at home I should have had to struggle for something to do along with all the other young men. And there are a great many young men in the world, and not so much for them to do as could be wished. Have I satisfied you now?"

"There is one question you have not answered," said Hester. "Do you love her?—that is the chief thing I want to know." [Pg 78]

"Love her? Come, you must not go into metaphysics. I like her very much. Aunts are excellent things. I have a great respect for her. Won't that do?"

"I looked at her last night," said Hester. "I got her by heart. I shall either love her or hate her. I have not made up my mind which."

"There is something between these violent sentiments," said Edward; "at least I hope so. You must not hate me."

"Oh, you!" said Hester, with friendly contempt, "that is a different thing altogether. You are not of any consequence. I think I like you, but you may be sure I shall never hate you; why should I? You can't do anything to me. But when there is one that is—that is—well, almost like God, you know——" said the girl, dropping her voice reverentially. "It is astonishing, is it not, that one should be so much more powerful than others? They say in France that men are all equal; but how can that be when Cousin Catherine—What gives her so much power?"

"That is all a fallacy about men being equal. You will see through it when you get older," said Edward, with gentle superiority. He had laughed at her cavalier mention of himself, but he was very willing to instruct this self-opinioned young person. "You are mixing up circumstances and principles," he added. "It is circumstances which make Aunt Catherine powerful; chiefly because she is rich—rich and kind; very kind in her way; always ready to do a charitable action." [Pg 79]

The colour wavered in Hester's cheek. "We don't want charity," she said; and after this walked on very stately, holding her head high. The Vernonry towards which they were going had begun to wake up. Smoke was rising up into the clear air from one or two of the chimneys; a few blinds

had been drawn up; a gardener, with his wheelbarrow and his scythe stood in the gate, throwing his shadow across the garden. Edward Vernon thought there was in the air a vague perfume from the cups of tea that were being carried about in all directions to the bedsides of the inhabitants. The people in the Vernonry were all elderly; they were all fond of their little comforts. They liked to open their eyes upon the world through the refreshing vapour of those early cups. All elderly—all except this impersonation of freshness and youth. What was she to do in such a place, amid the retired and declining, with energy enough for every active employment, and a restless, high, youthful spirit? Poor girl! she would have some bitter lessons to learn. Edward, though he had won the heart of his powerful relation by his domestic character and evident preference for her society, had not been able to divest himself of a certain grudge against the author of his good fortune. The feeling which Hester expressed so innocently was in his mind in a more serious form.

When they reached the gate, Hester stopped short.

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"You must not come in now," she said in her peremptory tones, "for mother is not up yet. I must go and make her coffee before she gets up. I will make you some, after dinner if you like. You cannot make coffee in England, can you?"

"No more than we can make the sun shine," said Edward with a smile. "I shall certainly come for my coffee in the evening. I may be of some use to you as your difficulties increase; but I should like to know your name, and what I am to call you?"

"Are you sure that our difficulties will increase?" said Hester, aghast, opening her mouth as well as her large eyes.

"Unless you know how to deal with them. I shall set up a series of lectures on fine manners and deportment."

Hester's countenance flamed upon him with mingled resentment and shame.

"Do you think me a savage?" she said. "I—do you know I have been brought up in France? It is in England that there are no manners, no politeness."

"And no sunshine," said Edward with a laugh. Thus saying he took off his hat with a little exaggeration of respect, and waving his hand to her, turned away. If Hester had been older, she would have known that to stand and look after him was not according to any code. But at fourteen the soul is bold and scorns conventional rule. She stood, shading her eyes with her hand, watching him as he walked along; still the only figure that broke the blaze and the silence of the morning. It was true, as she had said, that he was not of any consequence. Perhaps that was why she felt quite at her ease in respect to him, and on the whole approved of him as a pleasant feature in the new life.

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CHAPTER VI.

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NEIGHBOURS AND RELATIONS.

In the morning, the inhabitants of the Vernonry were to be seen a little before or after noon, according to the season, appearing and disappearing in the immediate neighbourhood of their house. It was a little community perfectly at leisure, called out by no work in the morning, returning with no more punctuality than pleased them. As a matter of fact they were exceedingly punctual, coming and going as by clockwork, supporting their otherwise limp existence by a severe mechanism of rule. Those who have least to do, are often most rigorous in thus measuring themselves out; it gives a certain sense of something real in their lives. It was a little after eleven when Mr. Mildmay Vernon appeared. His residence was in the west wing, nearest to the pool and the trees, and he thought it was probably owing to the proximity of the water that his rheumatism troubled him so much in winter. It did not trouble him at this fine season, but he had the habit of leaning on his stick and talking in a querulous voice. He came out with his newspaper to a little summer-house where the heat was tempered by the foliage of a great lime. He had very good taste; he liked the flicker of the sunshine which came through those green-silken leaves, and the shelter was very grateful when the sun was hot. The worst of it was that the summer-house was not in his portion of the common grounds, and the ladies, to whom it ought to have belonged, and to whom it was so convenient to do their work in, resented his constant presence. In winter, he seated himself always on a sunny bench which was in front of the windows now belonging to Mrs. John, but she was not as yet aware of this peculiarity. The Miss Vernon-Ridgways occupied the space between Mr. Mildmay's house and Mrs. John's. They were not in the direct line, and they felt that they were treated accordingly, the best of everything being appropriated to those whom Catherine Vernon, who was so proud of her name, considered nearest to the family stock. These ladies were convinced that the blood of the Ridgways had much enriched the liquid that meandered through the veins of the Vernons; but in Catherine Vernon's presence they kept silence as to this belief. The rooms in the wings were much the best, they thought, and they had even proposed an exchange to Mr. Mildmay when he complained of being so close to the pool. But he had only grinned and had not accepted; he knew better. Of course he would have grumbled if he had been lodged in Windsor Castle, the ladies said; but he knew very well in his heart that he had been preferred to the best place. On the other side of the house, towards the road, lived Mrs. Reginald Vernon, the young widow of an officer, with her four children, of whom

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everybody complained, and an old couple, in reality not Vernons at all, but relations of Catherine's mother who were looked down upon by the entire community, and had clearly no business in the Vernony. The old gentleman, Captain Morgan, had been in the navy, and therefore ought to have been the equal of any one. But the people on the road side kept themselves very much to themselves; the aristocracy lived on the garden front. When Mrs. John Vernon made her appearance in her deep mourning, there was a great deal of excitement about the place. Mr. Mildmay put down his paper and came out, bowing, to the door of the summer-house.

"Between relations I do not know if any ceremony of introduction is necessary," he said. "It gives me great pleasure to welcome you back to England. Poor John and I were once great friends. I hope you will allow me to consider myself at once an old acquaintance."

"Oh, how thankful I shall be for some one to speak to!" cried Mrs. John. "Though my family were of this county, I seem to have lost sight of every one that used to know me. A great many changes happen when one has been thirty years away."

"Poor John! I suppose he never came back to this country again?" Mr. Mildmay said, with sympathetic curiosity, and that air of knowing all about it which is sometimes so offensive; but Mrs. John was simple-minded. She was not even displeased by the undertone of confidential understanding. [Pg 85]

"Never! it would have broken his heart; what was left to him to come for? He always said that when ladies meddle with business everything goes wrong. But, dear me, I oughtn't to say so here," Mrs. John added, with a little panic, looking round.

"Why?—you need not be afraid of expressing your sentiments, my dear lady, before me. I have the greatest respect for the ladies—where would we without them? 'Oh, woman, in our hours of ease,' &c.—you know. But I think that mixed up with business they are entirely out of their place. It changes the natural relations—it creates a false position——"

"John always thought so. But then I was so silly—so dreadfully silly—about business; and he thought that women should all be like me."

"That is certainly the kind of woman that is most attractive to men," said Mr. Mildmay, with a gallant bow; "and in my time ladies thought much of that. I hope, however, that you will like this retirement, and be happy here. It is very retired, you see—nothing to disturb us——"

"Oh, Mr. Mildmay, I dare say I shall do very well," said Mrs. John, putting her handkerchief to her eyes; "but seeing *that*" (she waved her hand towards the front of the White House in the distance) "from the window, and knowing every day how things are going on at the bank, and all the old associations, I cannot be expected to be very happy. That was not thought of when I came here." [Pg 86]

"My dear lady!" Mr. Mildmay said, soothingly; and then he saw his way to inflicting another pin-prick upon this bleeding heart so easily laid open to him. "I suppose you know that Catherine has put her nephew Harry and his sister—he is no more her nephew than I am—one of Gilbert Vernon's boys: but she took a fancy to him—in the White House? It belongs to her now, like everything else in the neighbourhood. Almost the whole of Redborough is in her hands."

"Her nephew?" said Mrs. John, faintly, "but she has no nephew—she was an only child. My Hester is nearer to her than any one else." Then she paused, and added with conscious magnanimity, "Since I cannot have it, it doesn't matter to me who has got it. We must make ourselves as contented as we can—Hester and I."

It was at this moment that the two ladies appeared who considered the summer-house their special property. They were tall women with pronounced features and a continual smile—in dresses which had a way of looking scanty, and were exactly the same. Their necks were long and their noses large, both which characteristics they held to be evidences of family and condition. They followed each other, one always a step in advance of the other with a certain pose of their long necks and turn of their shoulders which made some people think of the flight of two long-necked birds. Mr. Mildmay Vernon, who pretended to some scholarship, called them the Cranes of Ibycus. They arrived thus at the peaceful spot all chequered with morning light and shade, as with a swoop of wings. [Pg 87]

"Dear lady!" said Miss Matilda, "we should have waited till we could make a formal call and requested the pleasure of making your acquaintance as we ought; but when we saw you in our summer-house, we felt sure that you did not understand the distribution of the place, and we hurried out to say that we are delighted to see you in it, and *quite* glad that you should use it as much as ever you please."

"Oh!" cried Mrs. John, much disturbed, "I am so sorry if I have intruded. I had not the least idea ____"

"*That* we were sure you had not—for everybody knows that Mrs. John Vernon is a lady," said the other. "It is awkward to have no one to introduce us, but we must just introduce each other. Miss Martha Vernon-Ridgway, Mrs. Vernon; and I am Matilda," said the spokeswoman, with a curtsey. "We are very glad to see you here."

At this Mrs. John made her curtsey too, but being unready, found nothing to say: for she could not be supposed to be glad to see them, as everybody knew the sad circumstances in which she had returned to her former home: and she seated herself again after her curtsey, wishing much that Hester was with her. Hester had a happy knack of either knowing or suggesting something to say. [Pg 88]

"We hope you will find yourself comfortable," said the two ladies, who by dint of always beginning to speak together had the air of making their remarks in common; but Miss Matilda had better wind and a firmer disposition than her sister, and always carried the day. "You are lucky in having the end house, which has all the fresh air. I am sure we do not grudge you anything, but it always makes us feel how we are boxed up; that is our house between the wings. It is monotonous to see nothing but the garden—but we don't complain."

"I am sure I am very sorry," Mrs. John began to say.

"Your favourable opinion of the end houses is very complimentary," said Mr. Mildmay. "I wish it were founded on fact. My windows look into the pool and draw all the miasma out of it. When I have a fire I feel it come in. But I say nothing. What would be the good of it? We are not here only to please ourselves. Beggars should not be choosers."

"I hope, Mr. Mildmay Vernon, that you will speak for yourself," said the sisters. "We do not consider that such an appellation applies to us. We are not obliged, I beg to say," Miss Matilda added, "to live anywhere that does not suit us. If we come here as a favour to Catherine Vernon, who makes such a point of having all her relations about her, it is not that we are beggars, or anything of the sort."

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"Dear, dear me!" said Mrs. John, clasping her hands, "I hope nobody thinks that is the case. For my poor dear husband's sake, and for Hester's sake, I could never submit—; Catherine offered the house out of kindness—nothing but that."

"Oh, nothing but that," said Mr. Mildmay Vernon, with a sneer.

"Nothing at all but that," said the Miss Vernon-Ridgways. "She said to us, I am sure, that it would be a favour to herself—a personal favour. Don't you remember, Martha? Nothing else would induce us, as you may suppose, Mrs. John—my sister and me, who have many friends and resources—to put up with a little poky place—the worst, quite the worst, here. But dear Catherine is very lonely. She is not a person, you know, that can do with everybody. You must understand her before you can get on with her. Shouldn't you say so? And she is perhaps, you know, a little too fond of her own way. People who can't make allowances as relatives do, are apt not to—like her, in short. And it is such a great stand-by for her—such a comfort, to have us here."

"I should have thought she was very—independent," said Mrs. John, faltering a little. She did not even venture to risk an opinion; but something she was obliged to say. "But I can scarcely say I know her," she added, anxiously, "for it is thirty years since I was at Redborough, and people change so much. She was young then."

"Young! she must have been nearly forty. Her character must have been what one may call formed by that time," said Mr. Mildmay; "but I know what you mean. Our dear Catherine whom we are all so fond of—"

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"You are quite right," said Miss Matilda, emphatically, "*quite* right, though perhaps you mean something different, for gentlemen are always so strange. We *are* very fond of dear Catherine. All the more that so many people misunderstand her, and take wrong ideas. I think indeed that you require to be a relation, to enter into the peculiarities of the case, and take everything into consideration, before you can do dear Catherine justice. She is so good, but under such a *brusque* exterior. Though she never *means* to hurt any one's feelings—that I am certain of."

"Oh *never!*" cried Mr. Mildmay, with mock enthusiasm, lifting up his hands and eyes.

Mrs. John looked, as each spoke, from one to the other with a great deal of perplexity. It had seemed to her simple mind at first that it was with a real enthusiasm that their general benefactress was being discussed; but by this time she had begun to feel the influence of the undertone. She was foolish, but there was no rancour in her mind. So gentle a little shaft as that which she had herself shot, in vindication, as she thought of her husband, rather than as assailing his successor, she might be capable of; but systematic disparagement puzzled the poor lady. She looked first at the Miss Vernon-Ridgways, and then at Mr. Mildmay Vernon, with a bewildered look, trying to make out what they meant. And then she was moved to make to the conversation a contribution of her own—

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"I am afraid my little girl made a sad mistake last night," she said. "Catherine was so kind as to come to see me—without ceremony—and I had gone to bed."

"That was so like Catherine!" the Miss Vernon-Ridgways cried. "Now anybody else would have come next day at soonest to let you have time to rest and get over your journey. But that is just what she would be sure to do. Impatience is a great defect in her character, it must be allowed. She wanted you to be delighted, and to tell her how beautiful everything was. It must be confessed it is a little tiresome. You must praise everything, and tell her you are *so* comfortable. One wouldn't like it in anybody else."

"But what I regret so much," continued poor Mrs. John, "is that Hester, my little girl, who had never heard of Catherine—she is tall, but she is only fourteen, and such a child! Don't you know she would not let her in? I am afraid she was quite rude to her."

Here Mrs. John's artless story was interrupted by a series of little cheers from Mr. Mildmay, and titters from the two sisters.

"Brava!" he said. "Well done!" taking away Mrs. John's breath; while the two ladies uttered little laughs and titterings, and exchanged glances of pleasure.

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"Oh, how very funny!" they cried. "Oh, what an amusing thing to happen! Dear Catherine, what a snub for her! How I wish we had been there to see."

"I should like to make acquaintance with your little Hester, my dear lady," said Mr. Mildmay. "She must have a fine spirit. Our respected Cousin Catherine is only human, and we all feel that to be opposed now and then would be for her moral advantage. We flatter her ourselves, being grown-up persons: but we like to know that she encounters something now and then that will be for her good."

"I must again ask you to speak for yourself, Mr. Mildmay," said the sisters; "flattery is not an art I am acquainted with. Dear, dear, what a sad thing for a beginning. How nervous it must have made you! and knowing that dear Catherine, though she is so generous, *cannot* forgive a jest. She has no sense of humour; it is a great pity. She will not, I fear, see the fun of it as we do."

"Do you think," said Mrs. John, with a little tremor, "that she will be dreadfully angry? Hester is such a child—and then, she didn't know."

The sisters both shook their heads upon their long necks. They wished no particular harm to Mrs. John; but they would not have been sorry so to frighten her, as that she should go away as she came. And they sincerely believed Catherine to be as they represented her. Few people are capable of misrepresenting goodness in the barefaced way of saying one thing while they believe another. Most commonly they have made out of shreds and patches of observation and dislike, a fictitious figure meriting all their anger and contempt, to which they attach the unloved name. Catherine Vernon, according to their picture of her, was a woman who, being richer than they, helped them all with an ostentatious benevolence, which was her justification for humiliating them whenever she had a chance, and treating them at all times as her inferiors and pensioners. Perhaps they would themselves have done so in Catherine Vernon's place. This at all events was the way in which they had painted her to themselves. They had grown to believe that she was all this, and to expect her to act in accordance with the character they had given her. When the sun shone into the summer-house, and routed the little company, which happened just about the time when the meal which they called luncheon, but which to most of them was dinner, was ready, Mrs. John carried back with her to her new home a tremulous conviction that any sort of vengeance was possible. She might be turned out of this shelter, or she might be made to feel that her life was a burden. And yet when she got back to the low cool room in which Hester, doubtful of Betsey's powers, was superintending the laying out of the table, it seemed to her, in the prospect of losing it, more desirable than it had been before. There were three windows in deep recesses, one of them with a cheerful outlook along the road that skirted the Common, in which was placed a soft, luxurious chair, which was exactly what Mrs. John liked. Nothing could have been more grateful, coming out of the sunshine, than the coolness of this brown room, with all the little glimmers of light in the polished wainscot, and the pretty old-fashioned furniture. Mrs. John sighed as she placed herself in the chair at the window. And the smell of the dish which Betsey soon after put upon the table was very appetising. It turned out to be nicely cooked, and the table was laid with fine linen and pretty crystal and old-fashioned silver—everything complete. The poor lady in her wandering and unsettled life had lost almost all this needful garniture which makes life so much more seemly and smooth. She had been used to lodging-houses, to *pensions*, greasy and public, to the vulgarity of inns; and all this daintiness and freshness charmed her with a sense of repose and personal property. She could have cried to think that it might be put in jeopardy by Hester's childish petulance.

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"Oh, why did I let you persuade me to go to bed? Why didn't I stay up—I could have done it quite well—and seen Catherine Vernon? Why are you so self-willed, child? I think I could be happy here, at least as happy as I can ever be now; and what if I must give it all up again for you?"

"Mother, if we have to give it up, we will do better," said Hester, a little pale; "we shall get pretty lodgings like Ruth Pinch, and I will give lessons; and it will not matter about Cousin Catherine."

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"Oh, child, child, what do you know about it!" Mrs. John said.

CHAPTER VII.

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SETTLING DOWN.

These alarms, however, did not come to anything, and as the days passed on Mrs. John accustomed herself to her new position and settled down to it quietly. She got used to the little meetings in the summer-house or on the bench in front of her own windows, and soon learned to remark with the others upon the freedom with which Mr. Mildmay Vernon took the best place, not taking any trouble to remark to whom it really belonged. He was a great advantage to the ladies of the Vernonly in giving them a subject upon which they could always be eloquent. Even when they could not talk of it openly, they would give each other little looks aside, with many nods of the head and an occasional biting innuendo; and this amused the ladies wonderfully, and kept them perhaps now and then from criticising each other, as such close neighbours could scarcely fail to do. But even more interesting than Mr. Mildmay Vernon and his mannish selfishness was Catherine, the universal subject on which they could fraternise even with Mildmay Vernon himself. He was caustic, and attacked her keenly; but the sisters never failed to profess a great affection for their cousin, declaring that from Catherine one accepted anything,

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since one felt that it was only her *gauche* way of doing things, or the fault of her education, but that she always meant well. Dear Catherine! it was such a pity, they said. Mrs. John never quite adopted either style of remark, but the subject was endless, and always afforded something to say; and there was a little pleasure in hearing Catherine set down from her superior place, even though a gentler disposition and simpler mind prevented Mrs. John herself from adding to the felicities of the discussion. Catherine had taken no notice of the unlucky beginning which had given so much alarm to Mrs. John, and so much amusement to the other members of the establishment. When she came in state to call on the mourner, which she did a few days after, with that amused toleration of the little weaknesses of her dependents which was as natural in Catherine's position as the eager and somewhat spiteful discussion of her was in theirs, Miss Vernon had tapped Hester on the cheek, and said, "This is the good child who would not let me disturb her mother." But when Mrs. John began to apologise and explain, Catherine had stopped her, saying, "She was quite right," with a decisive brevity, and turning to another subject. The magnanimity of this would have touched Hester's heart, but for the half-mocking smile and air of amusement with which it was said, and which made the girl much angrier than before. It cannot be denied that this was to some extent the tone unconsciously adopted by Catherine in her dealings with the poor relations who were so largely indebted to her bounty. There was a great deal that was ridiculous in their little affectations and discontents, and the half-resentment, half-exaction with which they received her benefits. These might have made her close her heart against them, and turned her into a misanthrope; but though the effect produced was different from this, it was not perhaps more desirable. Catherine, though she did not become misanthropical, became cynical, in spite of herself. She tolerated everything, and smiled at it; she became indulgent and contemptuous. What did it matter what they said or felt? If they learned to consider her gifts as their right, if they comforted themselves in the humiliation of receiving by mocking at the giver, poor things, that was their misfortune—it did not harm her upon her serene heights. She laughed at Hester, tapping her cheek. Had she been perhaps less tolerant, less easy to satisfy, she would not have excited that burning sense of shame and resentment in the girl's heart.

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But Catherine was very kind. She came in the afternoon in the carriage and took them out with her for a drive, to the admiration of all beholders. The Miss Vernon-Ridgways inspected this from behind their curtains, and calculated how long it was since Catherine had shown such a civility to themselves, and how soon Mrs. John would find out the brief character of these attentions. And the drive was perhaps not quite so successful as might have been expected. Mrs. John indeed gave her relative all the entertainment she could have desired. She became tearful, and fell away altogether into her pocket-handkerchief at almost every turn of the road, saying, "Ah, how well I remember!" then emerged from the cambric cloud, and cheered up again till the next turn came, in a way which would have afforded Catherine great amusement but for the two blazing, indignant, angry eyes of Hester fixed from the opposite side upon her mother's foolish little pantomime and her patroness's genial satisfaction, with equal fury, pain, and penetration. Hester could not endure the constant repetition of that outburst of pathos, the smiles that would follow, the sudden relapse as her mother was recalled by a new recollection to a sense of what was necessary in her touching position; but still less could she bear the lurking smile in Catherine Vernon's eyes, and her inclination to draw the poor lady out, sometimes even by a touch of what Hester felt to be mock-sympathy. The girl could scarcely contain herself as she drove along facing these two ladies, seeing, even against her will, a great deal which perhaps they themselves were only half-conscious of. Oh, why would mother be so silly! and Cousin Catherine, this rich woman who had them all in her power, why had she not more respect for weakness? Hester turned with an angry longing to her idea of putting her own small young figure between her mother and all those spurns and scoffs, of carrying her away, and working for her, and owing nothing to anybody.

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When they stopped at the door of Kaley's, the great shop of Redborough, and half-a-dozen obsequious attendants started out to devote themselves to the lightest suggestion of the great Miss Vernon, Mrs. John cleared up, and enjoyed the reflected distinction to the bottom of her heart; but Hester, pale and furious, compelled to sit there as part of the pageant, could scarcely keep still, and was within an ace of jumping out of the carriage and dragging her mother after her, so indignant was she, so humiliated. Cousin Catherine threw a little *fichu* of black lace into the girl's lap, with a careless, liberal, "You want something for your neck, Hester," which the girl would have thrown at her had she dared; and it would not have taken much to wind her up to that point of daring; but Mrs. John went home quite pleased with her outing. "It was a melancholy pleasure, to be sure," she said. "All those places I used to know so well before you were born, Hester—and Kaley's, where I used to spend so much money. But, after all, it is a pleasure to come back among the people that know you. Mr. Kaley was so very civil; did you notice? I think he paid more attention to me even than to Catherine; of course he remembered that as long as I was well off I always used to go there for everything. It was very sad, but I am glad to have done it. And then Catherine was so kind. Let me see that pretty lace thing she gave you? It is exactly what you wanted. You must be sure to put it on when we go there to-morrow to luncheon." Hester would have liked to tear it in pieces and throw it in Miss Vernon's face; but her mother regarded everything from a very different point of view.

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Catherine Vernon, on her side, talked a great deal to Edward that evening of the comical scene, and how she could not get the advantage of poor Mrs. John's little *minauderies* because of that child with her two big eyes. "I was afraid to stir for her. I scarcely dared to say a word. I expected every moment to be called to give an account of myself," she said. It added very much to her enjoyment of all the humours of her life that she had this companion to tell them to. He was her

confidant, and heard everything with the tenderest interest and a great many amusing comments of his own. Certainly in this one particular at least her desire to be of use to her relations had met with a rich reward. No son was ever more attentive to his mother: and all his habits were so *nice* and good. A young man who gets up to botanise in the morning, who will sit at home at night, who has no evil inclinations—how delightful he is to the female members of his family, and with what applause and gratitude they repay him for his goodness! And Miss Vernon felt the force of that additional family bond which arises from the fact that all the interests of the household, different as their age and pursuits may be, are the same. Nothing that concerned the one but must have an interest for the other. Perhaps Edward did not speak so much about himself, or even about the business, which was naturally of the first interest to her, as he might have done, but she had scarcely as yet found this out: and certainly he entered into all she told him on her side with the most confidential fulness. "The Vernony has always been as good as a comedy," she said. "I have to be so cautious not to offend them. And I must be on my ps and qs with this little girl. There is a great deal of fun to be got out of her; but we must keep it strictly to ourselves."

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"Oh, strictly!" said Edward, with a curious little twist about the corners of his mouth. He had not told the story of his own encounter with the new subject of amusement, which was strange; but he was a young man who kept his own counsel, having his own fortune to make, as had been impressed upon him from his birth.

There were only two other members of the Vernon community with whom the strangers had not yet made acquaintance (for as has been already said Mrs. Reginald Vernon, the young widow who was altogether wrapped up in her four children, and old Captain and Mrs. Morgan on the west side of the Vernony scarcely counted at all), and these were its gayest and most brilliant members, the present dwellers in the White House, Harry and Ellen Vernon, the most independent of all the little community. Stories were current in it that Harry in business matters had begun to set himself in something like opposition to Catherine Vernon not long after she had given up the conduct of the bank into his hands: while Ellen detached herself openly from her Aunt Catherine's court, and had set up a sort of Princess of Wales's drawing-room of her own. It was some time before they appeared at the Vernony, Harry driving his sister in a phaeton with a pair of high-stepping horses which seemed scarcely to touch the ground. The whole population of the place was stirred by the appearance of this brilliant equipage. Mrs. Reginald Vernon's little boy, though bound under solemn penalties never to enter the gardens, came round and hung upon the gate to gaze. Even old Captain Morgan rose from his window to take another look. Mr. Mildmay Vernon came out with his newspaper in his hand, and if the sisters did not appear, it was not from want of curiosity but because Ellen Vernon had not received their civilities when she came to Redborough with the cordiality they had a right to expect. Catherine Vernon's fine sleek horses made no such impression as did this dashing pair. And the pair who descended from the phaeton were as dashing as their steeds. Ellen was very fair, with hair half flaxen half golden, in light little curls like a baby's upon her forehead, which was not the fashion in those days and therefore much more effective. She was dressed in a rich red-purple gown, charitably supposed to be "second mourning" by the addition of a little lace and a black ribbon, with yards of silken train sweeping after her, and sweeping up too all the mats at the doors as she went in. Harry was in the lightest of light clothes, but he had a tiny hat-band supposed to answer all necessities in the way of "respect" to John Vernon deceased, or to John's widow living. Hester standing shyly by, thought this new cousin Ellen the most beautiful creature she had ever seen; her daintiness and her fineness, her airy fairness of face, set off by the rich colour of her dress, was dazzling as she came into the brown room, with its two inhabitants in mourning, and the tall, light-coloured young man after her. Mrs. John made them her little curtsy, shook hands with them, gave her greeting and a smile or two, and then had recourse to her handkerchief.

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"Oh yes, thanks," she said, "I have quite settled down. I am very comfortable, but everything is so changed. To go away from the White House where I had everything I wished for, and then to come back—here; it is a great difference."

"Oh, but this is so much nicer than the White House," cried Ellen; "this is so delightfully old fashioned! I would give the world to have the Vernony. If Aunt Catherine had only given it to us when we came here and taken the White House for the—" pensioners she was about to say, but paused in time—"other relations! I should have liked it so much better, and probably so would you."

Mrs. John shook her head.

"I never could have gone back to it in the same circumstances," she said, "and therefore I would prefer not to go to it at all."

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"But oh, you must come and see me!" said Ellen; "and you too," turning to Hester. "I am so fond of getting among little girls and feeling myself quite young again. Come and spend a long day with me, won't you? I will show you all my things, and Harry shall drive us out, if you like driving. May she come? We have always something going on. Aunt Catherine's is the old set, and ours is the young set," she said with a laugh. She spoke with a little accompaniment of chains and bracelets, a soft jingle as of harness, about her, being very lively and full of little gestures—pretty bridlings of her head and movements of her hands.

Harry behind backed her up, as seemed to be his duty.

"She is dreadfully wild," he said; "she would like to be always on the go."

"Oh, Harry, nothing of the sort; but if we don't enjoy ourselves when we are young, when are we to do it? And then I say it is good policy, don't you think so, Mrs. Vernon? You see we are just like

shopkeepers, all the people hereabouts are our customers. And Aunt Catherine gives big dinners for the old fogeys, but we do just as much good, keeping the young ones jolly; and we keep ourselves jolly too."

"Indeed, Miss Ellen," said Mrs. John, with some dignity, "I never heard such an idea that bankers were like shopkeepers. Catherine must have made great changes indeed if it is like that. It never was so in my time."

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"Oh," said Ellen, "you were too grand to allow it, that is all, but it is the fashion now to speak plain." And she laughed, and Harry laughed as if it had been the best joke in the world. "But we mustn't say so before Aunt Catherine," cried the gay young woman. "She disapproves of us both as it is. Perhaps not so much of Harry, for she likes the boys best, you know; but oh, dreadfully of me! If you want to keep in favour with Aunt Catherine—isn't your name Hester?"

"I don't," said Hester, abruptly, without further question.

"Oh, Harry, look here, here's another rebel! isn't it fun? I thought you were nice from the very first look of you," and here Ellen rose with a still greater jingle of all her trappings and touched with her own delicate fair cheek the darker oval of Hester's, which coloured high with shyness and pleasure. "I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll come for you one of these days. Are you doing lessons now? What are you learning? Oh, she may have a holiday for one day?"

"That is just what I ought to be inquiring about," said Mrs. John. "A governess—I am afraid I am not able to carry her on myself. I have taught her," the poor lady said with pride, "all she knows."

Hester listened with a gasp of astonishment. What Mrs. John meant was all she knew herself, which was not much. And how about her teaching and her independence and the *cours* she felt herself ready to open? She was obliged to overcome her shyness and explain herself.

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"I don't want to learn," she said, "I want to teach. I can speak French, and Italian, and German. I want to open a *cours*; don't you think I might open a *cours*? I know that I could teach, for I am so fond of it, and I want something to do." Having got all this out like a sudden shot from a gun, Hester stopped short, got behind her mother, and was heard no more.

"Oh!" cried Ellen, "teach! that little thing!" and then she turned to her brother, "Isn't it fine?" she said; "it would be a shame to stop her when she wishes it. French and Italian and German, only fancy. I don't know what a *cours* is, but whatever it is you shall have it, dear. I promise you. Certainly you shall have it. I will not have you kept back for the want of that."

Hester was a great deal too much excited to laugh, and here Mrs. John interfered. "You must excuse me," she said, nervously. "Do not think I don't feel the kindness. Oh, you must excuse me! I could not let her teach. My poor husband would never have suffered it for a moment. And what would Catherine say?—a Vernon! Oh, no, no! it is impossible; there is nothing I would not rather do. She has spoken of it before: but I thought it only childish nonsense. Oh, no, no! thank Heaven, though we are poor," cried the poor lady, "and fallen from what we were—we are not fallen so far as that."

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"Oh, but it isn't falling at all," said Ellen; "you see you are old-fashioned. Don't be angry. I don't mean any harm. But don't you know it is the fashion now for girls to do something? Oh, but it is though! the best girls do it; they paint, and they do needlework, and they sing, and they write little books, and everybody is proud to be able to earn money. It is only when they are clever that they can teach; and then they are so proud! Oh, I assure you, Mrs. Vernon! I would not say so if it were not quite the right thing. You know, Harry, people do it in town constantly. Lady Mannion's daughter mends old lace, and Mrs. Markham paints things for the shops. It is the fashion; the very best families do it. It will be quite aristocratic to have a Vernon teaching. I shall take lessons myself."

"That's the thing," said the good-natured Harry. "Nell, that's the best thing. She shall teach you and me."

"Oh, he wants to make a hole-and-corner thing of it," said Ellen, "to hide it up! How silly boys are! when it is the very height of the fashion and will bring us into notice directly! There is old Lady Freeling will take her up at once: and the Duchess. You may do whatever you please, but I will stand by her. You may count upon me, Hester, I will stand by you through thick and thin. You will be quite a heroine: everybody will take you up."

Mrs. John looked from one to the other aghast. "Oh, no, no, pardon me; but Hester—I cannot sanction it, I cannot sanction it; your poor papa—" faltered Mrs. John.

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It was characteristic that in the very midst of this discussion Ellen Vernon got up with all the ringing of her caparison, and took her leave, declaring that she had forgotten that she had to go somewhere at four o'clock, "and you know the horses will not stand, Harry," she said, "but whenever we are happy anywhere, we forget all our engagements—we are two such sillies, Harry and I." She put her arm round Hester's waist as they went through the passage, and kissed her again at the door. "Mind, you are to come and spend a long, long day with me," she said. Mrs. John interrupted in the midst of her remonstrances, and not sure that this dazzling creature would not drive off straight somewhere or other to establish Hester in her *cours*, followed after them trying to put in another word. But Ellen had been placed in her seat, and her dust-cloak arranged round her, before the poor lady could say anything. And she too stood spell-bound like all the rest, to see the beautiful young couple in their grandeur, so fair, so handsome, so perfectly got up. The only fault that their severest critic could find with them was that they were too fair; their very eyelashes were flaxen, there were no contrasts in their smooth fair faces; but this in conjunction with so much youth and daintiness had a charm of its own. Mr. Mildmay Vernon had

been watching for them at the window, losing all the good of his book, which was from the circulating library and cost twopence a night; consequently he threw away at least the half of a farthing waiting for the young people to come out. When they appeared again he went to his door, taking off the soft old felt hat which he wore habitually out of doors and in, and kissing his hand—not it is to be feared very much to his advantage, for these two fine young folks paid little attention to their poor relations. The Miss Vernon-Ridgways looked out behind their curtains watching closely. How fine it is to be young and rich and beautiful and on the top of the wave! With what admiration all your dependents look upon you. Every one in the Vernonly was breathless with excitement when Harry took the reins and the groom left the horses' heads, and the phaeton wheeled round. The little boys at the gate scattered as it wheeled out, the small Vernons vindicating their gentility and relationship by standing straight in the way of the horses. And with what a whirl and dash they turned round the sweep of the road, and disappeared from the longing view! Mildmay Vernon who had taken such trouble to get a glance from them crossed over to the door of the verandah where Mrs. John, with the streamers of her cap blowing about her, and her mind as much disturbed as her capstrings, stood still breathless watching the departure. "Well," he said, "so you've had the Prince and Princess in all their grandeur." Mrs. John had to take a moment to collect herself before she could even make out what he had said. As for Hester, she was so dazzled by this visit, her head and her heart so beating and throbbing, that she was incapable of putting up with the conversation which always made her wicker. She ran away, leaving her mother at the door, and flew to her own room to recollect all that had passed, and to go over it again and again as lovers do. She put her hands over her eyes and lived over again that moment, and every detail of Cousin Ellen's appearance and every word she had said. The jingle of her chains and trinkets seemed to Hester like silver bells, a pretty individualism and sign of her presence. If she went into a dark room or if you were blind, Hester thought, you would know by that that it was she. And the regal colour of her dress, and the black lace of her bonnet all puffed about those wonderful light locks, and her dainty shoes and her delicate gloves, and everything about her! "A long, long day," and "You may count upon me, Hester." Was it possible that a creature so dazzling, so triumphant, had spoken such words to her? Her heart was more elated than it had ever been before in her life. And as for the work which she had made up her mind to do, for the first time it seemed possible and feasible. Cousin Ellen would arrange it for her. She was far too much excited and awed to be able to laugh at the mistake Cousin Ellen had made in her haste about buying a *cours* for Hester, not knowing in the least what it meant. In this way with all sincerity the dazzled worshippers of greatness lose their perception of the ridiculous in the persons of those who have seized upon their imaginations. Hester would have been revolted and angered had any one noted this ludicrous particular in the conversation. Through the open window the girl heard the voices of her mother and the neighbours, now including the sharp voice of Miss Vernon-Ridgway, and the sound made her heart rise with a kind of indignant fury. They would discuss her as if they had any understanding of such a creature, as if they knew what they were speaking about! they, old, poor, spiteful as they were, and she so beautiful, so young, so splendid, and so kind. "The kindness was the chief thing," Hester said to herself, putting her fingers in her ears not to hear the ill-nature down stairs. Oh, of course, they would be taking her to pieces, pouring their gall upon her! Hester felt that youth and happiness were on her own side as against the envious and old and poor.

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For days after she looked in vain for the reappearance of that heavenly vision, every morning getting up with the conviction that by noon at least it would appear, every afternoon making up her mind that the dulness of the lingering hours would be brightened by the sound, the flash, the wind of rapid movement, the same delightful voice, the perfumed fair cheek, the jingle of the golden caparisons. Every day Mrs. John said, first cheerfully, then querulously, "I wonder if they will come for you to-day." When it began to dawn upon Hester at last that they were not coming, the sense of deception which came over her was, in some sort, like the pangs of death. She stood still, in her very being astounded, unable to understand what had happened. They *were not coming again*. Her very heart stood still, and all the wheels of her existence in a blank pause like death. When they began to move again reluctantly, hoarsely, Hester felt too sick and faint for any conscious comment upon what had happened. She could not bear the commentary which she was almost forced to hear, and which she thought would kill her—the "Poor child! so you've been expecting Ellen Vernon?" which Miss Matilda next door said to her with an insulting laugh, almost drove her frantic. And not much less aggravating to the sensitive girl were her mother's frequent wonderings what could have become of them, whether Ellen could be ill, what had happened. "They said they would come and fetch you to spend a day with them, didn't they? Then why don't they come, Hester?—why don't they come?" the poor lady said. Hester's anger and wretchedness and nervous irritation were such that she could almost have struck her mother. Was it right, in addition to her own disappointment, that she should have this question thrust upon her, and that all the pangs of her first disenchantment should be discussed by contemptuous spectators? This terrible experience, which seemed to Hester to be branded upon her as by red-hot irons, made a woman of her all at once. To her own consciousness, at least, she was a child no more.

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CHAPTER VIII.

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NINETEEN.

Such were the scenes and the people among whom Hester Vernon grew up. Her first *désillusionnement* in respect to Cousin Ellen, who for one bright and brief moment seemed about to bring glory to her young existence, was very poignant and bitter: but by the time Hester was nineteen she had ceased to remember that there had been so sharp a sting in it, and no longer felt it possible that Ellen, with all her finery, could at any moment have affected her with any particular sentiment. These years made a great deal of difference in Hester. She was at the same time younger and older at nineteen than at fourteen. She was less self-confident, less sure of her own powers to conduct everything, from her mother—the most easily guided of all subject intelligences in the old days—upwards to all human circumstances, and even to life itself, which it had seemed perfectly simple to the girl that she should shape at her own pleasure. By degrees, as she grew older, she found the futility of all these certainties. Her mother, who was so easily guided, slid back again just as easily out of the groove into which her child had, as she thought, fixed her, and circumstances defied her altogether, taking their own way, altogether uninfluenced by her wishes. Mrs. John Vernon was like the "knotless thread" of the Scotch proverb. Nothing could be more easy than to convince her, to impress her ductile mind with the sense of this or that duty; but, on the other hand, nothing could be more easy than to undo next moment all that had been done, and turn the facile will in a new direction. Between this soft and yielding foundation of her life upon which she could find no firm footing, and the rock of Catherine Vernon who remained quite immovable and uninfluenced by her, coming no nearer as the years went on, yet hemming in her steps and lessening her freedom, the conditions of existence seemed all against the high-spirited, ambitious, active-minded and impatient girl, with her warm affections, and quick intelligence, and hasty disposition. The people immediately about were calculated to make her despise her fellow-creatures altogether: the discontented dependents who received everything without a touch of human feeling, without gratitude or kindness, and the always half-contemptuous patroness who gave with not much more virtue, with a disdainful magnanimity, asking nothing from her pensioners but that they would amuse her with their follies—made up a circle such as might have crushed the goodness out of any young mind. Even had she herself begun with any enthusiasm for Catherine, the situation would have been less terrible; but as this, unfortunately, had not been the case, the poor girl was delivered over to the contemplation of one of the worst problems in human nature without shield or safeguard, or any refuge to creep into. Fortunately her youth, and the familiarity which deadens all impression, kept her, as it keeps men in general, from a conscious and naked encounter with those facts which are fatal to all higher views or natural charities. She had in her, however, by nature only too strong a tendency to despise her neighbours, and the Miss Vernon-Ridgways and Mr. Mildmay Vernon were exactly of the order of beings which a young adventurer upon life naturally treats with disdain.

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But Hester had something worse in her life than even this feeling of contempt for the people about her, bad as that is. She had the additional pang of knowing that habit and temper often made her a partaker of the odious sentiments which she loathed. Sometimes she would be drawn into the talk of the women who misrepresented their dear Catherine all day long, and sneered bitterly at the very bounty that supplied their wants. Sometimes she would join involuntarily in the worse malignity of the man to whom Catherine Vernon gave everything that was good in his life, and who attributed every bad motive to her. And as if that was not enough, Hester sinned with Catherine too, and saw the ridicule and the meanness of these miserable pensioners with a touch of the same cynicism which was the elder woman's great defect, but was unpardonable in the younger, to whom there should as yet have been no loss of the ideal. The rage with which she would contemplate herself when she yielded to the first temptation and launched at Cousin Catherine in a moment of passion one of those arrows which were manufactured in the Vernonry, the deep disgust which would fill her when she felt herself, like Catherine, contemplating the world from a pinnacle of irony, chill but smiling, swept her young spirit like tempests. To grow at all in the midst of such gales and whirlwinds was something. It was not to be expected that she could grow otherwise than contorted with the blasts. She came to the flower and bloom of existence with a heart made to believe and trust, yet warped to almost all around, and finding no spot of honest standing-ground on which to trust herself. Sometimes the young creature would raise her head dismayed from one of the books in which life is so different from what she found it, and ask herself whether books were all lies, or whether there was not to be found somewhere an existence which was true? Sometimes she would stop short in the midst of the Church services, or when she said her prayers, to demand whether it was all false, and these things invented only to make life bearable? Was it worth living? she would ask sometimes, with more reason than the essayists. She could do nothing she wanted in it. Her *cours* had all melted into thin air; if it had been possible to get the consent of her authorities to the work she had once felt herself so capable of, she was now capable of it no longer. Her mother, obstinate in nothing else, had been obstinate in this, that her poor husband's daughter should not dishonour his name (alack the day!) by becoming a teacher—a teacher! like the poor governesses for whom he had felt so much contempt; and Catherine Vernon, the last auxiliary whom Mrs. John expected, had supported her with a decision which put all struggles out of the question. Catherine indeed had explained herself on the occasion with a force which had almost brought her within the range of Hester's sympathies, notwithstanding that the decision was against herself. "I am here," Miss Vernon had said, "to take care of our family. The bank, and the money it brings in, are not for me alone. I am ready to supply all that is wanted, as reason directs, and I cannot give my sanction to any members of the family descending out of the position in which, by the hard work of our forefathers, they were born. Women have never worked for their living in our family, and, so far as I can help it, they never shall."

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"You did yourself, Cousin Catherine," said Hester, who stood forth to learn her fate, looking up

with those large eyes, eager and penetrating, of which Miss Vernon still stood in a certain awe.

"That was different. I did not stoop down to paltry work. I took a place which—others had abandoned. I was wanted to save the family, and thank Heaven I could do it. For that, if you were up to it, and occasion required, you should have my permission to do anything. Keep the books, or sweep the floors, what would it matter!"

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"It would matter nothing to me," cried Hester, clasping her nervous hands together; and then it was that for a moment these two, the old woman and the young woman, made of the same metal, with the same defects and virtues, looked each other in the eyes, and almost understood each other.

Almost, but, alas! not quite: Catherine's prejudices against Mrs. John's daughter, and her adverse experiences of mankind and womankind, especially among the Vernons, intervened, and brought her down suddenly from that high and serious ground upon which Hester had been capable of understanding her. She turned away with one of those laughs, which still brought over the girl, in her sensitive youthfulness, a blush which was like a blaze of angry shame.

"No chance, I hope, of needing that a second time: nor of turning for succour to you, my poor girl."

It was not unkindly said, especially the latter part of the sentence, though it ended in another laugh. But Hester, who did not know the circumstances, was quite unaware what that laugh meant. She did not know that it was not only Catherine Vernon's personal force and genius, but Catherine Vernon's money, which had saved the bank. In the latter point of view, of course, no succour could have been had from Hester; and it was the impossibility of this which made Miss Vernon laugh. But Hester thought it was her readiness, her devotion, her power of doing everything that mortal woman had ever done before her, which was doubted, and the sense that she was neither believed in nor understood swept in a wave of bitterness through her heart. She was taken for a mere schoolgirl, well-meaning perhaps—perhaps not even that: incapable—she who felt herself running over with capacity and strength, running to waste. But she said nothing more. She retired, carried further away from Catherine in the recoil, from the manner of the approach to comprehending her which she felt she had made. And after that arrest of all her plans, Hester had ceased to struggle. In a little while she was no longer capable of the *cours* to which she had looked so eagerly. She did not know anything else that she could do. She was obliged to eat the bread of dependence, feeling herself like all the rest, to the very heart ungrateful, turning against the hand that bestowed it. There was a little of Mrs. John's income left, enough, Hester thought, to live upon in another place, where she might have been free to eke out this little. But at nineteen she was wiser than at fourteen, and knew that to risk her mother's comfort, or to throw the element of uncertainty again into her life, would be at once unpardonable and impossible. She had to yield, as most women have to do. She had to consent to be bound by other people's rules, and to put her hand to nothing that was unbecoming a Vernon, a member of the reigning family. Small earnings by means of sketches, or china painting, would have been as obnoxious to Catherine Vernon's rule as the *cours*: and of what use would they have been? It was not a little money that Hester wanted, but work of which something good might come. She yielded altogether, proudly, without another word. The arrangement of the little household, the needlework, and the housekeeping, were nothing to her young capabilities; but she desisted from the attempt to make something better of herself, with an indignant yet sorrowful pride. Sometime Catherine might find out what it was she had rejected. This was the forlorn and bitter hope in her heart.

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The only element of comfort which Hester found at this dark period of her life was in the other side of the Heronry in the two despised households, which the Miss Vernon-Ridgways and Mr. Mildmay Vernon declared to be "not of our class." Mr. Reginald Vernon's boys were always in mischief; and Hester, who had something of the boy in her, took to them with genuine fellow-feeling, and after a while began to help them in their lessons (though she knew nothing herself) with great effect. She knew nothing herself; but a clear head, even without much information, will easily make a path through the middle of a schoolboy's lessons, which, notwithstanding his Latin, he could not have found out for himself. And Hester was "a dab at figures," the boys said, and found out their sums in a way which was little short of miraculous. And there was a little sister who called forth all the tender parts of Hester's nature, who had been a baby on her first appearance at the Vernonry, and to whom the girl would gladly have made herself nurse and governess, and everything that girl could be. Little Katie was as fond of Hester as of her mother, and this was a wonderful solace to the heart of the girl, who was a woman every inch of her, though she was so much of a boy. Altogether the atmosphere was better on that side of the establishment, the windows looked on the Common, and the air was fresh and large. And Mrs. Reginald, if she would have cared for it, which was doubtful, had no time for gossip. She did not pretend to be fond of Catherine, but she was respectful and grateful, a new feeling altogether to Hester. She was busy all day long, always doing something, making clothes, mending stockings, responding to all the thousand appeals of a set of healthy, noisy children. The house was not so orderly as it might be, and its aspect very different from that of the refined gentility on the other side; but the atmosphere was better, though sometimes there was a flavour of boots in it, and in the afternoon of tea. It was considered "just like the girl," that she should thus take to Mrs. Reginald, who had been a poor clergyman's daughter, and was a Vernon only by marriage. It showed what kind of stuff she was made of.

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"You should not let her spend her time there—a mere nursery-maid of a woman. To think that your daughter should have such tastes! But you should not let her, dear Mrs. John," the sisters said.

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"I let her!" cried Mrs. John, throwing up her hands; "I would not for the world say a word against my own child, but Hester is more than I can pretend to manage. She always was more than I could manage. Her poor papa was the only one that could do anything with her."

It was hard upon the girl when her own mother gave her up; but this too was in Hester's day's work; and she learned to smile at it, a little disdainfully, as Catherine Vernon did; though she was so little hardened in this way that her lips would quiver in the middle of her smile.

The chief resource which Hester found on the other side of the Vernonry was, however, still more objectionable to the feelings of the genteel portion of the little community, since it was in the other little house that she found it, in the society of the old people who were not Vernons at all, but who quite unjustifiably as they all felt, being only her mother's relations, were kept there by Catherine Vernon, on the money of the family, the money which was hers only in trust for the benefit of her relations. They grudged Captain Morgan his home, they grudged him his peaceful looks, they grudged him the visits which Catherine was supposed to pay oftener to him than to any one else in the Vernonry. It is true that the Miss Vernon-Ridgways professed to find Catherine's visits anything but desirable.

"Dear Catherine!" they said, "what a pity she has so little manner! When she is absent one can recollect all her good qualities, how kind she really is, you know, at bottom, and what a thing it is for her to have us here, and how lonely she would be, with her ways, if she had not us to fall back upon. But when she is present, really you know it is a struggle! Her manner is so against the poor, dear! One is glad to see her go, to think, *that* is over; it will be some time before she can come again; for she really is much better, *far* better, than she appears, poor dear Catherine!"

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This was how they spoke of her: while Mr. Mildmay shrugged his thin old shoulders. "Catherine, poor thing, has too much the air of coming to see if our houses are clean and our dinners simple enough," he said.

Even Mrs. John chimed in to the general chorus, though in her heart she was glad to see Catherine, or any one. But they were all annoyed that she should go so often to those old Morgans. They kept an account of her calls, though they made believe to dislike them, and when the carriage was heard on the road (they could all distinguish the sound it made from that of any other carriage), they all calculated eagerly at what house she was due next. And when, instead of coming in at the open gate, which the old gardener made haste to open for her, as if he had known her secrets and was aware of her coming, she stayed outside, and drew up at the Morgans, nobody could imagine what a commotion there was. The sisters rushed in at once to Mrs. John, who had a window round the corner, and watched to see if it was really true, and how long Catherine stayed. They made remarks on the little old gentleman, with his white head, when he came out to put her into the carriage.

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"What hypocrites some people are," they cried. "We are always as civil as ever we can be, and I hope dear Catherine, poor thing, *always* feels that she is welcome. But to make believe that we have enjoyed it is more than Martha or I am equal to." They watched until the fat horses had turned round and Catherine's bonnet was no longer distinguishable. "That is the third time in a month, to my certain knowledge," Miss Matilda would say.

"Be thankful, my dear ladies, that it is on old Morgan, not on you, that she bestows her favours," Mr. Mildmay would remark.

Mrs. John was not always sure that she liked this irruption into her house. But she too watched with a little pique, and said that Catherine had a strange taste.

"Oh, taste; dear Catherine! she has no *taste*! Her worst enemy never accused of her *that*," the other ladies cried.

And when it was known that these old Morgans, the captain and his wife whom Catherine Vernon distinguished in this way, had gained the heart of Hester, the excitement in the Vernonry was tremendous. Mr. Mildmay Vernon, though he was generally very polite to her, turned upon his heel, when the fact was made known to him, with angry contempt.

"I draw the line at the Morgans," he said. Much might be forgiven to the young girl, the only youthful creature (except Mrs. Reginald's boys, whom he detested) among them, but not this.

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The sisters did not, alas, pass it over so briefly. They themselves had never taken any notice of the old couple. The utmost they had done had been to give the old captain a nod, as they did to the tradesmen, when he took off his hat to them. Mrs. Morgan, who never went out, did not come in their way, fortunately for her. So strange was this departure on Hester's part from all the traditions of the place that, to do them justice, they would not believe in her iniquity until the fullest proof had been secured. But after she had been seen about half a dozen times, at least, seated in the round window which commanded the road, and was the old gentleman's delight, and even, strange girl, without any sense of shame, had made herself visible to everybody walking with him on the edge of the Common, and standing talking to him at his door, there was no further possibility of doubt on the subject. The only thing that could be thought was to cut Hester, which was done accordingly by all the garden front, even her own mother being wound up by much exhortation, as for the advantage of her daughter's soul, to maintain a studied silence to the culprit by way of bringing her to her senses. But it may be supposed that Mrs. John did not hold out long. A more effectual means of punishment than this was invented by Mr. Mildmay Vernon, who declared that it was a very clever way of currying favour with Catherine, and that he only wondered it had never been adopted before. This, indeed, touched Hester to the quick: but it did not detach her from her friends. The objects of all this enmity were two very simple old

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people without any pretension at all, who were very willing to live peaceably with all men. Captain Morgan was an old sea-captain, with all the simplicity of homely wisdom which so often characterises his class; and his wife a gentle old woman, entirely devoted to him, and, by this time, not capable of much more than to keep the record of all his distinctions and to assert his goodness. It was he who helped her down stairs every day to the chimney corner in winter, and in summer to the large chair in the window, from which she could see everything that went on in the road, all the people that passed, and the few events that happened. A conviction that little Ted, Mrs. Reginald's third boy, would be run over, and an alarmed watch for that incident, were the only things that disturbed her placid existence: and that she could not accompany him on his walks was her only regret.

"He dearly loves somebody to walk with," she said: "except when he was at sea, my dear, I've gone everywhere with him: and he misses me sadly. Take a little turn with the captain, my dear."

And when Hester did that which so horrified the other neighbours, old Mrs. Morgan looked out after them from the window and saw the tall slim girl walking by the side of the stooping old man, with a pure delight that brought the tears to her eyes. When you are over eighty it does not take much to make you cry. Hester, who was the subject of continual assault in every other place, was adored and applauded in this little parlour, where they thought her more beautiful, and good, and clever, than ever girl had been before. The old captain, who was screwed and twisted with rheumatism, and stooped with age, held himself almost straight when his young companion started with him upon his daily walk.

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"When a young lady goes with me," he said, "I must remember my manners. An old fellow gets careless when he's left to himself."

And he told Hester stories of all the many-chaptered past, of the long historic distances, which he could remember like yesterday, and which seemed endless, like an eternity, to her wondering eyes. He had been in some of the old sea-fights of the heroic days—at Trafalgar, though not in Nelson's ship; and he liked nothing better than to fight his battles over again. But it was not these warlike recollections so much as the scraps of his more peaceful experience which entranced the young listener. She liked to hear him tell how he had "got hold" of a foolish young midy or an able seaman who was "going to the bad," or how he had subdued a threatening mutiny, and calmed an excitement; and of the many, many who had fallen around him, while he kept on—fallen in death sometimes, fallen more sadly in other ways. A whole world seemed to open round Hester as he talked—a world more serious, more large, than this, in which there were only the paltry events of the day and her foolish little troubles. In Captain Morgan's world there were great storms and fights; there were dangers and struggles, and death lurking round every corner. She used to listen breathless, wondering at the difference—for what danger was there, what chance of mortal peril or temptation, here? In that other universe the lives of hundreds of people would sometimes hang upon the decision and promptitude, the cool head and ready resource of one. Why was not Hester born in that day? Why was not she a man? But she did not sufficiently realise that when the men were going through these perils, the mothers and sisters were trembling at home, able to do no more than she could. After these walks and talks, she would go in with the captain to pour out his tea, while Mrs. Morgan, in her big chair, restrained herself and would not cry for pleasure as she was so fain to do.

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"Oh, my dear, it was a good wind that blew you here," the old lady said. "The trouble it has been to me not to be able to go about with him! Indoors we are the best companions still; but he always liked his walk, and it is dreadful not to be able to go out with him. But he is happy when he has a young companion like you."

Thus they made a princess of Hester, and attributed to her every beautiful quality under the sun. When a girl is not used to enthusiasm at home, it does her good to have somebody believe in her and admire all she is doing. And this was what made her strong to bear all the jibes of the fine people, and even that detestable suggestion that she meant to curry favour with Catherine. Even the sting of this did not move her to give up her old captain and her humbler friends.

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CHAPTER IX.

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RECOLLECTIONS.

"If you will not think me an old croaker, ma'am, I would say that you retired from work too soon. That was always my opinion. I said it at the time, and I say it again. To give up before your time is flying in the face of Providence."

"I know you are fond of a fine preacher, Mr. Rule," said Catherine Vernon; "don't you remember what the Scotch Chalmers said, that our lives were like the work of creation, and that the last ten years was the Sabbath—for rest?"

"We are not under the Jewish dispensation," said the old clerk, as if that settled the question.

Catherine laughed. She was seated near old Mrs. Morgan in the round window, her carriage waiting outside. Mr. Rule, who was a neighbour, having retired upon a handsome pension and occupying a handsome house, had come in to call upon the old couple, and these two, so long associated in labour and anxiety, had begun, as was natural, to talk on a subject which the others

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with difficulty followed—the bank. Mrs. Morgan never did anything save sit contentedly in her chair with her hands clasped, but the captain sat by the table working away at one of his models of ships. He was very fond of making these small craft, which were admirably rigged and built like miniature men-of-war. This one was for Alick Vernon, the middle boy of Mrs. Reginald's three. In the background, half hidden by the curtains and by the captain's seat, Hester had taken refuge in a deep elbow-chair, and was reading. She did not want to hide herself, but she had no desire to be seen, and kept in the background of her own will. Catherine Vernon never took any special notice of her, and Hester was too proud either to show that she felt this, or to make any attempt to mend matters. She had risen up on her cousin's entrance, and touched her hand coldly, then sank back into her former place, and whether any one remembered that she was there at all she did not know.

"If one works till sixty, one does very well," Miss Vernon said.

"You did not think that applicable to me, ma'am," said the clerk. "You would not let me give up till I was near seventy."

"For the sake of the bank—for the sake of the young men. Where would they have been without a guide?"

"Ah!" said old Rule, shaking his head, "there is no guide like the chief. They might turn upon me, and laugh in my face, and tell me I am old-fashioned; but they could not say that to you." [Pg 133]

"Well, well! the young men fortunately have gone on very well, and have shown no need of a guide."

To this there was no reply, but a little pause pregnant of meaning. The thrill of the significance in it roused Hester altogether from her book: she had not been reading much to begin with, and now all her faculties were awakened. She understood no reason for it, but she understood *it*. Not so Catherine, however, who took no notice, as so often happens to the person chiefly concerned.

"Thirty years is a long spell," she said. "I was at it late and early, and did not do so badly, though I am only a woman."

"Women—when they do take to business—are sometimes better than men," said the clerk, with an accent almost of awe.

"That is natural," said old Captain Morgan over his boat, without raising his head. "For why?—it is not the common women, but those of the noble kind, that ever think of trying: so of course they go further and do better than the common men."

"I don't think that is a compliment," said Catherine, "though it sounds a little like one. You have a turn for those sort of sayings, Uncle Morgan, which seem very sweet, but have a bitter wrapped up in them."

"Nay, he never was bitter, Catherine," said the old lady. "He knows what he is talking of. He means no harm to the common women—for his wife is one of them." [Pg 134]

"We will not inquire too closely what he means," said Catherine Vernon with a smile. "Anyhow it is very sweet to be able to retire while one has still command of all one's faculties, and see the young ones come in. Of course one does not expect to live for ever. We are all in the Sunday period of our lives, all of us here."

"Not I," said the old clerk, "with respect be it spoken: I have had my Sunday and am ready to begin again, if there should be any need of me."

"Which there is not, thank God," she said heartily. And again there ensued that little pause. Was it possible she did not observe it? No one echoed the sentiment, no one even murmured the little nothings with which a stillness, which has a meaning, is generally filled up by some benevolent bystander. What did it mean? Hester asked herself. But Catherine took no notice. All had gone so well with her. She was not afraid of evil tidings. Her affection for the young men, her relations and successors, was calm enough to secure her from the anxious prescience of love. She took her life and all that was connected with her, with that serene and boundless faith which is the privilege of the untried soul. Catherine would have resented beyond everything else the imputation that her life was without experience. She had gone through a great deal, she thought. The evening long ago, when she had been told that the credit of the Vernons was at stake, and had roused herself to redeem it, had been the highest crisis and turning-point of existence to her. What had happened since had been little in comparison. She had not known what anxiety meant in the deepest sense of the word, and what had happened before was so long over, that, though she recollected every incident of that early time, it was apart from all her after-life, and never influenced her practical thoughts. She did not pay any attention to that pause which might have awakened her suspicions. There was no foundation in her for suspicion to build upon. She was so sure of all connected with her, and of herself, the first necessity of all.

"I will never forget," said old Mr. Rule, after a pause, "that night, when I had to go and warn you that all was lost unless you would help. What a night it was! I recollect now the light on Wilton Street; the sunset shining in the Grange windows as I rushed through the shrubbery. You were a young lady then, Miss Vernon, and I could not tell whether you would do it or not. Mrs. John, poor thing, that I went to first, was never very wise——"

Here a sudden fit of coughing on the part of the captain, and a stirring of Hester in the background, showed the old clerk his mistake.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Hester," he cried, "I was just going to tell something of your mother that

would please you. When I told her we wanted money, she ran to her desk and got out all she had. It was twenty pounds," said the old clerk with a little laugh; "twenty pounds, when we wanted twice as many thousands! But what did that matter? Some people have laughed when I have told that story, and some have been nearer crying."

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He was an old man, and tears and laughter get mixed up at that age; he was nearly crying himself at the end.

Hester's heart gave a bound of mingled pleasure and pain. Perhaps even she had never done justice to her simple-hearted mother. She sat bolt upright in her chair, listening with all her might. Catherine Vernon seemed to retire from the principal place she had hitherto held in the conversation, and Hester came forward in her stead. She looked at the old clerk steadily.

"You speak," she said, "of ladies only. Where was my father?" holding Rule with her eye, so that he could not escape.

"Your father!" he faltered, his very lips quivering with surprise and consternation.

"I don't know why we should bring up all these old stories to-night," said Catherine, suddenly, "nor what led us to introduce the subject. Let bygones be bygones, Mr. Rule. We old fogeys have our little talks together, and tell over our old adventures to amuse ourselves for want of something better; but that is what the young ones never understand."

"Do you wish me to go away, Cousin Catherine?" said Hester with her usual pale defiance, rising up with the book in her arms.

"Oh no, not I. It does not matter in the least whether you stay or go. I can remember, Uncle Morgan, when the same sort of thing I am now saying to Hester you used to say to me: and it does not seem so very long ago either. Now we are all old together, and not much difference between us," she said with a little laugh. It still gave her a certain amusement to think that she was old like these old people, and yet it was true; for though sixty-five and eighty-five are very different, nobody can doubt that sixty-five is old. It was still strange, almost ludicrous, to Catherine, that it should be so.

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"I am of all ages," said the old captain, "for I can remember all. I'll sail my boat with Alick tomorrow, and enjoy it like a small boy (it's a capital little boat, and will sail, I can tell you, Catherine, if you took any interest in it), and then I shall walk on the Common with a young lady, and talk of poetry and love."

"Fie, captain!" said his old wife; "but he does not mean all that nonsense, Hester."

"If love is nonsense, and poetry, she and I will go to the stake for them," said the captain. "We'll take a longer walk to-night, my dear, to prove to that old woman how wrong she is."

"I can't wish you a pleasanter thing, captain—and now I must be going," said old Rule, inconsequently.

Catherine, who had been sitting thoughtful since the moment when she interfered, all unthanked and misunderstood, to save Hester, rose when the old clerk did, and went out before him, with her rich black silk gown sweeping and rustling. The presence of the elder people made her look blooming, and capable, and young. The old couple watched her from their window, as Rule, gratified and beaming, put her into the carriage.

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"She looks young enough to do as much again," said Captain Morgan, standing in the window with his gum-bottle in his hands, with which he was working.

"Oh, captain!" said his wife, "but where's the money?" shaking her old head.

Hester behind peered out between these two aged heads, pale with interest, and antagonism, and attraction. She could never think of any one else when Catherine was near, though all her instincts were in arms against her. The words that passed between the old people were as a foreign tongue to her. She had not the slightest perception what they meant.

Meantime Catherine spoke a warning word to her former prime minister, who had abdicated later than herself.

"You were very near giving that child a heartache," she said. "Take care not to say anything before her. She need never know that her father deserted his post. The creature has a quick sense of honour, and it might wound her."

"She is not like his daughter," said the clerk, "nor that poor lady's either. She is one of the pure old Vernon stock."

"Do you think so?" said Catherine, indifferently. "I rather dislike her than otherwise; but I would not do the child any harm." And then the fat horses put themselves in motion, and she gave a smile and a bow to all her retainers and worshippers—and the Miss Vernon-Ridgways drew away from Mrs. John's window, where as usual they had been watching Catherine, as she, amid all these visible signs of her wealth and sovereignty, disappeared from their eyes.

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"I suppose, Captain Morgan," said Hester that evening, when she walked out with him as usual, "that Cousin Catherine was young once?"

It seemed an absurd question, but it was put with the utmost gravity; and Hester knew what she meant, as perhaps the reader will too.

"About your age, my dear," the captain said, promptly, "and not at all unlike you."

"Like me!"

"You think you are very different now, but there is not much more difference than that of years. She was the same kind of girl as you are—masterful—very sure that her own way was the right one—obstinate as a mule in her mind, but not so difficult to move by the heart."

"Am I all that?" said Hester, wondering; "not in some things, for I am never sure that I am right—or any one else—except you, perhaps. No, it is the other way, quite the other way! I am very sure that I am wrong, and every one else—except you."

"A large rule and a small exception," said the old man; "but it is the same thing. Catherine was rich and had everything her own way. You are—in the midst of a poor community where we can have nothing our own way. And at your age you can't discriminate any more than she could at hers."

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"Then does it come to this, that money is everything?" asked the disciple with some bitterness, but without, as may be supposed, the slightest intention of accepting the master's teaching on this point.

Captain Morgan made no reply. What he said was—

"I should like to interest you in Catherine, my dear; all that happened, you know, before we came here, while we were busy with our own life, my wife and I; but I have put this and that together since. Catherine was, as people say, crossed in love, notwithstanding her wealth and all her qualities. So far as I can make out, the man preferred a woman that could not hold the candle to her; not so pretty, not so clever, altogether inferior. That must be rather a blow to a woman!"

"A blow! What sort of a woman would she be that cared for a man who did not care for her?"

This somewhat inarticulate sentiment Hester delivered with an indignant blush and flashing eyes.

"That is all very fine, my dear; but you are too clear-headed to be taken in by it," said the captain.

"A woman might not show it, perhaps. I have no reason to suppose that Catherine showed it. But you must remember that a woman is not a woman in the abstract, but Catherine or Hester as the case may be, and liable to everything that humanity is liable to; and she would be a poor creature indeed if she were incapable of falling in love generously, as a man is supposed to do."

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"I don't know what you mean by generously!"

"Ah, but you do—none better. Something however occurred after, much worse than his preference of another woman. The man turned out to be an unworthy man."

Hester had been following every word with breathless interest. She grew quite pale, her lips dropped apart, her eyes blazed out of the whiteness of her face upon her old instructor. He went on without taking note of this change,

"I should think for my part that there cannot be any such blow as that. Don't you remember we agreed it was the secret of all Hamlet's tragedy? It is the tragedy of the world, my dear. I told the old woman we were going to talk of love and poetry. You see I was right."

"But—Catherine?"

Hester was, as became a girl, far too much interested in the individual case to be able to stray to the abstract, and in fact she had only assented to her mentor's theory in respect to Hamlet, not having begun such investigations for herself.

"Ay, Catherine. Well, that is just what happened to her, my dear. The man first showed that he had no appreciation of herself, which we will allow must have wounded her; and then after, when that was all over, proved himself unworthy, dishonourable—in short, what the young men call a cad."

"Who was he?" asked Hester, in a low and awe-stricken tone.

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Then Captain Morgan turned to look at her, apparently with some alarm; but his fears were quieted by her face. She had evidently no clue to who it was.

"I never knew the man," he said quickly. "One has no wish to know anything about him. The interesting person is the woman in such a case. Here, Hester, you must be the teacher. Tell me, what would that discovery do to a girl, a daring, masterful spirit like you?"

"Oh, captain, I am not daring or masterful," cried the girl clasping her hands; "don't you know it is cruel to call me so—I that can do nothing, that am only like a straw tossing on the water, carried the way I would not. If I were masterful, I would go away from here. I would do something for myself."

"All that is no answer to my question," the old captain said.

Hester was used to follow his leading at a touch. There was a kind of mesmerism in the effect he had upon her.

"I cannot tell," she said in a low and hurried voice. "I don't see: it would turn all the world wrong. It would— But," she added, collecting herself, "she would throw him away from her like a dead thing. He would be dead. She would think of him no more. Unworthy! One shakes one's self free—one is done with that!"

"Look again," said the old man, with a half smile, shaking his head.

"I don't wish to look again. Is not that enough? I suppose it would make her very unhappy. She would struggle, she would try to find excuses. Oh, Captain Morgan, don't press me so! I suppose everything would turn round and round. There would seem nothing to stand on, nothing to look

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up to, the skies would all whirl and the solid ground. It makes my head swim to think of it," the girl cried, covering her eyes with her hands.

"That was how it was with Catherine, so far as I know. She had to exert herself to save the bank, and that saved her."

"Had he anything to do with the bank?" she asked quickly.

"My dear, I tell you I was not here at the time," said the wary old man. "I had no knowledge of the circumstances. I never wish to know who he was, lest perhaps I should fail in charity towards him. It is Catherine I want you to think of. The bank troubles came afterwards, and she had to get up and put her shoulder to the wheel, which saved her. But do you think the world ever looked the same after? Hamlet would never have discovered what traitors those young courtiers were, if his mother had not turned out a fraud, and his love a delusion—at least that is my opinion. The wonder is, he did not misdoubt Horatio too. That is what I should have done if it had been me. But there is the good of genius, Hester; the Master who knew everything knew better. Catherine had a sort of honest Horatio in old Rule, and she had that work to do, which was the best thing for her. But you may be sure the world was all dissolving views, and nothing solid in it for years to come."

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Hester, after the shock of the realisation which had been forced upon her, as to what the result of such a calamity would be, felt exhausted and sick at heart, as if all her strength had been worn out.

"Why did you want me to know this?" she said at last. "I see no signs of it in her. She looks so triumphant, as if nothing had ever happened or could happen. She sees through everybody and laughs at them, as if all their lies could never touch her. Oh, she sees very well how they lie, but is never angry, only laughs; is that the way to make one love her? And she does not know the false from the true," the girl cried with an access of indignation. "She considers us all the same."

"No—no—no—no," said the old man, patting her arm, but he did not press her any further. He had said as much as he wanted to say. They went further than usual over the Common as he had threatened to his wife, and as they returned the old captain owned himself fatigued and took Hester's arm. "You must be my great-grandchild in the spirit," he said. "We had a little girl once, my wife and I. I have often fancied her grown up and married and having children in her turn. Oh, I am a great dreamer and an old fool. You remember Elia's dream children, and then Tennyson, though he was not old enough to know anything about it, making the unborn faces shine beside the never-lighted fire. These poets make fools of us all, Hester. They know everything without any way to know it. I fancy you are one of little Mary's grandchildren. She must be as old as Catherine Vernon, though age, we may suppose, doesn't count where she is."

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"You never told me about *her*."

"There was nothing to tell," he said cheerfully. "Her mother cries still if you speak of little Mary, but not I. It would have been a great thing for us if we could have kept her, but she would have married I suppose, and her husband might not have pleased me. I have thought of that. She would have been taken in probably, and brought us some man I could not put up with, though the children might have been an addition. I dare say she would have turned out a soft, innocent creature, taken in all round, something like your mother, Hester. You are tempted to despise that, you clever ones, but it is a great mistake."

"Oh, Captain Morgan, mother is taken in, as you say, because she thinks everybody true—but she is true always."

"*Always!*" said the old man with fervour, "and far happier because she does not find it out. My wife is the same. It is such souls as these that keep the world steady. We should all tumble to pieces if the race was made up of people like Catherine Vernon and you."

"I wish you would not say Catherine Vernon and me!" said Hester passionately; "there is no likeness, none at all—none at all!"

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But the old captain only laughed, and turned her attention to the sunset, which was lighting up all the western sky. The pines stood up against it like rigid black shadows, cut out against the golden light which was belted with flaming lines of crimson. Overhead the sky ascended in varying tints of daffodil and faint ethereal greenness up to the deep yet bright summer blue. The last gleams caught the yellow gorse upon the Common and turned every blossom into gold, and all the peaks of the Vernonly rose black against the radiance of the west.

"I wonder if the people *up there* have any hand in it?" said the old man. "I should like to think so. The old landscape painters, perhaps, that never had such colours to work with before. But in that case there would be nothing for me to do," he added with a laugh, "unless it was some small post about the gunneries. I was always fond of my guns."

To Hester this light suggestion, and the laugh with which it was accompanied, sounded profane. She shrank from anything which could take away the awe and mystery from death, just as the old man, who was so near the threshold, liked to familiarise himself with the thought of going over it, and still finding himself a recognisable creature there.

A LOVER.

It was about this time that Hester became aware of a circumstance the most important that could possibly happen in a young woman's life. There had been no opportunity for her to become acquainted with the emulations and rivalry of other girls. Girls there were none about the Vernonry, nor did they abound in the neighbourhood, in the class from which alone her mother's visitors were chosen. Mrs. John, it has been said, belonged to a county family, a fact of which she was as proud as it is natural and becoming a woman should be. She did not altogether frown upon the few callers from the town who thought it only their duty to Miss Vernon, the most hospitable entertainer in the neighbourhood, to take a little notice of the pensioners, as the poor ladies at the Vernonry were called; but she did not encourage these benevolent visitors. "They are all ladies, and as good as any of us," Mrs. Redfern had been heard to say, who was the mayor's lady, and considered herself a leader of society; and it was a beautiful sight to see Mrs. John, in her old-fashioned dark room and simplest black gown, receiving with kind condescension, and endeavouring to set at her ease, this very fine lady, who considered herself to be paying the poor widow a quite undeserved honour. Mrs. John returned cards only in acknowledgment of Mrs. Redfern's visit, and there the acquaintance ended. So that Hester lost altogether the opportunity of knowing how ordinary girls looked and talked, and what was the object of their ambition. She had not even, which may surprise some people, come to any conclusion whatever in respect to her own personal appearance. Sometimes indeed, it cannot be denied, she had looked up in the midst of a novel, where all the young persons in whom the reader was supposed to take any interest were beautiful, and asked herself vaguely, with a blush, feeling ashamed of the question, whether she was pretty. But partly she was ashamed to give the time necessary to the solution of the problem, and partly she had not the data upon which to form her conclusions. There was a beautiful girl in Redborough in a humble position, upon whose claims everybody was agreed, but she was a queenly creature, with dark hair and blue eyes, and features of the most exquisite regularity, to whom Hester could not flatter herself that she bore the slightest resemblance. Nor was she like Ellen Vernon, with her lovely fairness, her look of wax and confectionary. Hester was not ethereal at all. There was no smallness about her, though she was slim as became her age. "The springy motion in her gait," the swift, light step which never tired, were beautiful in their way, and so was the eager outlook in her eyes, which seemed to contract and expand according to the degree of interest with which outside subjects moved them; but all this rather as exponents of the mind within than as merely physical features. Her hair had never grown long, not much longer indeed than was just necessary to twist into the knot behind which proved her to be grown up, and it remained full of curl and ready to break the smoothness of outline then thought necessary, on the smallest provocation. Her complexion was very variable, sometimes radiant with flutters of sudden colour, sometimes relapsing into a rose-tinted whiteness, more white than pale. Her features were not much to brag of; it was the play of prompt feeling in her face, the interest, the indignation, the pity, the perpetual change and vicissitude, that made it attractive, and on this point of course Hester could not judge. Seeing that her mouth was too large, and her nose too short, and her eyebrows too marked, she concluded that she was not pretty, and regretted it, though in her circumstances it mattered very little; her friends liked her just as well, whether or not; and she was never likely to produce the effect which the heroines in novels—even though comparatively plain—did produce. So she decided, with a little shame to think that she could have been disturbed about the matter, that it was not worth going into it further. All the same it is a pity, for the sake of young readers, that all the girls in novels, with so very rare exceptions—and Jane Eyre, if not pretty, probably was less plain than she thought, and certainly was *agaçante*, which is much more effective—should be beautiful and should have so much admiration and conquest. The girls who read are apt to wonder how it is that they have not the same fortune. Hester, for her part, had a fine scorn of feminine victories in this sort; they had never come within the possibilities of her lot. She never went to balls, nor met in society gangs of suitors contending for her smile; she did not believe in such things, and she thought she despised them.

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It was in the very midst of this scepticism that she suddenly became aware of certain facts which, as we have said, were of the kind generally supposed to be most important in a young woman's life. Harry Vernon had been for some time alone in the splendour of the White House; Ellen, who had inflicted so deep a wound upon Hester's inexperienced girlhood, had married the previous summer, and in the lack of young ladies worthy to swell her train on that occasion, had selected Hester as one of her bridesmaids. Hester had never forgiven her frivolous kinswoman for that first disenchantment of her youth, but her mother, upon whom her exclusion from society and from all opportunities of distinguishing herself there weighed heavily, had insisted on the acceptance of the invitation, and Hester had figured accordingly in a white muslin frock, much too simple to match the toilette of the other bridesmaids in the pageant, greatly to her own disquiet. She was the only Vernon in it, and thus had been specially put forward, and Ellen, altogether unconscious of previous offence, had exhausted herself in demonstrations of affection to her young relative. It was she whom Harry led out in the morning's procession, and he had, in the intervals of his duty to his guests, come back again and again to her side. Hester, all inexperienced and unknowing, had paid little attention to these early indications. She did not identify him with his sister's guilt towards her. He was a weak, good-natured, genial fellow, and no more. If Harry did anything wrong, no doubt it was because of being led astray. In himself he wished nothing but good to any one. He was not clever, he was steady and stolid, and went through both work and pleasure without much discrimination as to which was which, carrying on both in the same way. When he began to come to the Vernonry evening after evening, Hester paid little attention to him. She would go out to walk with old Captain Morgan in the very face of

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the young visitor whose "intentions" all the community considered to be of such importance. Hester never thought of his "intentions." She had none herself in which he was anyhow involved. She was perfectly friendly when they met, but she did not care whether they ever met or not, and repulsed him as much as steady indifference can repulse an obstinate and not very clear-sighted young man. But this was not saying much. Harry knew as well as any one that his suit was a wonderful chance for his distant cousin; that Hester had no right to look for such good fortune as that of being the object of his affections. He knew that he was bringing in his hand everything a girl need wish for. And so far as Hester's course of action was concerned, though he was much irritated by it sometimes, he still felt that it was what she had a right to employ in the circumstances. It "drew a fellow on;" she was right to do what she could to obtain this so desirable consummation. He could not find fault with her even when he was angry. Had she been too ready to meet him, he felt that he would himself have despised what was so easily won. But her coyness, her apparent indifference, her walking out to the old captain from her lover, all helped to rivet his chains. It was excellent policy, and he took it as such; it drew a fellow on.

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And it would be impossible to describe the interest of the Vernons in this new development. Harry made his appearance first when they were all outside enjoying the beauty of the summer evening, Mr. Mildmay Vernon occupying that bench in front of the verandah, which was the most desirable place in the evening, being just clear of the low sunbeams which came into your eyes through the trunks of the pines, penetrating like golden arrows. Mrs. John herself was watering the plants in the verandah, which were a little exhausted by the long, scorching day, and wanted refreshment. The Miss Vernons-Ridgways were walking about with their long sashes extended and their large sleeves flying, the one eagerly talking from a few paces behind her, to the other. Their conversation was on the well-worn subject of "some people who never knew their own place," and was aimed at the tranquil gentleman on the bench, who when he had secured his own comfort, which was the first thing to be thought of, rather prided himself upon never interfering with his neighbours. When Harry Vernon appeared, there was a universal stir. The sisters made a little flight round him, gazing at him. "I do believe it is Harry. Is it Harry?" they said. Mr. Mildmay Vernon put down his paper in the midst of a paragraph, and came forward with his most genial air. "I hope this is a visit only. I hope there is nothing wrong," he said.

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"Wrong! what should be wrong?" said Harry, turning his fair countenance wonderingly upon the group. "It's a lovely evening, and I wanted a walk," he added, with a little reddening of that too fair face; "and besides, I've got a message from Ellen to Mrs. John——"

"Dear Ellen! How is Ellen? When is she coming home?" cried Miss Matilda. "When you write to her, give her our love. But I suppose she is too happy to care about anybody's love save one person's. Marriage will improve Ellen—marriage will steady her. She used to be a little forgetful, perhaps. Ah! marriage will do her a great deal of good. She had everything too much her own way."

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"But she is missed. It would be pretty to see her again—forgetting," said Mr. Mildmay, "that she had ever set eyes on you before."

"Ah, dear Ellen! We should not have known her without her little ways!"

Now Harry was fond of his sister.

"I'll thank you to leave Ellen alone," he said, brusquely. "I dare say we've all got our little ways. I had something to say to Mrs. John if you'll let me pass, please."

"Politeness is characteristic of our family," said Miss Matilda, drawing her skirts closely round her, and standing ostentatiously, though she was not very near him, out of his way.

Mrs. John stood looking on in the verandah with the watering-can in her hand, not hearing much of what they said, but feeling that it was uncivil, and putting on a little deprecating, anxious smile

"Come in," she said, "come in. The parlour, I think, is almost cooler than the garden after this hot day. Shall I make you a cup of tea?"

"These pensioners of Aunt Catherine's are odious people," said Harry. "It was you and Hester I came to see."

"You must not speak of them so—they would not like it," said Mrs. John, not thinking that she herself might be spoken of in the same way, though rather pleased at the bottom of her heart that Harry should make a distinction between them. He threw himself down in a chair, which creaked under his weight, and looked very large and mannish in the little feminine room—rather, indeed, it must be allowed, out of place there.

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"I wonder how you can get on in such a poky little place," he said. "I should like to see you in handsome big rooms; it would seem much more natural."

Mrs. John smiled again, a deprecating, half-apologetic smile.

"Oh, I am very glad to be here. I did not expect ever to have to live in such a poor place when I married, it is true; but people's minds change with their circumstances. I am glad to have it——"

"You oughtn't to—you should have been provided for in a different way. Ah, Hester! I am so glad to see you," Harry said, rising with some commotion to his feet. He took Hester's hand and held it for a moment. "I thought I'd come and tell you about Ellen," he said, with a blush.

"Hester," said her mother, giving her a little meaning look, of which she did not understand the signification, "you must give Mr. Harry a cup of tea."

And there he sat, to her great oppression, for an hour at least. He did not even tell them about Ellen. He said nothing in particular—nothing which it was necessary to say. Hester, who had intended to go out with her old captain, felt herself bound by politeness and her mother's warning looks. She did not know what these looks meant, but they held her fast. There was not very much conversation. He said a few things over and over, which made it difficult to change the subject; and it was mostly Mrs. John who replied, and who rather liked, also, to repeat the same sentiment. Hester poured out the tea, and when the moment came for that, lighted the candles, and sat down in the background and took her work. She was not very fond of work, but it was better than doing nothing at all. When she took that seat which was beyond his point of vision, Harry turned his chair round so as to face her, and took up one of the candles and arranged it for her, that she might see to work. "You should have a lamp," he said. "I have a nice little lamp at home just the thing for you; you must let me send it." What a long time he sat, and how anxious he was to make himself agreeable! After that he came three or four times in succession. Mrs. John began to look for him, brightening up as the hour of his visit approached; and the neighbours kept up a watch which it was impossible to mistake. "If he comes to-night again I shall know what to think," Miss Matilda said. But when he came that night he met Hester at the gate in her out-door apparel. Harry's countenance fell.

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"Oh, you are surely not going out," he said, "not just when I come? You couldn't be so unkind."

"I have been unkind to Captain Morgan very often," said Hester. "I must not neglect him to-night," and she passed him quickly with a little bow and smile. It made Harry very angry, but still he felt that it drew a fellow on.

On one of these occasions, when Hester eluded him in this way, Harry spoke his mind to Mrs. John.

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"I'm very lonely up there by myself," he said, "and I have nobody to please but myself. Ellen used to interfere and keep me in order, as she said; but now she's got somebody else to look after. I've thought a great deal of Hester for years back. That time when we came to see you first, you know, when Ellen made so many advances and forgot all about them—that was her way. She's not a bad sort when you get safe hold of her—but it's her way. Well, from that time I've thought of Hester, though I never liked to say a word as long as Ellen was there."

"Oh, Mr. Harry," said Mrs. John, who was fluttered and flattered as if a proposal were being made to herself. "She was only a child in those days."

"I know; but she isn't a child now. If she'll have me—and I can't see why she shouldn't have me—we might all make each other very comfortable. I'm not frightened of a mother-in-law as so many fellows are. I believe that's all bosh. I shouldn't wish to part you more than for the honeymoon, you know. There is plenty of room for you in the White House, and it would be always nice for her to have you there, when I happened to be engaged. I think we should hit it off very well together. And as for money—I know she has no money—I should never think twice about that. Of course it would be to my own advantage to make as good settlements as possible, which is always a good thing in business when one never knows what may happen. We might have to consult Aunt Catherine just at first, for she always keeps a hold on the funds——"

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"And there's Hester to consult—that is the most important," said Mrs. John.

"To be sure, that's the most important; but I can't see why she should object," said Harry. "Why, she has never seen any one, has she? I am the only man that has paid any attention to her. At Ellen's wedding there were one or two, and that was only once in a way. I don't say she likes me, but she can't like any one else, can she? for she has never seen anybody."

"Not that I know of," said Mrs. John; "but, Mr. Harry, girls are so fanciful. You cannot be sure of them in that way. They may have some ideal in their heads, though they have never met any one——"

"Eh?" said Harry, making a large mouthful of the word, and opening wide those blue eyes of his with the light lashes. And, indeed, he did not know much about that sort of thing. He returned to the question without paying any attention to this strange piece of nonsense. "There's nobody about but the old gentlemen, and Ned at Aunt Catherine's. Sometimes I've felt a little suspicious of Ned. Does he come and see you often? He is a great fellow for books and that sort of thing."

"Mr. Edward Vernon," said Mrs. John, a little stiffly, "*never* comes here. Hester, I believe has met him at the Grange or elsewhere; but he never comes here. I scarcely know him, neither of course does she."

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"Then," said Harry, taking no notice of the offence in her tone, but bringing down his hand vehemently upon his knee, "if it isn't Ned, there is no one she can have seen, and the field is all clear for me."

"That is very true," said Hester's mother, but her tone was doubtful. "At the same time," she continued, "perhaps it would be well to let me talk to her a little first, Mr. Harry, just to see, before you said anything."

"If she doesn't want to have me, I don't wish to force her to have me," said Harry, his pride taking alarm.

"Force—oh, Mr. Harry, do you think I would force my child? And indeed I couldn't;" cried Mrs. John, shaking her head. "She is far, far stronger than I."

"She would be the cleverest of us all," said Harry admiringly. "I believe she is as clever as Aunt Catherine. I dare say she might even find out dodges in the bank, like Aunt Catherine did."

Perhaps on the whole it might be better if you would sound her a bit, eh? and find out what she is up to. What she thinks of me, for instance," said Harry, nodding half with modesty, half with vanity. "Yes, I should like that. I should like to be pretty sure before I committed myself. A man doesn't like to make a fool of himself for nothing," the young man said.

Mrs. John thought it was quite natural. And indeed all her feelings were enlisted on Harry's side, who expressed himself so beautifully. What better could happen to Hester than to be thus uplifted to the heights of luxury and wealth, the White House, and everything else that heart could desire, with a nice husband, so good-looking, so tall, so fair, and so anxious to be kind to her mother? Her imagination, not her strong point on ordinary occasions, was strong enough on this, to jump at all the advantages of the match with a rapidity which would not have disgraced Hester herself. To see her child the mistress of the White House was the very height of Mrs. John's ambition. She did not feel that the world held anything more desirable. Her mind made a hurried rush through the rooms, all so familiar to her, and which Harry, no doubt, would remodel in preparation for his bride. With what pride and happiness would she see her child at the head of the table, where she herself had once sat! It would be a return more triumphant than any return in her own person. And yet she would be there too, the happy spectator, the witness of it all. She saw in her mind's eye, the wedding, the beautiful clothes, the phaeton, and the high-stepping horses, and perhaps a pony carriage which Hester herself would drive. All this in a moment, while Harry was telling her that he would like to be pretty sure before he committed himself. Perhaps it was not a lofty sentiment, but she felt it to be quite natural. A man with so much to bestow had a right to see his way before him, and then for Hester's own sake it was far better that she should not be taken by surprise. She was a perverse girl, and if the young man walked straight up to her without warning, and asked her to marry him, the chances were that she would refuse. That was not a risk to be run when so much was at stake.

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"If you will leave it in my hands, I think you will have no cause to regret it," she said, nodding her head at him with the softest maternal smile. "You may be sure you will have my good wishes."

They were both quite affected when he took his leave.

"I feel sure we should hit it off together," Harry said, warmly grasping her hand; and the water stood in her eyes. She could almost have given him a kiss as he stood before her, a little flushed and agitated with his self-revelation. Indeed, she would have done so but for that doubt about Hester. What would Hester say? That was the one point upon which doubt existed, and unfortunately it was the most important of all. There could not be the least uncertainty as to the many advantages of the match; money, comfort, good position, good connection, everything that can be wished for in marriage, and with no personal defects to be glossed over by these advantages, but a fine young man, a husband any girl might be proud of. Elation and gladness filled Mrs. John's heart, when she contemplated that side of the question; but when she turned to the other a chill came over her, a cloud that swallowed up the sunshine. What would Hester say? Oh the perverseness of girls that never know what is good for them! If it had been somebody quite ineligible, somebody without a penny, the chances were that Hester would have had no doubt on the subject. Mrs. John could not remain still after this momentous conversation. She went from one window to another, looking out, watching for her daughter's return. She had been vexed that Hester should have been so uncivil as to go away for no better reason than to walk with old Captain Morgan when Harry was coming, but she felt now that this contradictoriness on the girl's part had been providential. How full her head was with thoughts and plans how to speak, and what to say, with artful approaches to the subject, and innocent wiles by which to divert all suspicion, and lead Hester unawares towards that goal! She trotted up stairs and down, from one window to another, framing dialogue after dialogue in her mind. She was astonished by her own powers as she did so. If she ever had been so clever in reality as she was in this sudden crisis of imagination, she felt that it might have made a difference in her whole life. And one thing Mrs. John had the wisdom and goodness to do in the midst of her excitement, she kept within her own house, and did not so much as venture down to the verandah, where she might have been seen from outside, and pounced upon by the eager watchers, brimful of curiosity, who wanted to know what it all meant. Miss Matilda Vernon-Ridgway, as has been intimated, had been conscious of an internal admonition that something critical, something decisive, something throwing a distinct light upon the "intentions" of young Harry would happen this night. And Mrs. John knew herself, and was aware that she never would be able to stand against the questionings of these curious spectators. Her only safety was in keeping out of their way. Thus not only her imaginations, but her moral faculties, her power of self-control and self-denial, were strengthened by the occurrences of this momentous evening. She had not felt so important before since Hester was born.

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CHAPTER XI.

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MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

Mrs. John had a long time to wait. The old captain prolonged his walk, as he was too apt to do, beyond his strength, and came home very slowly, leaning on Hester's arm; and then as every hindrance, when people are anxious, has a way of doubling itself, Mrs. Morgan sent a polite message to say that she hoped Mrs. John Vernon would not object if she kept Hester to supper. Mrs. John objected greatly, but she was weak, and had never set up her own will in the face of

any one else who made a stand for theirs. She said "Oh yes, with pleasure," with a pitiful little smile to Mrs. Morgan's maid. To deny Hester anything (except the power of making a governess of herself and losing caste) was what she had never done in her life. It always gave her a little pang when her child left her to eat her solitary meal in the dark little parlour which nothing would light up, but she had trained herself to feel that this was very wrong, and that young people need change. Hester was entirely unacquainted with the series of little sacrifices which her mother thus made for her. If she thought of them at all, she thought that the poor lady "did not mind." Her old friends next door were not gay, but they talked as Mrs. John was quite incapable of talking, and lived, though they saw nobody, in a wider atmosphere, a bigger world than any of the others. The old captain's stories, the people he had seen, the experiences both these old people had gone through, were like another world to Hester. Her mother was small and straitened, had seen without seeing, and lived without living. In the days when Hester had guided her about by the arm, taking her whither she pleased, making new eyes for her in the vividness of her own, it was enough for the girl to have that echo of all her sentiments, that little objection generally ending with agreement, that broken little stream of faint recollections which her mother would give forth. But Hester had long ceased to form part of that sort of dual being which is so often made by a mother and her only daughter. To feel your parent smaller and sillier than yourself is sad. A great many young people do it without any adequate reason, strong in their sense of being the reigning monarchs of the present, while their progenitors belong to the past. Perhaps indeed it is the nature of youth to take a pleasure in such superiority. But that is very different from the fact of actual incapacity on the mother's part to follow her child's thoughts or even to know what she meant. Mrs. John was very well aware of it herself, and declared with a smiling countenance that young people liked change, and that she was never so happy as when her child was enjoying herself. And Hester, though she was so much more clever, accepted all this, and believed and thought her mother was quite contented with the evening paper, or a book from the circulating library, and never missed her when she was away. She misunderstood her silly mother, far more than that silly mother did her. The lesser comprehended the bigger, not the bigger the lesser, as in the ordinary course of affairs. Mrs. John had a great many sacrifices to make, of which her daughter was quite unconscious. And to-night the poor lady felt it, as with her mind so full she sat down at her little solitary table, which she had made pretty for Hester. There was nothing on it more luxurious than cold meat and salad, but the crisp greenness of the leaves, the little round loaf, the pat of butter in a small silver dish which was one of her relics, the creaming glass of milk, all set out upon a white cloth and lighted up by the two candles, would, she had flattered herself, call out an admiring exclamation when the girl came in out of the dark, a little dazzled for the first moment by the light. After she had said "Oh, yes, with pleasure," Mrs. John came in and sat down and cried. Such a pretty table laid out, and oh, for once, so much to say! her mind so overflowing, her news so all important! There could not be anything so exciting to talk about, that was certain, on the other side of the partition, and this provoked and tantalised sense of having herself far better entertainment for Hester than she could be having, gave an insufferableness to the position. At one moment Mrs. John thought she must send for the girl, that she could not put up with the disappointment, but she was much more used to putting up with things, than to asserting herself. She sat down very cheerlessly and ate a mouthful of bread and salad. To eat alone is always miserable. Hester was making the table, where the old Morgans sat, very lively and cheerful, talking as she never talked with her mother. They sat and talked quite late into the night. What with the captain's stories, and Mrs. Morgan's elucidations and Hester's questionings, the evening was full of interest. It flew away so quickly that when the clock struck eleven the girl sprang up with a great sense of guilt. "Eleven o'clock! what will mother say? I have never been so late before," she cried. They were all half proud of it, of having been so mutually entertaining. "The poor little mother must have felt lonely," Mrs. Morgan said, with a passing compunction when Hester flew round the corner, watched from the door to see that all was safe by the maid; but the captain took no notice. "It is delightful to see how that child enjoys herself," he said, flattered in spite of himself, "though it's no very intoxicating amusement we furnish her." Captain Morgan was very soft-hearted, and understood by his affections as well as with his understanding, but in this case something beguiled him, perhaps a little complacency, perhaps want of thought.

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When Hester ran in, in the dark, locking the door of the verandah behind her, Mrs. John had gone up stairs and was going to bed. She was chilly and "cross" her daughter thought, who ran quickly up to her full of apologies. "We got talking," she said; "you must forgive me, mother. The captain's stories run on so, one into another—one forgets how the time runs on too."

"I wish," said Mrs. John, with the tears very near the surface, "that your mother was sometimes as amusing as the captain." It was the greatest reproach she had addressed to her daughter for years.

"Oh, mother! If I had thought you minded," cried Hester, with wondering eyes.

Mrs. John was penitent at once, and did her best to make things up. "I ought not to speak," she said, "after all—for I was not so very lonely. Harry stayed a long time and kept me company. It is only when you have him to yourself that you see how nice he is."

"Is he so nice?" said Hester, indifferently. "How lucky for him to find you alone," she added, with a little laugh.

"Oh, Hester, how can you say so. As if it was me he came for! Whatever you may try to make yourself believe you can't think that."

Hester made no reply. She slept in a small room within her mother's, the door of which always stood open. She had taken off her out-door things and let down her hair to brush it. It hung about

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her in a cloud, running up into curls as soon as she let it free. Mrs. John, seated in the easiest chair, sat contemplating this operation with a mixture of pleasure and pain. The mass of curls was pretty, but it was not the fashion. It was quite unlike the smooth brown glossy locks that had adorned her own head when she was young. But she said to herself that it suited Hester, and gazed at her child admiringly, yet anxiously, conscious of many things in which she might be improved: her hair for one thing; and her waist, which was not so small as Mrs. John's had been in her youth; and her nose, which was a little too short. And yet with all these defects she was pretty. When she was Harry's wife everybody would admire her. Perhaps it was only because she was not sufficiently seen that she had no more admirers now.

"I had a great deal to say to you, dear," she said. "I don't grudge you being away when you are enjoying yourself, but I had many things to say. It is not likely that Harry Vernon would sit with me for hours for nothing."

"I suppose," said Hester, from the midst of her curls, "that he finds it dull now without Ellen at the White House?"

"I could tell you a great deal about that," said her mother quickly, eager to seize an opening. But Hester yawned with discouraging demonstrations of fatigue.

"Don't you think it will keep till to-morrow, mother? We had a long walk, and I am sleepy. I think Harry can't be very urgent. To-morrow will be time enough." [Pg 170]

"Oh, Hester, how strange you are," cried Mrs. John, "so pleased with those old people, ready to listen to all their old stories; but when I begin to talk to you of a thing that is of the greatest importance——"

"Nothing concerning Harry Vernon can be of great importance to me," cried the perverse girl; and then she tried to turn off her wilfulness with a laugh. "The beauty of the captain's stories is that they are of no importance, mother. You can have them when you please. It is like going to a theatre, or reading a book."

"I am not so clever as the captain to interest you," Mrs. John said.

There was a plaintive tone in her voice with which Hester was very well acquainted, and which betokened an inclination to tears. She came and kissed her mother, and gave her a few of those half-impatient caresses which generally soothed the poor lady. The girl did not in the least know that any consciousness was in Mrs. John's mind of the superficial character of those kindnesses. She was not without love for the tender domestic creature who had been hers to use at her pleasure since ever she could recollect, but she bestowed these kisses upon her, as she would have given sweetmeats to a child.

"Go to bed, mother. Don't mind me. I will shut the door; you shall not have the light in your eyes to keep you from sleeping. Go to bed, mammy darling." [Pg 171]

Mrs. John had liked this caressing talk when Hester was a child. She was soothed by it still, though a faint sense that there was something like contempt in it had got into her mind: and she could not struggle against a will which was so much stronger than her own. But she could not sleep, though she allowed herself to be put to bed. She could not help crying in the night, and wondering what she could do to be more respected, to be more important to her child; and then she prayed that she might be able to put Harry before her in the best light, and stopped and wondered whether it were right to pray about a young man. Altogether Mrs. John had not a tranquil night.

But next morning she made a great effort to dismiss her anxiety, to present herself at breakfast with a cheerful aspect, and to get rid of that plaintive tone which she was herself aware of, which she had so often tried to remedy. Instead of it she tried a little jauntiness and gaiety, for extremes are always easy. It is the *juste-milieu* which it is so difficult to attain.

"I am afraid I scolded you last night, Hester. I was cross when you came back. One can't help being cross when one has a great many things to say and no audience," she said with a laugh.

"I am very sorry, mamma. I did not mean to stay so late."

"Oh, it was nothing, my dear. I had Harry. He sat with me a long time. He is—really—very—entertaining when you have him to yourself." [Pg 172]

"Is he?" said Hester demurely. "I should not have expected that: but I am very glad, mother, for your sake."

"Because I am likely to see a great deal of him in the future? Oh yes, my dear. I hope so, at least. He is very kind to me. Nobody has spoken so nicely of me for many a year."

"I like him for that," said Hester honestly, yet with a blush of self-consciousness; for perhaps though she liked him for it, it did not improve her opinion of Harry's intellect, that he should find her mother's company so congenial.

"Oh, you would if you knew him better, Hester. He feels for me in my changed circumstances. You don't know how different things used to be, what a great deal people used to think of me when I was young. I don't complain, for perhaps it was silly of them; but it is a great change. But living where he does in my house, you know, Harry feels that: he says it is there I ought to be—in the White House. Even though nothing should ever come of it, it is nice that somebody should think so."

"Unfortunately nothing can ever come of it," said Hester. "However nice people may be they do

not give up their house to you, or their living; for you would need his money as well, to be able to live in the White House."

"You say unfortunately, dear," said her mother, with eagerness. Mrs. John blushed like a girl as she began her attempt to hint out Harry's love-tale to her daughter. She was innocent and modest, though she was silly. No talk about lovers, no "petty maxims" about marriage, had ever offended Hester's ears. Her mother blushed and trembled when she felt herself broaching the subject to her child. "Oh, Hester, it would be easy, very easy, to cease to be unfortunate—if you choose, dear. All that part of our life might fly away like a cloud—if you choose. We might be done with poverty and dependence and thinking of what Catherine will say and what people will think. The White House—might be yours if you liked, everything might be yours. You would only have to say the word."

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Mrs. John's eyes filled with tears. She could not get to the end of a long speech like this without crying; and she was so anxious, that they found their way also into her voice.

"Mother!" cried Hester, opening wide her eyes. They were very bright and clear, and when they opened widely looked almost unnatural in their size. She was all the more startled that she had never been subject to any such representation before. "I don't know what you mean," she said. "What should we do with the White House? I think it is a vulgar, staring place, and far too big."

"Don't speak so, Hester. I can't bear it. My own married home that your poor papa took me to!"

"I beg your pardon, mother. I had forgotten that. Of course taste was different in those days."

"Oh, taste! Your poor papa had beautiful taste. There are some things there that just break my heart—the ormolu set that everybody admired so, and the picture of me over the mantel-piece in the little parlour. It used to be in the drawing-room, but you can't wonder at them changing it. The hair was worn high then, on the top of your head, and short sleeves. It was very becoming to me. And to hear you call it vulgar and staring——"

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"It was a mistake, mamma. I did not think what I was saying. Forgive me, mother dear!"

"You know I would forgive you anything," cried Mrs. John, now fairly launched, and forgetting all prudential restraints. "But oh, Hester, my darling, when he speaks to you don't be hasty; think of all that is involved. I am not going to tell you what he wants to say—oh no, he would never forgive me. It is he himself that must tell you that. But Hester, oh, don't speak hastily; don't answer all in a moment, without thinking. Often, often a girl says what she is sorry for, not being prepared. Think, my darling, what it would be—not only to be rich, but to be independent—to have your own house, all your own, and no charity—to have as much money as you want, to be able to help the poor, and do everything you wish, and to make me happy, so happy, to the end of my days!"

It was thus that Mrs. John treated Harry's secret. She forgot all her precautions and her conviction that from himself only the proposal ought to come. The dialogues she had invented, the long conversations with Hester which she had held in imagination, delicately, diplomatically leading up to the main possibility, had all disappeared when the moment came. When she began to speak she had forgotten them altogether, and gone off impromptu without recollecting a syllable of all that had been so painfully prepared: and her own eloquence, if it did not affect her daughter, affected herself beyond description: her mouth quivered, the tears flowed out of her eyes. Hester, who could no more bear to see her mother cry (though she had seen that sight often enough) than to see the tears of a child, rose from her seat, and coming round hurriedly behind Mrs. John's chair put her arms caressingly round her, and laid her cheek to that wet one. She was not so entirely unprepared but that she understood well enough what this emotion meant, but she tried to look as if it had a different meaning altogether. She drew her mother's head to her breast and kissed her.

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"Dear mother! Is it really so bitter to you to be dependent? and you never let me know that you felt it."

"What would have been the good," said the poor lady, "when we could do nothing? The thing was to put the best face upon it. But now when it is all in your power——"

"It was always in my power," said Hester, with a mixture of real earnestness and a desire to persuade her mother that she put a different meaning upon all that had been said; "if you had not stopped me, mother; but I have not lost my accent, and if you will only give your consent now—I am older, and people will trust me with their children."

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"Oh, Hester, do not vex me so," cried Mrs. John. "Do you think that is what I mean? And besides, if I were to give you leave to-morrow, Catherine, you know, would never consent."

"If you will trust to me," said Hester, colouring high, "what Catherine pleases shall not be the last word."

Mrs. John wrung her hands, drawing herself out of Hester's arms, to gaze into her face.

"Oh, why will you make such a mistake? It is not *that*. I am not strong to stand out against you, Hester, but for your own sake. And Catherine would never let you do it. Oh, this is quite a different thing, my dear love! Not to work like any poor girl, but to be far above that, to have everything that heart could desire. And all so right and so nice, and so suitable, Hester. If your dear papa had lived and all had gone well I could not have wished for a better match."

"Match!" said the girl, colouring violently.

She had indeed understood well enough that Harry was behind all her mother's anxious insinuations, her promises and entreaties, but she had been confident in her power to defeat Mrs.

John by aid of her own confused statements always capable of bearing two meanings. This word "match," however, was one upon which there could be no confusion, and she was immediately driven to bay. She drew herself away from the tender attitude in which she had been standing.

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"I never thought," she said, "that this was a thing that could be discussed between us," with all the unreasonable indignation of a high-handed girl, determined to crush all attempts to influence her on the spot.

But Mrs. John, though she was conscious she could not stand against Hester, was too sure that she was right, and too deeply convinced of the importance of this great question to give in, as she usually did.

"Oh why should it not be discussed between us?" she said. "Is there any one so much interested as I am? I have heard people say it was a mother's duty. And Hester, abroad where we used to live, I should have settled it altogether—you would never have been consulted. I am sure I don't know that it is not the best way."

"It is a way—that could never have been taken with me," Hester said. She walked round to her own side of the table with a very stately aspect and sat down, and made a pretence of resuming her breakfast, but her hand trembled with excitement as she took up her cup. "It may be quite true what you say, that you are interested, mother. I suppose so. People consider a girl a piece of goods to be sold and disposed of."

"Oh, Hester, have I ever thought so? I have been wanting in my duty," cried Mrs. John. "I have never tried to put you forward, to get you invitations, to have you seen and admired as other people do. You are so proud and so fanciful that I have never dared to do it. And when there comes one, without ever being invited, or thought of, or supposed possible——"

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It seemed to Hester that the burning blush which she felt go all over her was capable of bursting into flame. It was not the shy shamefacedness with which every girl contemplates this subject on its first introduction, but bitter and scorching shame.

"Invited—thought of; mother!" she cried in a voice of girlish thunder; "is it possible that you could ever think of scheming—match-making—for ME?"

No capitals could represent the fervour of her indignation. She was entirely unconscious of the arrogance of self-opinion that was in all she said. FOR ME. That a man should be invited into her presence with that thought, that she should be put forward, taken into society in order to be seen with that view. Heaven and Earth! was it possible that a woman should avow such possibilities and yet live?

"When I tell you that I never did it, Hester! though I know it was my duty," Mrs. John cried with tears. Never was woman punished more unjustly. She turned like the proverbial worm at the supreme inappropriateness of this judgment against her, and a sudden impulse of anger sustained the gentle little woman. "I know it was my duty," she cried; "for who is to care for you, to see that you are settled in life, but me? But I was afraid to do it. I was obliged to leave it—to Providence. I just said to myself, it is no use. Hester would never be guided by me. I must leave it—to Providence."

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It did not appear that Mrs. John had much opinion of Providence in such matters, for she announced this with a voice of despair. Then taking courage a little, she said with insinuating gentleness—

"I was just the same when I was a girl. I could not endure to hear about settlements and things. It was all love I thought of—my darling. I was like you—all love."

"Oh, mother!" cried Hester, jumping to her feet. This was more intolerable than the other. Her face flamed anew with the suggestion that it was "all love." "For Heaven's sake don't say any more about it, unless you want to drive me out of my senses," she said.

Mrs. John stopped crying, she was so astonished, and gazed with open mouth and eyes. She had thought this last tender touch would be irresistible, that the child would fall into her arms, and perhaps breathe forth the sweetest secret aspiration of her heart—perhaps own to her that dark eyes and a moustache had been her dream instead of Harry's fairness; or that a melting voice or a genius for poetry were absolute requirements of her hero. With all these fancies she would have so tenderly sympathised. She would have liked to discuss everything, to point out that after all a fair complexion was very nice, and a genius for poetry not profitable. She remembered what occupation and delight these same subjects had afforded herself in the interval before John Vernon had proposed to her. She herself had dreamed of a troubadour, a lonely being with a guitar, with long hair and misfortunes; and John Vernon had none of these attractions. She was talked over by her mother and sister and made to see that the Bank and the White House were far better. Hester, perhaps, would have been more difficult, but yet she had felt that, confidence once established, the sweetness of these discussions would have been unspeakable. When she had got over her astonishment, she sank back in a despair which was not unmingled with resentment. Had it come to that, that nothing a mother could say would please a child nowadays—neither the attraction of a great match nor the tenderness of love?

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This was how the great question of a young woman's life was first revealed to Hester. It was not, to be sure, the last word. That would come when she was placed face to face with the aspirant for her favour and have to decide, so to speak, upon the future of two lives. But to say "no" to Harry would not have excited and confused her being, like this previous encounter with all the other powers and influences which were concerned—or which were considered to be concerned, in her fate.

CHAPTER XII.

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AN INDIGNANT SPECTATOR.

Hester Vernon had been, during the most important years of her existence, a sort of outlaw from life. She had been unacquainted altogether with its course and natural order, out of all its usual habits, separated from every social way of thinking or discipline of mind. She belonged to a little community which thought a great deal of itself, yet had no foundation for so doing; but, strangely enough, though she saw through the fallacy of its general pretensions, she yet kept its tradition in her own person and held her head above the ordinary world in unconscious imitation of the neighbours whom she knew to have no right to do so. She kept the spirit of the Vernons, though she scorned them, and thought them a miserable collection of ungrateful dependents and genteel beggars, less honourable than the real beggars, who said "thank you" at least. And she had no way of correcting the unfortunate estimate of the world she had formed from this group, except through the means of Catherine Vernon, and the society in her house, of which, at long intervals, and on a doubtful footing which set all her pride in arms and brought out every resentful faculty, she and her mother formed a part. If the Vernon-Ridgways and Mr. Mildmay Vernon were bitterly critical of Catherine, missing no opportunity to snarl at the hand that fed them, Catherine, on her part, was so entirely undeceived in respect to them, and treated them with such a cynical indulgence and smiling contempt, as if nothing save ingratitude and malice were to be expected from humanity, that Hester had found no relief on that side from her painful thoughts. She was so conscious in her own person of meanings more high, and impulses more noble, that the scorn with which she contemplated the people about her was almost inevitable. And when, deeply against her will, and always with an uneasy consciousness that her mother's pleasure in the invitations, and excitement about going, was childish and undignified, Hester found herself in a corner of the Grange drawing-room, her pride, her scornful indignation and high contempt of society, grew and increased. Her poor little mother standing patiently smiling at all who would smile at her, pleased with the little recognition given her as "one of the poor ladies at the Vernonry," and quite content to remain there for hours for the sake of two minutes' *banal* conversation now and then, to be overlooked at supper, and taken compassion upon by a disengaged curate, or picked up by some man who had already brought back a more important guest, made Hester furious and miserable by her complacency. Hester herself was one of some half dozen girls in white muslin, who kept a wistful eye upon the curate in the hope of being taken away to the supper-room down stairs, from which such a sound of talk and laughter came up to the forlorn ones left above. But no curate, however urgent, ever persuaded Hester to go down, to stand at the tail of the company and consume the good things on Catherine's table. She saw it all from that point of view which takes the glitter off the brightest surface. Why did those poor girls in white muslin, not being compelled, like Hester, continue to go? There were two sisters, who would chatter together, pretending to be very merry, and point out to each other the pictures, or some new piece of furniture, and say that Miss Vernon had such taste. They were always of the number of those who were forgotten at supper, who were sent down after the others came up stairs with careless little apologies. Why did they come? But Hester was not of a temper to chatter or to look at the pictures, or to make the best of the occasion. She stood in the corner behind her mother, and made it quite clear that she was not "enjoying herself." She took no interest in the pieces that were performed on the piano, or the songs that were sung, and even rejected the overtures of her companions in misfortune to point out to her the "very interesting photographs" which covered one table. Some of the elder ladies who talked to her mother made matters worse by compassionately remarking that "the poor girl" was evidently "terribly shy." But, otherwise, nobody took any notice of Hester; the other people met each other at other houses, had some part in the other amusements which were going on, and knew what to say to each other. But Hester did not know what to say. Edward Vernon, her early acquaintance, whom she would still often meet in the morning, and between whom and Hester there existed a sort of half-and-half alliance unlike her relations with any one else, took no open notice of her; but would sometimes cast a glance at her as he passed, confidential and secret. "How are you getting on?" he would say; and when Hester answered "Not at all," would shrug his shoulders and elevate his eyebrows and say "Nor I" under his breath. But if he did not "get on," his manner of non-enjoyment was, at least, very different from Hester's. He was, as it were, Catherine Vernon's son and representative. He was the temporary master of the house. Everybody smiled upon him, deferred to him, consulted his wishes. Thus, even Edward, though she regarded him with different eyes from the others, helped to give a greater certainty to Hester's opinion on the subject of Society. Even he was false here—pretending to dislike what he had no reason to dislike, and, what was perhaps worse, leaving her to stand there neglected, whom he was willing enough to talk with when he found her alone.

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Hester felt—with her head raised, her nostrils expanded, a quiver of high indignation in her lip—that she herself would never suffer any one to stand thus neglected in any room of hers. Those women in their diamonds, who swept down stairs while her mother stood and looked on wistfully, should not be the first in her house. She would not laugh and say "One of the Vernonry," as Catherine permitted herself to do. It seemed to Hester that the poor and the small would be the first whom she would think of, and amuse and make happy. They should have the best of everything, they who had not the best of anything in life. Society (she thought, always in that corner, where there was full time to make theories, and the keen prick of present humiliation to give animation to them) should be a fine compensation to those who were not so happy as the

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others. A true hostess should lay herself out to make up to them, for that one genial moment, for the absence of beauty and brightness in their lives. It should be all for them—the music, and the wit, and the happy discourse. Those who lived in fine houses, who had everything that wealth could give, should stand aside and give place to the less happy. There should be no one neglected. The girl whom no one noticed stood apart and invented her high magnanimous court, where there should be no respect of persons. But it was not wonderful if in this real one she felt herself standing upon a pedestal, and looked out with scorn upon the people who were "enjoying themselves," and with a sense of bitter mortification watched her poor little mother curtsying and smiling, pleased to go down to supper after the fine people were satisfied, on somebody's benevolent arm who was doing duty for the second time. "No, I thank you," Hester said to the curate, who stood offering his arm, tossing her head like a young princess. "I never go to supper." She was not without a consciousness either, that Catherine, hearing this, had been mightily amused by her airs and her indignation, and next time looked out for them as one of the humours of the night.

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Thus it will be seen that all Hester's small experience of society taught her to despise it. She was outside of the life of families, and knew little or nothing of the ordinary relations of parents and children, and of that self-sustaining life where there are no painful bonds of obligation, no dependence, no forced submission of one set of people to another. She thought the mass was all the same, with such exceptions as old Captain Morgan and his wife rarely appearing, and here and there a visionary, indignant soul such as herself, free as yet from all bonds, looking on with proud consciousness that were power in her hands it should not be so. The great question of love had scarcely flitted at all across her firmament. She had indeed a trembling sense of possibility such as youth itself could not be youth if destitute of, a feeling that some time suddenly there might come down upon her path out of the skies, or appear out of the distance, some one—in whom all the excellences of earth should be realised; but this, it need not be said, was as entirely unlike an ideal preference for dark eyes and moustaches, as it was unlike the orthodox satisfaction in a good match which her mother had so abruptly revealed. It was like the dawn upon the horizon where as yet there is no sun and no colour, a visionary, tremulous premonition of the possible day. A girl who has this feeling in her heart is not only horrified but angry, when the fact comes down upon her in the shape of a dull man's proposal or a parent's recommendation. It is a wrong to herself and to him, and to the new earth and the new heaven which might be coming. Hester left her mother on that memorable morning with the glow of a fiery resentment in her heart. Everything seemed to grow vulgar under that touch, even things which were heavenly. Not a magnanimous hero, but Harry—not a revelation out of heaven, out of the unknown, but a calculation of his good qualities and the comforts he could bestow. All this no doubt was very highflown and absurd, but the girl knew no better. She felt it an insult to her, that her mother should have set such a bargain before her—and oh, worse than an insult, intolerable! when poor Mrs. John, in her ignorance, invited the confidence of this high visionary maiden on the subject of love. This drove the girl away, incapable of supporting such profanation and blasphemy. She went out upon the Common, where she could be quite alone, and spent an hour or two by herself beyond reach of anybody, trying to shake off the impression. She had nothing to do to occupy her mind, to force out of it an unpleasant subject. She could only rush out and secure for herself solitude at least, that she might master it and get it under her feet.

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But sometimes to appoint a meeting with yourself to discuss such a question, ends in another way from that which has been foreseen. Sitting alone under a bush of whins, some chance touch of fancy made Hester think of her mother's aspirations towards the White House, the ormolu set, and the portrait in short sleeves. Thoughts arise sometimes in a curious dramatic order, to all appearance independent of the mind of the thinker, as if certain pictures were presented to it by some independent agency outside. In this way there gleamed across the mind of Hester a sudden presentation of her mother in those same short sleeves, her pretty dark hair in two large bows on the top of her head, her feet in white satin shoes with sandals, like an artless beauty out of the *Keepsake* or the *Forget-me-not*. The imagination was so sudden that in the midst of thoughts so different it tempted the girl to a smile. Poor mother, so young and pretty—and silly, perhaps! And then Hester recollected old Mr. Rule's story, how she had rushed to her desk and produced twenty pounds to save the bank from bankruptcy. The girl recollected, with an indignant pang of compassion, that Catherine had produced thousands of pounds, and *had* saved the bank. What virtue was that in her? She had the money whilst the other had not, and Mrs. John's helpless generosity was just as great. Poor little mother! and the house she was so proud of, her "married home," her ideal of everything that was fine and handsome. Hester's imagination after this made a jump, and beheld her mother in the widow's dress of black which she never left off, standing, glad of any crumbs of notice which might fall to her in the corner of the drawing-room where Catherine the successful reigned supreme. It angered the girl that her mother should be so humble-minded—but yet it was quite characteristic of her. And what a contrast was in those two scenes! Who made her think of this at the very moment when, rushing out to escape from her mother, she had felt the gulf of incomprehension between them more bitterly than ever before? It could not be anything but a kind influence that did it, a good fairy, or even perhaps a friendly angel, grieved at the emancipation of this child from the tenderest bonds of nature. Anyhow Hester thought, with a sudden moistening of her eyelids, of the pretty creature in the picture and the widow in the black gown at the same moment. From white satin to crape, from twenty to fifty—ah, and more than these, from the thoughtless prosperity of a creature who had never known anything different, to the humiliation borne so sweetly of the too-submissive artless soul. Her eyelids moistened, and the sun caught them, and amused himself making tiny rainbows in the long lashes. Hester's heart too was caught and touched. Poor *petite mère*! how much, as she would have said herself, she had "gone through!"

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And then something occurred to Hester which made her set her white teeth and clench her hands. If she pleased she could set that right again which was so wrong. She could put back her mother in the White House she loved, take down the innocent portrait in white satin, and hang it in the place of honour once more; throw open finer rooms than Catherine's for the reception of, oh! so different a company—society in which no one should be overlooked, and in which Catherine's gentle rival should be supreme. She could do all this if she chose. The thought suddenly bursting upon her made her head go round. She could put her mother in the place from which it seemed (wrongly, but yet that was so natural an impression) Catherine had driven her, turn the tables altogether upon Catherine, and make a new centre, a new head, everything new. The girl raised her head with a little shake and toss like a high-bred horse, as this strange and sudden suggestion came into her mind like an arrow. She could do it all. The suggestion that she could do it when it came from her mother had been an insult and wrong; but when it came as it did now, though there was horror in it, there was also temptation, the sharp sting of an impulse. What was the dreadful drawback? Nothing but Harry: no monster, nothing terrible, a good fellow, a docile mind—one who had never been unkind. Hester had judged him with his sister for a long time, but of late days she had learned to separate Harry from Ellen. He had always been *nice*, as Mrs. John said—not great indeed or noble, but honest and kind in his simple way. Once at least (Hester remembered) he had—what was nothing less than heroic in the circumstances—stepped forward, broken all the Redborough laws of precedence, and "taken down" her mother at one of the Grange parties, in entire indifference to the fact that ladies more great were waiting for his arm. This recollection jumped suddenly into her mind as she sat in the solitude thinking it all over. He had always done his best, coming to her, standing by her side, with not much to say indeed, but with a sort of silent championship which Hester had laughed at, but which she remembered now. He was not very often present at the Grange parties; but when he was there, this was what he had done. It was no great matter, but in the excited state of her mind it told upon her. Edward came only by moments when the company was otherwise engaged, and then spoke to her rather by signs, by that shrug of the shoulders and elevation of the eyebrows, than in words. But Harry had penetrated to her corner and stood by her, making himself rather larger than usual that everybody might see him. The ungrateful girl had laughed, and had not been proud of her large-limbed champion; but when she thought of it now her heart melted to him. *He* had not been afraid of what people would say. And after all, to be able to set everything right, to restore her mother's comfort and exaltation, to be free and rich, with no greater drawback than Harry, would that be so difficult to bear? She shivered at the thought; but yet, that she did so much as ask herself this question showed how far already her thoughts had gone.

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After the untoward conversation of this morning, Mrs. John took great pains to keep Harry back. She ventured even to write a note to him, composed in great anxiety, very much underlined and emphatic. "I have sounded her, and find her mind *a complete blank* on that subject. She has never thought about it, and *she has seen no one*, as you remarked. If you will but put off a little, I feel sure it will be followed by THE HAPPIEST RESULTS." Circumstances, as it happened, served Mrs. John's purpose, and made it indispensable to put off a little any formal advances. For Harry had to leave Redborough on business for a week or two. His consequent absence from the Vernony was seen with great satisfaction by the neighbours, who knew no reason for that absence.

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"He has seen his mistake in time," the Miss Vernon-Ridgways said, congratulating each other, as if the destruction of poor Hester's supposed hopes and projects was some gain to them; and Mr. Mildmay Vernon nodded his head over his newspaper, and chuckled and announced that Harry was no fool. They all remarked with much particularity to Mrs. John that her visitor had not long continued his assiduities.

"But we can't expect, you know, that a young man should always be coming out here," said Miss Matilda. "What was there to gain by it? and that is the rule nowadays. Besides, dear Catherine does not like these nephews of hers, as she calls them—no more nephews than I am!—to see too much of *us*. They might hear things which she wouldn't wish them to hear."

Mr. Mildmay's remark was jaunty like himself. "So Harry has given you up! Young dog, it's what they all do, you know. He loves and he rides away. I was no better myself, I suppose."

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Mrs. John could have cried with humiliation and pain. She explained that Mr. Harry was absent; that he had told her he was going away; but these kind people laughed in her face. Perhaps this too had a certain effect upon Hester's mind. She heard the laugh, though her mother did all she could to keep her from hearing; and an impulse to show them her power—to prove once for all that she could have everything they prized, the money, and the finery, and the "position," which they all envied and sneered at, when she pleased—an impulse less noble, but also keener than the previous one, came suddenly into her mind. When Harry came back, however, Hester quailed at the thought of the possibility which she had not rejected. She saw him coming, and stole out the other way, round the pond and under the pine-trees, so as to be able to reach the house of the Morgans without being seen. And when Harry appeared he had to run the gauntlet of the three bitter spectators, the chorus of the little drama, without seeing its heroine.

"Dear Harry, back again!" the Miss Vernon-Ridgways cried; "how nice of you to come again. We made up our minds you had given us up. It was so natural that you should tire of us, a set of shabby people. And dear Catherine is so fond of you; she likes to keep you to herself."

"I don't know that she's so fond of me. I've been in town on business," Harry said, eager to escape from them.

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Mr. Mildmay patted him on the shoulder with his newspaper. "Keep your free will, my boy," he said; "don't give in to habits. Come when you please, and go when you please—that's a man's

rule."

Harry looked at this feeble Mephistopheles as if he would have liked to kick him, but of course he did not; because he was feeble and old, and "a cad," as the young man said in his heart; and so went in by the verandah door to see Hester, and found her not, which was hard, after what he had gone through. Mrs. John pinned him down for a talk, which she was nervously anxious for, and which he, after the first moment, liked well enough too; and perhaps it was as well, he consented to think, that he should see how the land lay.

Meanwhile, Hester very cautiously had crept into the house of the old people next door. The two houses were divided only by a partition, yet how different the atmosphere was! The keen inquisitions of the Vernons, its hungry impatience to know and see everything, its satirical comments, its inventions of evil motives, were all unknown here. And even her mother's anxieties for her own advancement put a weary element into life, which in the peaceful parlour of the old captain and his wife existed no more than any other agitation. The old lady seated in the window, putting down her book well pleased when the visitor came in, was an embodiment of tranquillity. She had lived no easy life; she had known many troubles and sorrows, laboured hard and suffered much; but all that was over. Her busy hands were still, her heart at rest. Hester did not know sometimes what this great tranquillity meant, whether it was the mere quiet of age, almost mechanical, a blank of feeling, or if it was the calm after great storms, the power of religious consolation and faith. It filled her sometimes with a little awe—sometimes with a sort of horror. To think that she, with all the blood dancing in her veins, should ever come to be like that! And yet even in her small round she had seen enough to be sure that these old people had a kind of happiness in their quiet which few knew. Mrs. Morgan took off her spectacles, and closed them within the book she had been reading, well pleased when Hester appeared. The captain had gone out; she was alone; and perhaps she did not care very much for her book. At all events, Hester was her favourite, and the sight of the girl's bright looks and her youth, her big eyes always full of wonder, her hair that would scarcely keep straight, the "something springy in her gait," pleased the old lady and did her good.

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"May I stay and talk to you?" Hester said.

"You shall stay, dear, certainly, if you think it right; but I see everything from my window, and Harry Vernon has just gone in to see your mother. Do you know?"

"I saw him coming," Hester said, with a cloud upon her face, which looked like displeasure, but was indeed the trouble of her self-discussion and doubt as to what she should do.

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"Something is wrong," said the old lady, "and you have come to tell me. Are you going to marry Harry Vernon, Hester?"

"Would that be something wrong?" cried the girl, looking up quickly, with a certain irritation. She did not mean to have so important a question fore-judged in this easy way.

"That is according as you feel, my dear; but I fear he is not good enough for you. Catherine says ___"

Now the Morgans were altogether of Catherine's faction, being her relations, and not—as the other members of the community remembered with much resentment—Vernons at all. It was a sinful use of the family property as concentrated in Catherine's hand, to support these old people who had no right to it. More or less this was the sentiment of the community generally, even, it is to be feared, of Mrs. John herself; and consequently, as an almost infallible result, they were on Catherine's side, and took her opinions. Hester stopped the mouth of the old lady, so to speak, hastily holding up her hand.

"That is a mistake," she cried; "Catherine is quite wrong! She does not like him; but he is honest as the skies—he is good. You must not think badly of him because Catherine has a prejudice against him."

"That is a rash thing for you to say. Catherine is a great deal older, and a great deal wiser than you."

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"She may be older, and she may be wiser; but she does not know everything," said Hester. "There is one prejudice of hers you don't share—she thinks the same of me."

This staggered the old lady.

"It is true—she does not understand you somehow; things seem to go the wrong way between times."

"Am I difficult to understand?" cried Hester. "I am only nineteen, and Catherine is sixty—"

"You are not quite so easy as A B C," said Mrs. Morgan, with a smile; "still I acknowledge that is one thing against her judgment. But you do not answer my question. Are you going to marry Harry Vernon?"

Hester, seated in the shelter of the curtain, invisible from outside, hardly visible within, looked out across the Common to the place where she had sat and pondered, and breathed a half-articulate "No."

"Then, Hester, you should tell him so," said the old lady. "You should not keep him hanging on. Show a little respect, my dear, to the man who has shown so much respect to you."

"Do you call that respect?" said Hester, and then she added, lowering her voice, "My mother wishes it. She thinks it would make her quite happy. She says that she would want nothing

more."

"Ah!" said the old lady, "that means——" It is to be feared that she was going to say something not very respectful to Hester's mother, about whom, also, Catherine's prejudice told: but she checked herself in time. "That gives it another aspect," she said.

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"Do you think it would be right to marry a man only because your mother wished it?" asked Hester, fixing her eyes on Mrs. Morgan's face.

"Sometimes," said the old lady, with a smile.

"Sometimes! I thought you were like the captain, and believed in love."

"Sometimes," she said again. "It does not do in every case: that is what I object to the captain and you for. You are always so absolute. Love rejects suitableness; and if Catherine is not quite wrong —"

"She is quite wrong!" cried Hester again, vehemently. "She does not know Harry any more than she knows me. He is not clever, but he is true."

"Then marry him, my dear."

"Why should I marry him?—one does not marry every one whom Catherine misjudges—oh, there would be too many!—nor even to please mother."

"I am perhaps as poor a judge as Catherine, Hester."

"Now you are unjust—now you are unkind!" cried the girl, with anger in her eyes.

"Come," said Mrs. Morgan, "you must not assault me. You are so young and so fierce: and my old man is not here to take my part."

"I cannot ask him, because he is a man," said Hester; "but I know what he would say. He would not say 'Sometimes' like you; he would say 'Never!' And that is what I think too."

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"Because you are so young, my dear; and my old man, bless him, he is very young. But this world is a very strange place. Right and wrong, are like black and white; they are distinct and easy. The things that baffle us are those that perhaps are not quite right, but certainly are not wrong."

"Do you call it not wrong—to do what your heart revolts at to please your mother?"

"I call that right in one sense; but I would not use such strong language, Hester," the old lady said.

"This must be metaphysics," said the girl. "Sophistry, isn't it? casuistry, I don't know what to call it; but I see through you. It would be right to do a great many things to please her, to make my dress her way instead of mine, to stop at home when she wanted me though I should like to go out; but not—surely not, Mrs. Morgan——"

"To marry the man of her choice, though he is not your own?"

Hester nodded her head, her face glowing with the sudden blush that went and came in a moment. She was agitated though she did not wish to show it. The impulse to do it became suffocating, the shiver of repugnance stronger as she felt that the danger was coming near.

"I am not so sure," said the old lady in her passionless calm. "Sometimes such a venture turns out very well; to please your mother is a very good thing in itself, and if you are right about his character, and care for no one else, and can do it—for after all that is the great thing, my dear—if *you can do it*—it might turn out very well, better than if you took your own way."

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"Is that all that is to be thought of, whether it will turn out well?" cried Hester, indignantly. "You mean if it is successful; but the best way is not always successful."

"Success in marriage means almost everything," the old lady said.

Then there was a pause. Separated only by the partition, Harry Vernon was discoursing with Mrs. John on the same subject. He was telling her all he would do for his wife when he got her. The White House should be refurnished; but if she pleased the best of the old things, "the ormolu and all that rubbish," Harry said, which gave the poor lady a wound in spite of her great and happy emotion, should be put into the rooms which were to be her rooms for life; but for Hester he would have everything new. And he thought he saw his way to a carriage: for the phaeton, though Ellen was fond of it, was not quite the thing, he allowed, for a lady. He had got just about that length, and was going on, a little excited by his own anticipations, and filling his future mother-in-law with delight and happiness, when Hester, on the other side of the wall, suddenly sprang up and cried, throwing up her hands—

"But I cannot do it!" in tones so painful and so clear that it was a wonder they did not penetrate the wainscoting.

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Mrs. Morgan, who had been waiting for a reply, folded her old fingers—worn with the hard usage of life, but now so quiet—into each other, and said, softly—

"That was what I thought."

CHAPTER XIII.

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CATHERINE'S OPINION.

It is not to be supposed that Harry's visits, which made so much commotion at the Vernony, could have entirely escaped the keen observation of the Grange. Catherine Vernon shared, with most sovereigns and the ruling class in general, the peculiarity, not indeed a very unusual one, of liking to know everything that went on within her sphere. It was not as gossip, nor, she would have said with some reason, from curiosity alone. She had for so long been all-powerful, and sure that the means were in her hand to help those that wanted help, and to regulate affairs in general for the benefit of the world, that it had become a necessity, almost a duty on her part, to keep herself informed of everything that went on. When an individual feels capable of performing the part of a visible Providence, it becomes incumbent upon that person, so far as possible, to know everything, to shut his eyes to no detail, to note every little incident, and to encourage not only the confidences of his possible clients and *protégés*, but the observations of all surrounding them, and every hint as to their motives, their intentions and purposes, that can be got at. The outside crowd, knowing nothing of the meaning of these investigations, is apt to mistake them altogether; but Catherine did not care much about the outside world. It was her wish that everything should be told her, and she was perhaps too apt to think that those who were not willing or able to open their hearts, were people who had secrets in their life, and probably a good deal that would not bear the light. She liked her friends to bring her news, and never thought anything too trivial to be added to the mass of information which was in her hands. She knew the habits of her neighbours, and the good and evil fortune that befell them, better sometimes than they did themselves. Parents, who were doubtful about the proceedings of their sons, had they asked Catherine, would have known all about them. So the prince, in a little State, may often interest himself graciously about the affairs of his subjects, and monarchs are the best of genealogists, knowing who married who all the world over, even outside of the Almanach de Gotha. It is not a taste which can be indulged without falling into an occasional appearance of pettiness; but yet there is a great deal to be said for this degree of interest in our fellow creatures, and there is no way in which it can be kept up so well as in a country town, where everybody knows everybody else. This is perhaps rather an elaborate preface to introduce the simple fact that Catherine Vernon from the very beginning had known of Harry's visit to the Vernony. Her own woman, Meredith by name, shared her mistress's task, without Catherine's fine reason for it, and carried it deeper than Catherine, not refusing any garbage of the lanes to satisfy her appetite. And she was a woman who saw everything and knew everybody. It was no more than Harry's second or third visit when she pointed him out to her mistress, walking past in his summer morning suit, which the long evenings permitted a young man to retain while daylight lasted and he could be about. Harry was very carefully got up; he wore light clothes, and ties of the most interesting description. He had always the stick which was in fashion, the hat of the moment; and a very pleasant sight he was striding along in the summer evening, going where love carried him, with honest intentions and a simple heart. He was not perhaps capable of a very refined or poetical sentiment. He had at that time no doubt whatever that Hester would accept him gratefully, not so much for himself (in which point he had an instinctive humility), but for the good things he could give her. The glamour and the thousand little enchantments of love were not in him, but he was honest and true, as Hester had said. He meant this poor girl, whom most people, in Catherine's drawing-room and elsewhere, passed by without notice, though some thought her pretty—he meant her as his wife to be a happy and much-honoured woman. And what was more, he meant to be good to his mother-in-law. He might have been a romantic paladin, or a man of genius, and not have been so excellent, so worthy of all admiration as that. It never occurred to Harry to go another way, to conceal what he was about from prying eyes. He was not ashamed of what he was about. All the world might watch his steps so far as he cared, and it must have required a distinct effort on the part of any honest heart not to like the sight of him as he went a-wooing, and wish him a happy ending. Perhaps it would be too much to say that Catherine made that effort; but she was not favourable to Harry as to his cousin who was under her own roof.

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It is scarcely possible for any eyes but those of a parent (and even the eyes of a parent are not always impartial) to look upon two young candidates for favour with exactly the same sentiments. If it is too much to say that one will be loved and the other hated, at least the balance will be unequal. Edward had found means from the beginning to please his patroness and relative. He had been—is not this the grand reason?—so good: he had been ready at her service when she wanted him, he had stayed at home, he had been son and daughter to the lonely woman. All that she knew of him was excellent, and she had no reason to imagine there was anything to know which was not equally good.

Catherine was one of the people who say that they do not look for gratitude. If Edward had not appreciated the kindness which picked him up as it were from the roadside, she would but have laughed; she would not have shown either surprise or pain; but the fact that he did feel her kindness, and devote himself to her, touched her deeply. She was as well off as if he had been her son, far better off than many mothers with sons. But Harry was very different. For a long time she had made up her mind that Harry was her great failure. He and his sister had never attempted to attach themselves to Catherine. They had considered their elevation to the White House, and the honours of the bank, as owing to their own merits, and had set up a sort of heir-apparent establishment always in opposition. With the natural instinct of a woman, she had concluded it all to be Ellen's fault; but Harry had not the good sense to separate himself from his sister, or even to imply that he did not support her in her proceedings: far from that, he stood by her with the utmost loyalty. Though he never was anything but deferential and respectful in his dull way to his benefactress, he never would allow it to be supposed that he did not approve of

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his sister and back her up. If Catherine saw the merit of this faithfulness, it was in a grudging way; and, as a matter of fact, she did not like Harry. There was nothing in reality to find fault with in him. He was very steady at his business, notwithstanding the rival claims of cricket in summer and football in winter. And when he was asked to dinner at the Grange, he was as punctual as clockwork, with an expanse of shirt front that would have been a credit to any man. But he did not please Catherine. He had given her a reproof which stung, on that occasion when he "took down" Mrs. John, without waiting to know what person of importance should have gone before. Nothing that could have been said would have stung Catherine so much as that good-natured act, and it was all the more hard upon her that in her heart (always a good and generous one) she approved Harry. It was a reproach to her, and still more, it was a reproach to Edward, who had never taken the slightest notice of Mrs. John's presence, but left her among the neglected ones. Catherine had been doubly angry with Harry ever since that evening. She would not allow even that he was a handsome fellow.

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"He is big enough," she would say, resenting the fact that he was a head taller than Edward, and twice as strong. "He is a fine animal, if you like: but I don't see how a man with white eyelashes can be considered handsome."

Edward did not oppose his aunt in this any more than in other things. "I allow," he would say, "that he is not clever." But he shook his head, as one who would deprecate a too true accusation when Miss Vernon held Harry up to ridicule. "No, he is not clever; he will never set the Thames on fire," Edward said.

Miss Vernon saw Harry pass the third time he went to the Vernonry, and afterwards she looked for him regularly. "Who was it for?" she asked, with an ardent feminine appreciation of the only motive which could induce a man to hurry over his dinner and get to the Vernonry in time for the humble community's tea. This was a question not very hard to answer, seeing that the next moment she added to herself, "Who else could it be?" It could not be Matilda, or Martha, who were neither young nor fair. It was very unlikely to be Mrs. Reginald, though she was young enough, and not without beauty. "But Harry is not the man to burden himself with a lot of children," said Catherine, with an unnecessary scoff at the poor fellow who was not her favourite. Thus there was only one person whom it could be. It gave her a sort of pang of amusement when she concluded upon this—Hester! that proud, troublesome creature—she who would never give in, who put on the airs of a princess in the Grange drawing-room, and declined to go to supper—she with the spirit of a revolutionary, and the temper of a—demon—(no, no, this was perhaps too bad—the temper of a—Vernon, Catherine said to herself with a laugh)—she to fall to the lot of Harry! This was so strangely funny, so paradoxical, so out of character, that it amused Catherine altogether beyond description, yet gave her a strange blow. What a ridiculous combination! If the world had been ransacked for two who ought not to come together, these two would be that pair. What would they do with each other? how could they ever pull together—the one all eagerness and vigour, the other stolid and heavy? Catherine was almost tempted to be sorry for the girl, but the next moment she laughed again. Oh, it was easy to understand! Mrs. John must have managed it all. She would see in it a way of recovering all her lost glories, of getting back her footing in that ridiculous White House, which had been adapted to her silly taste from the beginning. Oh, no doubt it was her doing! She would talk the girl over; she would persuade her into it, "with a host of petty maxims preaching down a daughter's heart." And it was with a gleam of vindictive amusement that Catherine assured herself that Mrs. John would find herself mistaken. After she had made the marriage she would be left in the lurch. Harry was not a man to put up with a mother-in-law. Thus Catherine Vernon, though she was a clever woman, misconceived and misunderstood them all.

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But yet it did give her a natural pang. That girl, who compelled her attention somehow, though she had no favour for her—who inspired her with a certain respect, notwithstanding the consistent opposition to herself which Hester had always shown—to think of that ambitious creature, all fire and life being quenched in the dulness of Harry, put out in the heavy tranquillity of his athletic existence—to score at cricket matches, and spend long wearisome days out in the sun, watching for the runs he got! But then, she would be well off, would have the White House and all sorts of good things. Oh, no occasion to be sorry for her. She would get her compensation. And then Catherine thought, with a jealous displeasure which she felt angry with herself for entertaining, of the arrangements which Harry's marriage would make necessary. Up to this time he had more or less held his position at her pleasure, but she had no reason, she was aware, to refuse to satisfy all her engagements, and make him actually independent, as he had been virtually for a long time back. She would not have the slightest excuse for doing it. Everything had gone on perfectly well. There were no complaints of him at the bank. The business flourished and made progress. But the thought that Hester would be thus immediately placed on a sort of equality with herself, and Mrs. John reinstated, vexed her. It was a mean sentiment, but she could not help it. It vexed her in spite of herself.

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The news had been, it is scarcely necessary to say, communicated to Edward at a very early stage. Miss Vernon had called him to her, after dinner, as soon as he came up stairs to the drawing-room, to the window from which the road was visible winding along the side of the Common to the Vernonry.

"Do you see that?" she said, pointing his cousin out.

What? He saw the Common lying in all its sweetness, its roughness and undulations standing out in the level sunset rays, every bush casting a shadow. He was young, and he had at least a scientific love of nature, and longed to be out poking into those beds of herbage, feeling the fresh air on his face; and it was with a secret grudge in his heart that he realised the difference

between the light, strong figure moving along buoyant with life and liberty, and he himself in his evening clothes in his aunt's drawing-room, seeing it all from within four walls.

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"What?" he said, thinking that he would rather not see the fair out-door evening world since he could have no share in it. "Why—is it Harry?" and then he felt that he hated the fellow who was his own master.

"He is going a-wooing," Miss Vernon said.

She was sitting in her favourite place which commanded this prospect, the Common, the Vernonry, the tall pines, and the red bars of the sunset behind. The sunset was her favourite entertainment, and in summer she always sat here. Edward stood behind, looking out over her head. She did not see the grimace with which he heard these words. And he did not reply for some time. It gave him a shock more sharp even than that with which Catherine herself had heard it first, though to be sure there was no reason why.

"Ah!" he said indifferently, "who can he find to woo about here?" But he knew very well in his heart what the answer would be.

"Only one person, so far as I can make out. It must be that girl of Mrs. John's. I suppose she is what you call pretty, though she has never been a favourite of mine."

"But you can't confine prettiness to your favourites, Aunt Catherine," said Edward, with a sharp smile which he had sometimes.

"No, that's true. I deserved that you should hit that blot. She is pretty I know. Poor Harry, he will have his hands full, what with the mild mother and the wild daughter. I wonder at the girl though. She is an ambitious, energetic thing, and poor dear Harry will never set the Thames on fire as you say."

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"Did I say it? No, I don't think he will; but he has solid qualities."

"Very solid—the White House and his share in the bank. Oh, there will be an equivalent! And to think that little schemer, that soft little woman that looks as if she could not harm a fly, should have managed to secure herself in this cunning way and get her daughter back to the point she started from! Who would have thought it? There is nothing so astute as simplicity."

Edward made no reply, and this was a thing Miss Vernon did not like. She required a response. Silence felt like disapproval, and as there was a strong silent protest in her heart against everything that was mean or petty in what she said, she was apt to resent this want of acquiescence all the more. She looked back at him when he did not expect it, and was startled to see a look she had never seen before, a look that astonished her, on his face. It was something like a snarl of contempt and despite, but it disappeared in a moment and she could not believe her eyes.

"Are you so sure that Hester will marry him?" was all that Edward said.

"Marry him! Why how could he have so much as looked that way without encouragement? To be sure she will marry him. Where could she find any one who had so much to offer? The girl is not a fool. Besides, her mother would not let her if she wished it; and of course she would not wish it, an ambitious girl to whom her present position is intolerable. Don't you remember her look on the Thursdays, which we both remarked?"

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Edward had remarked it, not exactly in the same way as Catherine had done. Hester's look had made him ashamed of himself, but he had not had the strength to go and display himself by her side as Harry had done. It made him furious to think of Harry standing there by her in the corner, not caring what their patroness might think. It was a courage of which he was not capable.

"Don't you think," he said, softly, "that we are going too fast, Aunt Catherine, in every way? Harry's visit may be a chance one. There may be no purpose at all in it, or it may have some other purpose."

"He was there last night and on last Saturday and Wednesday, and I don't know how many evenings besides. Oh no, there can be no doubt on the subject. It will be a great amusement for the Vernonry; the dear old ladies want something to amuse them."

This was said of the Ridgways and Mr. Mildmay, who were all younger than Catherine, and one of them a man. But that fact increased the pleasantries all the more.

The curious thing was, that through all this Catherine was aware that what she was saying was unworthy of her, and in reality was disgusted with herself, and kept a mental reckoning of all the meannesses of which she had been guilty. There were first her remarks upon Mrs. John, which indeed might be true enough, but which she ought not to have made; and her certainty that scheming and "encouragement" must have been used to entrap Harry, and that Hester would marry him for an equivalent. No moralist would have noted these faults more clearly than she did herself, yet somehow she went on with them all the same. But it vexed and annoyed her to find Edward so constrained. He said, "Will you come and have a turn in the garden?" but not in his usual tone. That turn in the garden had been doubly pleasant to her, because he had made it appear that it was pleasant to him too.

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"I think not to-night," she said.

"There is a new moon. It is a lovely evening," said he. "I think you ought to go. The sunset on one side, and that clear, pale shining in the east on the other, make such a beautiful contrast. Come, Aunt Catherine, it will do you good."

"You think it will blow the ill-natured thoughts out of my head," she said with a laugh.

"Have you ill-natured thoughts? I was not aware of it," said Edward; and then as she did not move he added—"If you will not come I think I must go and give a little attention to some papers I brought home with me. I had not time to look at them during the day."

"What papers?" she said quickly.

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"Oh, only some prospectuses and details about investments," he said with a careless air, and left her: to her great surprise.

He had been in the habit of telling her of any work he had, all about it, and of sitting with her for an hour or two at least. Catherine was surprised, but as is natural in a first shock of this kind, having got over the momentary prick of it, assured herself that it was accidental and meant nothing: yet was a little more vexed with *that* girl and with Harry, because in the same way their concerns had brought about this little, little break, this momentary lapse in the continuance. She could not any longer amuse herself with the prospect of the Vernonry, and the little excitement of this dawning story. There were a great many pricks about the story altogether, sentiments and sensations of which, when left alone and without the support of any moral backer up, of Meredith's stimulating disclosures or Edward's assent, she felt ashamed. It was wrong to speak as she had done about the astuteness of Mrs. John's simplicity. Why should not the mother wish to place her child in the position which she, after all by no fault of her own, poor creature! had lost? Catherine escaped from the tingling of shame at her own pettiness which had gone through her, by considering the final arrangements which she would have to make in view of Harry's marriage. Practically she was always magnanimous; she would have scorned a petty cutting off, a restraint of liberality, a condition to her gifts. Her givings were always large, and if her mind was warped by the sense of benefactions unappreciated, or kindness unprized, of reaping envy and resentment where she should have got gratitude and love, was it not the fault of her pensioners more than her own, the fault of human nature, which she had been forced to believe she saw through, and which—in order not to break her heart over it—she was obliged to laugh at and despise?

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It would have given Catherine Vernon a sharper shock still if she had seen into Edward's mind as he went away from her, bitterly feeling that while other men could taste the sweetness of freedom and of love, he was attached to an old woman's apron-strings, and had to keep her company and do her pleasure, instead of taking the good of his youth like the rest. It was a sudden crisis of this bitterness which had made it impossible for him to bear the yoke which he usually carried so patiently, and which she, deceived in this instance, believed to be pleasant to him, the natural impulse of a tranquil and home-loving disposition. Had she known how he regarded it, how violently he suppressed and subdued himself, the shock would have been a terrible one; for she was slow to put faith in those around her, and she clung to the one who had been able to impress her with a sense of trustworthiness, with a double tenacity. Edward breathed more freely when he got out of that drawing-room where he always seemed so entirely at home. The library in which he sat when he was alone was a little less oppressive in so far that he was alone in it, but the recollection of Harry going lightly along in his freedom, going a-wooing, had raised a ferment in the breast of the other which it was very difficult to quiet down. Since the morning when he made her acquaintance first, Hester had been an interest to the self-sufficing young man. Perhaps it was only a little warmer than the interest he felt in his botany, in a new specimen, but it had continued through all those years. When he spoke that little aside to her at the party, with his eyebrows and shoulders in a suppressed and confidential attitude which placed himself and her in the same category of compelled assistants at a lugubrious merrymaking where neither of them "got on"—he felt her in her poor little muslin frock and her high indignation to be far the most interesting person in the room, and he resented the necessity which made it impossible to him as the official host to separate himself from the more important people, and show the opinion he had of her. Here again the disabilities of his good fortune weighed upon Edward. He was the host; he was the first person there next to Catherine, her representative, the master of all her wealth. Harry was not of any authority in the house; so he could do as he pleased, and earn the gratitude of Hester; but Edward could neither go to her side in her corner, nor set out of a lovely evening in his pleasantest clothes to woo her, as a free man might. He was not sure that he wanted to woo her, any more than as a fine specimen; but he could not bear the impudence of the other fellow who thought himself good enough to go after her, and whom Catherine thought so sure to win. Edward could not contemplate with any self-possession the idea that Harry might win. It made him angry, it made him furious; it made him for the moment too much a natural man, too sincere and real to be capable of his usual self-suppression. Harry would have an equal share with himself of the bank; they were equal there in power and authority, and in the profits they drew. Why then was it that Harry should be his own master and Edward the slave of an old woman! This was the utterance of his passion, of the sincerity which was forced upon him by the enticements of the summer night, the freedom in the air, and the sight of all the privileges which Harry exercised so easily without knowing they were privileges at all. No doubt the fellow thought himself good enough for Hester, perhaps believed that she would jump at him, and was encouraging him, and ready to accept his proffered hand as soon as ever he should hold it out. This thought made Edward's blood boil, and the confinement of the Grange became so oppressive to him that he did not know how to bear it. He indemnified himself by plunging into the midst of the bundle of papers which he had not chosen to describe to Catherine. In these papers lay far more excitement than all Harry's privileges had yet supplied. A battery of artillery planted in front of this peaceful Grange with all its matches alight would scarcely have been more full of danger. There was enough in the packet to tear the house up by

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its roots, and send its walls flying in a whirlwind of ashes and ruin. Edward sat down to examine it as another man might have flown to brandy or laudanum. Dreams were in it of sudden successes, of fortunes achieved in a moment. Castles in the air more dazzling than ever rose in a fairy tale. He revenged himself on his bonds, on the superior happiness of his rival, on Catherine above all, the unconscious cause of his imprisonment, by this—Here was enough, all ready and in his hands, to ruin them all.

CHAPTER XIV.

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HARRY'S VIEW.

Of all the people who discussed his affairs and were interested in his prosperity, Harry Vernon himself would have agreed most entirely with Catherine. He had no very elevated ideal either of life in general or even of love, though that influenced him at the present moment very powerfully. He had got to be "very fond," as he would himself have described it, of Hester. He thought her very pretty to begin with, very delightful, attractive, and amusing—the sort of girl with whom life never would be dull. He thought her clever, one who would be able to manage his now somewhat too large and unwieldy house and take the trouble off his hands; he thought that handsomely dressed, as of course she would be, she would look very nice at the head of his table and make it popular—better even than Ellen had done: for in Ellen's time it had been somewhat fast and noisy, more than Harry, with the instincts of a respectable citizen and man of business, felt to be advantageous, though he had enjoyed it well enough. In all these particulars he felt that his affections were leading him wisely, and that not merely love—always avowedly more or less folly—but discrimination and sense were in his choice. But he would have thought Catherine perfectly right about the advantages on Hester's side, and he would not have been disgusted or offended by the suggestion that Mrs. John had schemed to place her daughter in the White House, and done her best not to let such an eligible suitor slip through her hands. And quite right too, he would have said! He knew that he would be "a catch" for Hester, and that as she was no fool, it was inconceivable that she should not jump at him. This idea did not offend him at all; that she should marry him because he could give her rank which otherwise she would not have, was a natural, sensible, perfectly legitimate reason to Harry. Had there been a rival in the field with greater things to offer, he would have felt that he had a right to pause, to think what was most to her advantage. But as there was nobody, he thought probably that Hester would be a great fool if she made any difficulty. Catherine had offended herself and offended Edward by her suggestion, but she would not have offended Harry. "That is about it—that is the true state of the case," he would have said. And it is possible that he might have represented that notwithstanding the fact that she had no money, Hester would not be an altogether bad investment; for she had connections. Mrs. John might be a silly little woman, but she was Sir John Westwood's cousin, and a little more backing up from the county people would do the Vernons no harm. Thus he took a very common-sense view of the whole concern, thinking it perfectly reasonable that Mrs. John should scheme, and that Hester should consider the advantages. He thought even that she had probably calculated the uses of holding back, and that her expeditions with the old captain, her disappearances at the time of his own visits, were done with a distinct intention of drawing a fellow on. It made him very angry, especially as matters came to a crisis, to find her absent, and only Mrs. John, very nervous and apologetic, waiting for him when he went in: but after the first bitterness of the disappointment, he was ready to allow that it was good policy, and that he was all the more anxious in the pursuit because she thus played with him and kept him in uncertainty. If Hester had but known that she was supposed to be "drawing him on" by her absences! but fortunately she did not know. And nothing could have made them understand each other on that point. They belonged to two different species, and talked different languages. But the superficial explanation which Catherine was ashamed of herself for giving, and which Edward despised, would have seemed quite natural to Harry, though in many ways he was better than they were, and far more true to his own system of morality. He neither hid nor deceived, he did not cheat himself nor any one else; and truth is so precious that even a low matter-of-fact truth is better than half a falsehood, however delicately and cleverly carried out. Harry was all genuine throughout, not elevated in kind, but never pretending to be what he was not. He liked to think that he had a great many advantages to bestow, and that the lady of his hopes had too much good sense not to take these advantages into consideration. This was different from wild impulse and passion, which some people think finer things. But Harry did not think so; he knew nothing indeed about them. He considered that a man (and on the other side perhaps an heiress) might "please his fancy," in the first place, about his wife, before thinking of other matters: but that the girl should weigh the advantages, and strain a point to accept a good offer, was as clear to him as daylight. It would not in the smallest degree have vexed him to know that his own claims were thus reasonably weighed. He had the proud satisfaction of thinking that Hester was not very likely to get such another offer; and he felt sufficient confidence in her good sense to be sure that this must have its just influence upon her. Why should not it weigh with her? She was "no fool." She could not but see on which side the advantage lay.

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The only thing was that he got tired of waiting for the decision. He thought it unreasonable that having so honourably and unequivocally displayed his intentions, he should not be allowed to carry them out. Summer began to wane and autumn to come on, and yet he had never been able to speak to the object of his affections. At last his patience failed him altogether. He announced

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his mind to Mrs. John almost with solemnity. "I can't go on much longer," he said; "the servants worry me to death. Ellen always took that sort of thing off my hands. But I don't want Ellen to get in her nose again and spoil my wife's chances when she does come. The truth is, I should like to get married before Christmas, if I am to be married at all. Why should Hester hold me off and on? If she won't have me, let her say so, and I can look elsewhere. I don't think I should have much difficulty in finding—" he concluded, his annoyance going off in a half-smile of vanity as he caressed his light moustache.

A shiver ran through Mrs. John. Before Christmas! Even if Hester would consent at all, was it possible that her reluctance could be overpowered so soon, or that she should be made to acquiesce in Harry's quite practical and matter-of-fact view. "No doubt you want a lady in the house," she said, sympathetically. "I am sure if I could be of any use——"

"Oh yes, of course you could be of use," said the straightforward lover, "after we are married; but it would be making a laughing-stock of ourselves if I were to have you before. If there was any reason for putting off I might wait, but I don't see any reason. Once it's settled, we could make our arrangements comfortably. It is being hung up like this from week to week which is such a nuisance to me."

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He went away that evening almost angry. What was to be done? Mrs. John's natural instinct was to "talk to" Hester; but she had learned by experience that "talking to" is not a very effectual instrument. All that she had been able to say had been said, but without much apparent effect. She had pointed out all the advantages. She had shown, with tears in her eyes, what a change it would be—what an unspeakable, delightful difference. Insensibly to herself, Mrs. John had become eloquent upon the charms, if not of Harry, at least of the White House. But this had suddenly been brought home to her by her remorseless child, who said calmly, "Mother, if I could marry the house and let you have it, I would do so in a moment," which stopped Mrs. John's mouth.

"Marry the—house!" she said, with a surprised cry.

"It is of the house you are talking. I know it is nice—or at least I know you like it. I do not care for it myself."

"Oh, Hester, my first married home!"

"Yes, mother, I know. I wish I could get it for you—on easier terms," the girl said, with a sigh. And this was about all that ever came of talking to her. She was very obstinate: and such a strange girl.

But sometimes Providence, so much appealed to—whom we upbraid for not furthering us and backing up our plans—suddenly did interfere. It was entirely by chance, as people say. Mrs. John had gone out of the room not two minutes before, and Hester, who had been walking and had just come in, stood before the old-fashioned dark mirror which occupied the space between the windows, arranging her hair, which had been blown about by the wind. It was, as has been said, troublesome hair—so full of curls that the moment it had a chance it ran out of the level and orderly into rings and twists, which were quite unfashionable in those days. It had been loosened out by the wind, and she was trying to coax it back into its legitimate bondage, with her arms raised to her head, and her back turned to the door. Harry came in without knocking, and the first intimation Hester had that the long-avoided moment had come, and that there was no escape for her, was when she saw his large form in the glass, close to her, looming over her, his fair head above hers, looking down with admiration and tenderness upon her image. She turned round hastily, with a cry of astonishment, her rebellious locks escaping from her hands.

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"Why shouldn't you let it stay so? It is very pretty so," Harry said, looking at the curly mass with a smile, as if he had a great mind to take a lock of it in his fingers.

Hester sprang away from him, and twisted it up, she did not know how.

"It is so untidy—there is so much wind." She was angry with herself for apologising. It was he who ought to have apologised. She pushed the hair away behind her ears, and got it fastened somehow. "I did not hear you knock," she said.

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"I fear I didn't knock. The verandah door was open. I saw nobody about. I did not know whether I should find any one. You are so often out now."

"Yes, I walk with old Captain Morgan about this time. In the morning I am always at home."

"If I had known that I should have come in the morning," he said, "not regularly because of the bank, but I should have come once to see you. However, this is far better. I am so glad to find you. I have wished for this for months past. Has it never occurred to you that I was anxious to see you, Hester? You looked to me as if you were keeping away."

"Why should I keep away? I do always the same thing at the same hour. Captain Morgan is old—he requires to have somebody with him."

"And I—I am young, and I want somebody with me."

"Oh, it does not matter about young people," Hester said.

"I think it matters most of all, because they have their life before them; and, don't you know, the choice of a companion tells for so much——"

"A companion!—oh, that is quite a different question," said Hester. "It is teaching I have always wanted, never a companion's place."

"I have heard of that," said Harry. "When you were quite a little thing you wanted to teach, and Aunt Catherine would not let you. You—teaching! It would have been quite out of the question. Won't you sit down? Do come for once, now that I have found you, and sit down here."

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It was the little old-fashioned settee that was indicated, where there was just room for two.

"Oh, I have got things to do!" cried Hester, in alarm. "My mother will be here immediately, but I—have got something up stairs——"

"Always when I come," he said. "Just once, because I am here, listen to me, Hester. It won't take very long. I think you use me very ill. You know I come here for you, and you will never let me see you. And now when I find you by chance, you insist that you have something to do. Leave it till to-morrow. Perhaps after to-morrow," said Harry, in a lugubrious voice, "I may not be coming any more."

"Is anything to happen to-morrow?" said Hester, betrayed by his seeming gravity.

Then Harry cheered up again, and became more at his ease.

"Not," he said, "if something should happen to-night. That's what I wish—that something should happen now. Sit down, please, and listen. Don't you know, Hester—they say women always know—that I've been in love with you ever so long?"

"No, I don't know anything about it," said Hester, though a sudden flush came over her face.

She had seated herself on the sofa in a kind of desperation, fearing that he meant to place himself beside her. And such had been Harry's intention; but some dim sense of fitness moved him to depart from this portion of his programme. He stood before her instead, looking down upon her, feeling now that he had it all in his own hands.

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"It is true, though. What do you suppose I have been coming here for every night? *I think* I've been in love with you ever since I first saw you—when you were only a child. Now I'm alone since my sister is married, and quite free to choose where I like. He made a pause, but Hester did not say anything. She sat drawing patterns upon the carpet with her foot, listening—because she could not help it. She who was so full of eagerness and life, it seemed to Harry as if every line of her figure expressed the listlessness of a subject that wearied her. Now this was more than a fellow could stand, although even now he felt that it drew him on. "By Jove!" he cried, "one would think you were getting offers every day of your life."

She looked up at him with a brightening countenance.

"No," she said. "If this is an offer, Cousin Harry, it is the first I have ever had."

"And you think no more of it than that!" he cried, with most natural feeling, flinging himself down in a low wicker-work chair at her feet, so that he made it shake and tremble. This restored Hester once more to herself. She began to be amused, which, in the dull life she was leading, told for so much.

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"How should I take it? I don't know, indeed, for I never was in the circumstances before. It is true I have read about it in books," said Hester, considering. "A girl in a novel would say that it was a great honour you had done her, Cousin Harry," for he showed signs of natural impatience, jumping up and pacing noisily about the room. "Don't you see it is very difficult. You make a statement to me about your own state of mind, and then you look as if you expected something from me; but what am I to say? I am not in love with you—or anybody," Hester added quietly, as if by an after-thought.

He was coming towards her, with his lips apart ready to speak; but this quiet little additional word seemed to stop in a moment what he was going to say. He did not quite know how, nor did she know, whether she meant anything by it; but it had an immediate effect. He gave a gasp as if those arrested words almost choked him, then said, "Nor anybody?" suddenly. It had seemed certain to him before that: she never could have seen any one, and she had informed him that this was her first "offer"; nevertheless he took these words—having them thrown at him, as it were, in a surprise—as a great concession. He drew a long breath, and said—

"Then, Hester, there is the more chance for me."

Thus in a moment their relative positions were changed. Harry had begun by feeling that he had a great deal to bestow—many things which no girl in her senses could neglect or reject. But in a moment he had been reduced to what in chivalry should be a lover's only standing-ground, the right of telling his love with or without response, waiting absolutely upon his lady's pleasure, hoping for her bounty—no more. He was so carried away by this new impulse that he did not understand himself, or the change worked in him; but with a gasp as for breath, turned from the nineteenth-century version of love-making to the primitive one, not knowing what he did.

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"I don't know," said Hester. "Perhaps; I cannot tell. I don't know anything about it; and, if I must tell you the truth, Cousin Harry, I don't wish to know. It seems to me that all that is silly between you and me. You can come here as often as you like: my mother is always glad to see you. We are all very good friends. What advantage do you think there would be in turning everything upside down—in making a great fuss and disturbance and changing all our relations? I cannot see what object there is in it. I think we are much better to stay as we are."

"But I don't think so," said Harry stoutly. "If you're going to argue about it, I never was good at that sort of thing, and you might easily beat me. But *I* don't think so. I don't care about being good friends. I want you to belong to me, to live with me, you and your mother too. Why! we might go on as we are doing for a hundred years, and we never could be of any use to each other

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—"

Here Hester stopped him with raised hand and gesture. "Oh, yes, a great deal of use. To be friends is about the best thing in the world—"

"Not half so good," cried Harry, "as being man and wife! My house might all be at sixes and sevens, and you could not help me to manage it, living here; and you would never let me be of any use to you. Don't you see? if we were married I could give you everything you wanted, it would be natural. We should get on together, I know. I should never grudge you anything, and your mother could come back to her old home, and I should see to her comfort too. Whereas here, living as we are, what can I do?—or you for me?" said Harry. "Ah! that's all nonsense about being friends. It isn't your friend I want to be."

"What you say is very curious to me," said Hester. "There is a great deal that is very fine in it, Cousin Harry. To offer to give me all that is very nice of you, and I should like to help you to manage your house. I have often thought I should like to try—very likely I should not succeed, but I should like to try."

"It is the easiest thing in the world," he said with a smile that was tender, and touched Hester's heart. "As soon as ever you marry me—"

"But the preliminary is just what I don't like," said Hester. "I would rather not marry—any one. I don't see the need for it. We are very well as we are, but we don't know what a new state of things might do for us." [Pg 233]

"I know," said Harry, "what it would do for me. It would make me very happy and comfortable at home, which I am not now. It would settle us both in life. A young fellow is thought nothing of till he is married. He may go off to the bad at any time, he may take a wrong turn; and in business he is never relied upon in the same way. When he has a wife he has given hostages to society, they say—that is what it would do for me. Except being richer and better off, and able to make your mother comfortable, and so forth, I can't say, of course, what it would do for you."

"Nor I either," she said gravely. "All these things would be very good: but it might make me into something I shouldn't like. I feel afraid of it. I have no inclination to it, but all the other way."

"By Jove!" said Harry, which was an exclamation he never used save when very hard bested, "that is not very complimentary to me."

"Did you wish me to pay you compliments? No; we are arguing out the general question," said Hester, with her serious face.

Harry was at his wits' end with impatience and provokedness, if we may use such a word. He could have seized her with his hands and shaken her, and yet, all the time, he was still conscious that this strange treatment drew a fellow on.

"I suppose all this means that you won't have me?" he said, after a pause.

"I think so, Cousin Harry. I am not satisfied that it would do us any good; but don't rush away in a temper," she said, laying her hand lightly on his arm. "Don't be vexed; why should you? I don't mean to vex you. If I don't see a thing in the same light as you do, that is no reason why you should be angry." [Pg 234]

"By Jove!" said Harry again, "if a man is not to be vexed when he's refused, I wonder what you think he's made of?—not flesh and blood."

"Sense," said Hester, "and kindness. These are things you are made of, whether you are angry or not."

She had risen up, and stood looking at him, as he turned round hastily and made for the door; but this flattery (if it was flattery) stopped him. He turned round again and stood looking at her, tantalised, provoked, soothed, not knowing what to say.

"If you think all that of me, why won't you have me?" he said, stretching out wistful hands towards her.

Hester shook her head.

"I don't want to have—any one," she said.

Mrs. John had been listening on the stairs. Not listening—she was too far off to hear a word—but waiting for the indications which a step, a sound of movement, the opening of a door, might give. The stair was an old oaken one at the end of the passage, hidden in the evening dimness; dark at any time even in the day. When the door did open at last, though it did so with a little jar as from an agitated hand, yet two voices came out, and the sound of their conversation was not angry, nor like that of people who had quarrelled. But, on the other hand, it was not low like the talk of lovers; and Mrs. John could not conceive it possible that if he had been accepted Harry would have left the house without seeing her. That was impossible. Either nothing had been said on the subject, or else— But what else? She was confounded, and could not tell what to think. Hester went out with him to the verandah door. It was she who did most of the talking. She called out to him something that sounded like "Don't be long of coming back," as he went out. Mrs. John by this time had hurried out of the staircase, and rushed to a window whence she could see him departing. He turned round and waved his hand, but he also shook his head with a look more completely lover-like than Mrs. John had yet seen him cast at her child. It was full of tender reproach, yet pleasure, disappointment, but also something that was far from despair. "It is all very well for you to say so," he said. What did it mean? Mrs. John hurried down when he had [Pg 235]

disappeared, tingling with curiosity and anxiety. She found Hester sitting in the twilight quite unoccupied, her hands in her lap, her eyes gazing straight before her. Nothing could be more unlike her usual dislike to idleness. She was lying back on the settee, thinking, not even asking for lights. Mrs. John stole to her in the gathering darkness and gave her a sudden kiss. The mother was tremulous and shaken, the daughter very calm.

"Oh, Hester! what has happened? Have you accepted him?" said Mrs. John: "have you refused him? What has been going on? Now it is over, you might let me know." [Pg 236]

"I am just trying to think, mother," Hester said.

CHAPTER XV.

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WHAT EDWARD THOUGHT.

The day after this interview, which had excited everybody, and which, not only Mrs. John, but the chorus of attentive neighbours had felt in their hearts to be of the most critical importance, Hester had, as happened sometimes, a commission from her mother—or rather, as she was the active housekeeper and agent in all their business, a necessity of her own, which took her into Redborough. Mrs. John had been brought up in the age when girls were supposed to be charming and delightful in proportion as they were helpless, and her residence abroad had confirmed her in the idea that it was not becoming, or indeed possible, to permit a young woman "of our class" to go anywhere alone. But what was it possible for the poor lady to do! She could not herself walk into Redborough, a distance which was nothing in the estimation of the young and energetic. All that Mrs. John was capable of, was to bemoan herself, to wring her hands, and complain how dreadfully things were changed, how incapable she herself would have been of going anywhere unaccompanied—all which galled, almost beyond endurance, the high spirit of Hester, whose proud consciousness of perfect capacity to guard herself wherever she choose to go, was yet so much embittered by the tradition of her mother's prejudice, that her expeditions, harmless as they were, always appeared to her as a sort of confession of lowliness and poverty, and defiance of the world's opinion. Thus she moved swift and proud about the streets, looking neither to the right hand nor the left, with a half-shame, half-scorn of her unprotectedness, which mingled oddly with her indignant contempt of the idea of wanting protection at all. No messenger ever went so quickly, or returned so soon as Hester, under this double inspiration. She skimmed along with "that springy motion in her gait," as straight and as light as an arrow; and before the chorus of the Vernonry had finished communicating to each other the exciting fact that Mrs. John had once more permitted *that* girl to go into town by herself, and asking each other what she could expect was to come of such proceedings—Hester would walk back into the midst of their conclave with such a consciousness of all their whisperings in the large eyes with which she contemplated them as she passed to her mother's door, as suddenly hushed and almost abashed the eager gossips. [Pg 238]

"She can't have been in Redborough," Miss Matilda would say breathless when the girl disappeared. "Nobody could go so quickly as that. She has never been there at all. Dear Mrs. John, how she is taken in! She must have had some appointment, some rendezvous, there can't be any doubt of it." [Pg 239]

"You know best, ladies, how such things are managed," Mr. Mildmay Vernon would say with his acid smile, which was like a doubled-edged weapon, and cut every way.

This was the usual course of affairs. But on this particular day she did not surprise them in their animadversions by her rapid return. She was as long as an ordinary mortal. It was already afternoon when she set out, and the early autumn twilight had almost begun when she returned home. The weather was no longer warm enough to permit of those hostile meetings in the summer-house where the Vernonry disputed and fraternised. They were all indoors, looking out—Miss Matilda seated in her window, with her work-table displayed, Mr. Mildmay making himself uncomfortable at the only angle of his which commanded the gate, to watch for the girl's return. If Harry accompanied her back the community felt that this would be certain evidence as to what had happened; but they were still full of hope that Harry had not been such a fool. It strung up their nerves to the highest pitch of suspense to have to wait so long, especially as it was evident that Mrs. John too was exceedingly nervous about her daughter's delay. She was seen to go out, at least twice, with a shawl over her cap, to look out along the road, and twice to return disappointed. What was she anxious about? Very good cause she had to be anxious with a girl like *that*, wandering no one could tell where about the streets! And where could she be? and whom could she be with? Of course things could not go on like this; it must come to light sooner or later; for the credit of the family it ought not to be allowed to go on. This was what the chorus said. [Pg 240]

In the meantime Hester had done her business as quickly as usual, but on her return she had found herself waylaid. Edward, with whom her intercourse had been so broken, who had established himself on the footing of a confidential friend on the first day of her arrival, and at intervals when they had met by chance since then, had spoken and looked as if this *entente cordiale* had never been disturbed—Edward was lingering upon the edge of the Common on this particular afternoon on his way home apparently, though it was early. It would be difficult to explain Hester's feelings towards him. He piqued her curiosity and her interest beyond any one of

the limited circle with which the girl had to do. There were times when her indignation at the contrast between his fraternal and almost tender accost on their accidental meetings, and the way in which he held himself aloof on more public occasions, was uncontrollable; but yet there rarely occurred any of these public occasions without a meaning look, a word said in an undertone which conveyed to Hester a curious sense of secret intimacy, of having more to do with Edward's life than any of the fine people among whom he was so much more visibly familiar. She was young enough to have her imagination excited, and kept in a state of tantalised interest by these tactics, and also to be indignant by any suggestion that this mode of treatment was not honourable on his part. Not honourable! The idea would have roused Hester into proud indignation. What was he to her that it should matter how he behaved? His blowing hot and cold, his holding off and on, which a moralist would have condemned summarily, which the gossips would have delighted in commenting upon, what was it to her? But it amused her in the meantime with a constant curiosity and frequent pique, exercising over her imagination something of the same effect which her own waywardness had upon Harry, when he declared that it drew a fellow on. When she got out of the streets, and saw before her walking slowly, as if waiting for some one, the figure of this tantalising and uncertain personage, there was a slight quickening of Hester's pulses and flutter at her heart. He had never done anything of this kind before, and she had a feeling that he had not waited for her for nothing, but that some further revelation must be at hand.

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"I saw you from my office-window," he said. "I never saw any one walk like you. I know you at once at any distance, even in a crowd. Do you dislike so much walking alone?"

"Why should I?" she asked quickly. "I always walk alone."

"That is no answer. One may hate many things one has to do habitually. Your walk says that you dislike it. It says, Here am I, who ought to be guarded like a princess; but I am poor, I have no escort of honour; yet here I walk, a whole retinue, a body-guard to myself."

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Hester's colour changed from pale to red, and from red to pale, with mingled indignation and pleasure. It occurred to her, against her will, that Harry might have seen her pass for years without learning anything from her gait.

"I have to be my own body-guard, it is true," she said; "but why should I want one at all? It is folly to suppose a girl requires protection wherever she goes. Protection! who would harm me?" she cried, lighting up with an almost angry glow.

"I for one should not like to try," said Edward, looking at her, with a look which was habitual to him when they were alone. What did it mean? A sort of contemplative regretful admiration as of a man who would like to say a great deal more than he dared say—a sort of, "if I might," "if I could," with an element of impatience and almost anger in the regret. There was a pause, and then he resumed suddenly, and without any preface, "So it is Harry—who is to be the man?"

"Harry!" Hester gasped, suddenly stopping short, as she had a way of doing when anything vexed or disturbed her. The rapidity of the attack took away her breath. Then she added, as most people, and certainly every girl naturally would add, "I don't know what you mean."

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"Who else?" said Edward, calmly. "He has his freedom and he knows how to use it. And I approve him, for my part. I am of the same opinion. It should be I, if I were he."

It seemed to Hester that all the blood in her rushed to her throbbing cheeks and aching forehead. She stamped her foot on the ground.

"Is it of me you dare to speak so?" she cried. "Oh, I understand you! When one has been brought up among the Vernons, one knows what things mean. You venture to tell me that Harry is the man!—who else?—but that you would have been so had you been free—the man," cried the girl with blazing eyes, that smote him with lightnings not of a harmless kind, "to pick up out of the dust—me!—like something on the roadside."

"You are very eloquent, my little cousin," said Edward, "not that there is very much in what you say; but your looks and gesture are as fine as ever I saw. After all though, is it called for? When I say that Harry is the man, I do not suppose either that he is worthy of you, or that you think so; but you are a girl, what can you do? They would not let you work, and if you could work, nothing but daily bread would come of it. And, my dear Hester, you want a great deal more than daily bread. You want triumph, power; you want to be as you are by nature, somebody. Oh, yes," he said, going on quietly, waving his hand to avert the angry interruption which was on her lips; "believe me it is so, even if you don't know it. And how can you do this, save by marrying? It does not make anything worse to recognise its real character. You must do this by marrying. Harry is the first man who offers. If you were to wait a little longer you might do better; but you do not feel that you can wait. I do not blame you. I should do the same were I you."

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All this was said very quietly, the speaker going on by her side with his eyes turned to the ground, swinging his stick in a meditative way. The soft measure of his voice, with little pauses as if to mark the cadence, exercised a sort of spell upon the girl, who with passion in all her veins, and a suffocating sense of growing rage, which made her almost powerless, and took away words in the very heat of her need for them—moved on too against her will, feeling that she could express herself only by tones of fury if she attempted to express herself at all.

"Money does it all," said Edward, in the same meditative way. "I am supposed to have as much as he has, but I am tied to an old woman's apron, and would lose everything were I to venture like he. Why should he be free and I a slave? I know no reason. Caprice—chance, made it so. He might have been taken in at the Grange, and I at the White House. Then I should have been the

man, and he been nowhere. It is just so in life. Nothing but money can set it right. Money does. You can believe in Providence when you have money. I shall get it some day; but so far as this goes, I shall be too late. For you, there are compensations," he said, giving a little glance at her. "You will find him very manageable—more manageable than many who would have suited you better—than myself for instance. I should not have been docile at all—even to you—but he will be. You can do what you please with him; there is compensation in all—"

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"Cousin Edward," said Hester, suddenly finding her voice, "you told me just now that I disliked to walk alone, that I was poor and had no body-guard. I said, who would harm me? but you have proved that it was true, and I a fool. I did want a body-guard, some one to see that I was not insulted, to protect me, on a quiet country road, from—from—"

"Yes? from—whom? an unsuccessful suitor: a man that always has a right to be insulting," cried Edward with a sort of laugh, "to relieve his mind. True! to be sure all these things are true. It is quite right that a girl needs protection. Men are stronger than she is, and they will insult her if it is in their power, if not in one way then in another. The weak will always go to the wall. If there is nobody to take care of you, and nobody to punish me for it, of course I shall treat you badly. If I am not any worse than my neighbours I don't pretend to be any better. Do you think I should have waited for you to-night if I had not wanted to insult you? because you were alone and unprotected and unfriended," he said, with a sort of snarl at her, turning upon her with a fierce sneer on his face.

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Hester was struck with a horror which stopped her indignation in full career. "Oh," she cried, "how can you make yourself out to be so ignoble, so ungenerous! even when you say it I cannot believe it; to insult me cannot be what you mean."

"Why not?" he said, looking at her, "you can't do anything to me. For your own sake you will tell nobody that Edward Vernon met you and—said anything that he ought not to have said. Besides, if you wished to ruin me with *her*," he waved his hand towards the Grange as he spoke, "in the first place she would not believe you, in the second place if it came to that I should not much mind. It would be emancipation anyhow; I should be no longer a slave bound to follow a woman, in chains. If I lost in one way, I should gain in another. But I am safe with you," he said with another laugh; "I am free to irritate you, to outrage you as much as I please; you will not complain: and in that case why should not I take it out of you?" he cried, turning fiercely upon her.

Hester was too much startled to retain the violent indignation and offence of her first impulse. She was overwhelmed with pity and horror.

"Cousin Edward," she said, "you do not mean all that. You did not come here to insult me. You must have had some other thought. You must be very unhappy somehow, and troubled, and distressed to speak as you are doing now. It comes out of yourself, it is not anything about me."

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"Oh, yes, it is something about you," he said with a laugh. Then after a pause, "But you have some insight all the same. No. I'll tell you what it is; it is money, money, Hester—that is what we all want. If you had it you would no more marry Harry than old Rule; if I had it—And the thing clear is that I must have it," said Edward, breaking off abruptly. "I can't wait."

Hester went home very much bewildered, outraged by all he said, yet more sorry than angry. He had not made any reply to her appeal for his confidence, yet she knew that she was right—that it was out of a troubled and miserable heart that he had spoken, not merely out of wounded feeling on the subject of herself. She did not know whether he understood what she said to him on the subject of Harry, or if that penetrated his mind at all; but she went home at once more miserable and more interested than she thought she had ever been in her life. Had not she too drawn some conclusion of the same kind from her own experiences, from the atmosphere of the Vernonyry so full of ingratitude, unkindness, and all uncharitableness? She came very slowly home, and took no notice of the way in which Mildmay Vernon squinted at her from his corner, and the Miss Ridgways waved their hands from the window. Harry then had not come home with her. "I knew he was not such a fool," the male observer said to himself, and the sisters laughed and talked in quite an outburst of gaiety for some time after. "Harry Vernon think of *that* girl! of course he did not. Who would? so ill brought up, with such manners, and hair that is nearly red," they said.

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CHAPTER XVI.

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WALKS AND TALKS.

"They tell me you are to be congratulated, Hester," said old Captain Morgan.

She had met him taking his evening walk, and in that and in his aspect altogether there was something altogether despondent—a depression and air of weakness which was not common with the old man. She had not gone with him for some days, and perhaps he had felt the desertion. The first thing Hester did was to draw his hand within her arm.

"You are tired," she said.

"Not very. I am a silly old fellow and always go too far. I have been thinking of you, my dear; and if you are to be congratulated—"

"No; I don't think so, Captain Morgan. What about?"

"About—— If anything so important had happened you would have come and told me, Hester."

"I am glad you see that at last. But yes, there is something to congratulate me upon. Nothing did happen. Is not that a great deal to say? For I was tempted, sadly tempted." [Pg 250]

"My dear, I don't understand that."

Hester laughed.

"You see, Captain Morgan, you are wise and know a great deal; but you were never a girl—and a poor girl. It would have been so delightful to put my mother back in her nice house, and show Catherine——" Here she paused somewhat embarrassed.

"What of Catherine?" he said.

"Oh, not much—they were, perhaps, when they were young—on different sides. My mother has come down, and Cousin Catherine has gone up. I should like to have put the balance straight."

"To bring Catherine down, and put your mother——"

"No, Captain Morgan. Catherine is always good when she is with you. I think I almost like her *then*. I would not harm her," said Hester, holding up her head, "if I had the power to do it. But she scorns every one of us; perhaps because we all consent to eat her bread. I would not, you know, if I could help it."

"I know you are ungenerous, Hester, in that respect."

"Ungenerous! Well, never mind, there are more kinds of ungenerosity than one. I am going in with you to tell Mrs. Morgan."

"I am not sure," said the old captain, "though it is a wretched piece of self-denial, that I want you to come with me to-night." [Pg 251]

Hester opened her great eyes wide.

"Why!" she said. It was the one house in the world to which she felt she had a right.

"That is nonsense, however," said the old man; "for of course you must meet. We have got our grandson, Hester."

"I heard somebody had come, but I thought it was a gentleman. I did not know you had any—children—except little Mary."

"We have none—in this world; but do you think my wife would have been what she is with never a child? We all have our disabilities, my love. I have never been a young girl, and you have never been an old—pair."

They both laughed. Hester with the easily-recovered cheerfulness of youth, he in tremulous tones, which had as much pathos as mirth in them.

"This is the son of my daughter," he said. "She has been long dead, poor girl—happily for her. Unless when there is some business connected with them to be settled we don't talk much of them. My wife and I long ago went back to the honeymoon stage. We have had to live for each other: and very glad to have each other to live for. Children are very strange, my dear."

"Are they?" said Hester, with an awe which she could scarcely understand.

"Very strange. So dependent upon you for long, so independent after; so unlike you, that you cannot understand what you have to do with them. Perhaps it is a penalty of living so long as we have done. I have a theory," said the old captain, cheering up, "that after seventy, when you have lived out your life, you begin another. And it is quite different. It is a pity we can't renew the old bodies—eyes and ears and legs and all the rest of it. It would be a very interesting experiment." [Pg 252]

"Like the people who found the elixir of life, or the Wandering Jew?"

The girl spoke to humour him, herself wondering over every word with that curiosity, mingled with pity and tenderness and half disapproval, with which youth listens to the vagaries of age.

"Not at all like the Wandering Jew; his life was continuous and one-ideaed," said Captain Morgan, delighted to get upon his hobby. "And I miss a great deal in the stories of those who get the elixir. They may renew their lives but not themselves. There is one I recollect at this moment, St. Leon. Of course you have never read St. Leon. He becomes a beautiful young man, and the rival of his son, who, of course, does not know him. But the old fellow knows *him*. He is an old fellow notwithstanding his elixir; the soul of him is just the same. That is not my point of view."

The old man had become quite erect and walked smartly, animated by his fancy, leading Hester with him rather than leaning on her.

"No," he repeated, "that is not at all my point of view. The bodies keep old, the minds get—different. I have shaken off my old burdens. I don't take any more responsibility for those who—used to belong to me. They don't belong to me any longer. They are labouring along in the former life. I have started in the new." [Pg 253]

"But Mrs. Morgan?" said Hester, with a quaver in her voice.

"Ah! there's the blot," said the old man. "Of course, she and I belong to each other for ever and ever. Oh, I don't want to begin again without my old wife; and she won't give up the children, though they are children no longer. Once a mother, always a mother, Hester. You women are sadly fettered—you can't shake it off."

"Nor you either, Captain Morgan!" cried Hester, indignant. She could not bear that he should so wrong himself.

"My dear, I could do it—without difficulty. Is it just, do you think, that one human creature should be made the victim of another, simply because he has been instrumental in bringing that other into the world? Supposing that they have drained all that was best in me out of me for years? Supposing that they have made my life hard and bitter to me? Supposing that they have grown alien to me in every respect—thinking other thoughts, walking in other ways? And that they are as old and more worldly than I am—older, less open to any influence of nature—am I to go treating these old rigid commonplace people as if they were my children still, and breaking my heart about them? No; no."

This seemed a terrible speech to Hester. She kept patting his arm softly with her hand, and saying, "Oh, Captain Morgan! You do not mean that!" again and again. It was dreadful that he should say this. A father to give up his children! It hurt Hester to think that such an idea could find entrance into any mind.

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"And as for the grandchildren, that is out of the question altogether," Captain Morgan said; "I am not going to begin a new life of trouble through them."

"I thought," said Hester, "that fathers and mothers never could forget their children—it is in the Bible."

"Can a woman forget?' It is a woman, my dear. There is nothing about a man. My wife is horrified at what I say, as much as you are. But for all that there is justice in everything, and one soul should not be sacrificed for another. Well, will you come in? I do not forbid you; but don't take much notice, I warn you, Hester, of the person you are going to meet."

The person she was going to meet! This was enough to make her curious, if not prepossess her in favour of the unknown, who, however, she expected to be introduced to her in the shape of a schoolboy—perhaps a heavy schoolboy—a sort of being for whom the girl had an instinctive dislike. She followed the old captain into the house almost mechanically. Mrs. Morgan's chair, now that it began to be chilly in the evenings, was placed so as to approach the fire, which in the evening was now always lighted, and sent out a cheerful glow. It was more cheerful than usual to-night, coming in from the grey of the waning light outside. There was no lamp, but only the leaping flame of the fire. The sound of cheerful voices in conversation, even of laughter, was audible as the door was opened. The quiet in which the old lady generally sat waiting for her husband's return—a tranquillity which was peace itself, yet a silent peacefulness—had always seemed very sweet to Hester. That soft stillness of waiting had seemed to her the very atmosphere of love; but now at the door, even before she entered, she was conscious of a difference. Life had entered in. The voices were not forced or measured, but chiming with each other in the free interchange of familiar affection: the old lady's soft little laugh enticing a louder laughter; her voice alternating with the deeper tones. There was no pause in this lively conversation; but some one rose up against the firelight—a tall, straight figure, no schoolboy, as was evident at the first glance—when they went in. But, indeed, the first glance was not supported by any further revelation, for after the little commotion occasioned by their entrance, the stranger subsided into his chair again, and remained to Hester, till her departure, a shadow only, with a singularly soft and harmonious voice. It got up again to bow to her. And it went on talking, out of the gloom, as she, sitting in the full glare of the light, kept shyly by Mrs. Morgan's side. Why was she shy? It was not her disposition to be shy. This evening a gentle embarrassment was upon her. She had a pleasure in sitting there by the old lady's side, defended by the darkness from all necessity of saying anything, sharing, she could scarcely tell why, the content which trembled in every tone of her old friend's voice. The captain did not take any share in this talk. He sat down behind backs, saying that the fire was too much for him, with a long-drawn breath that sounded like a sigh. Once or twice he was appealed to by name, and made a brief response; but he took no part in the conversation. On ordinary occasions it was he who talked, Mrs. Morgan in her great chair remaining quietly quiescent, now and then making a remark. It was very strange to see the captain thrown thus into the background; but, curiously enough, Hester did not remark it, so much was she occupied with the novelty of the conversation. When the door opened she was alarmed lest it should be the lights that were coming, so much more satisfactory was it to let things remain as they were. The unseen speaker talked about a great many things altogether unknown to Hester—his brothers and sisters, his cousins, a throng of unknown Christian names, every one of which it was evident had characteristics of its own with which both the speakers were acquainted. The listener felt as if a throng of new acquaintances crowded softly in, filling the dim place with not unfriendly faces.

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"And what is Elinor doing?" Mrs. Morgan said.

"It is easy to answer that question, grandmother. She is spoiling her children, and we all know so much better, we who have none."

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"Yes, yes; that is always the way," said the old lady. "But, Roland, you must tell her from me that it is very foolish. She will not think it is ignorance on my part. Her mother, poor dear, was just the same," and here the old lady shook her head softly, with a glitter in her eyes, as if a tear was not far off; but if so, there was sweetness in the tear. She turned, after a time, to Hester, who sat by, with a strange sort of pleasure to which she was unaccustomed, listening, in surprised interest, without wishing to take any part.

"You are surprised to hear me so talkative, Hester? But it is not often I have a grandson to wake me up. You did not know I had one perhaps? Ah! I have been hearing of so many people that I

don't often hear of. That does an old body good."

"I like it too," said Hester, the firelight adding colour and animation to her face. "I did not know there were so many people in the world."

"That's very pretty of you to say, my dear," said the old lady. "I was afraid you would think it all gossip; but they are people who belong to me, the most of them. And letters don't tell you like the voice. You must run away when you are tired, for I think I shall go on asking questions till midnight. This young lady—this dear girl—Roland, is the comfort of our lives."

"I thought no less," said the voice of the shadow, with a softness which went to Hester's heart, sending a little thrill of pleasure through her. She had not even seen his face—but she could not be unaware that he was looking at hers—from the protecting darkness on the other side of the fire. This curious pleasurable encounter, as through a veil, of two fresh souls, hitherto unknown to each other—a moment as full of enchantment as can be in this world—was suddenly broken in upon by the old captain, who jumped up, notwithstanding his rheumatism, as quickly as a boy, and, coming between, stood up with his back to the fire, interrupting the light.

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"My old woman," he said, "your Elinors and your Emilys are like a book to her. It is like reading a chapter at hazard out of a novel; but there is no end to the story and no beginning, and she is at this moment deep in her own—approaching the end of the third volume."

"I should have said, to see Miss Vernon," said the stranger, who was more a voice than ever, now that the old man interrupted what little light there was, "that she was at the beginning of the first."

Was it the beginning of the first? Hester felt a wave of colour fly over her face, and thought in her heart that the new-comer was right. The initial chapter—surely this was true; not even a beginning, but something that went before any beginning.

"It never answers," said Captain Morgan, "to give an opinion without knowledge of the facts. You are a clever fellow, Roland, but not so clever as that comes to. You will find, Hester, that round every human creature you come across, there is some kind of a world hanging 'bound with gold chains about the feet of—' That is the most uncomfortable metaphor I know. I wonder what Mr. Tennyson could have been thinking of? Did he think that this round world was hanging on like a big ball, hampering the going of God, do you suppose? But there is something of that kind, true enough, with men."

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"If you mean that for me," said the old lady, smiling, "you are wrong, Rowley. God knows my heart yearns after them all, great and small, and it is the greatest refreshment and no hampering, to hear about them all—their pleasures and their troubles. What hurts me is to keep it all in and ask no questions, as so often I have to do."

The old captain shook his head. He kept on shaking it gently.

"We have argued that question a great many times," he said, "but I am not convinced."

What was evident was, that he intended this conversation which had been so animated and pleasant to come to an end. He could not surely be unkind? But he placed himself, as it were, in the midst of the current, and stopped its flowing. A sensation of vexed displeasure and disappointment with her old friend whom she loved rose in Hester's mind. Was it like him to reject the kindness of kin, to limit his wife in her affections, to turn a cold shoulder on his grandson? And yet all these things he seemed to do. "Roland" on the other side (she knew no other name for him), had been silenced. He had scarcely attempted to speak since the old man took that place in front of the fire, from which his shadow fell like a dark pillar across the room, dividing the side on which Mrs. Morgan sat with Hester beside her, from the other on which was the new being with whom Hester had already formed an almost intimate acquaintance she felt, though she did not know his name and had not seen his face. This very uncertainty pleased her imagination, and inclined her to the new-comer. But it was embarrassing to find herself in the midst of a scene, where so many confusing uncomprehended elements were at work, and where something which was not family harmony and peace lay evidently under the surface. When she rose up to go away, the unknown rose too; but the captain was on the alert.

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"You can now go back to your gossip," he said, "my dear: for I mean to see Hester round the corner."

"No, Captain Morgan. It is very damp, and your rheumatism——"

"Bah! my rheumatism. There are worse things than my rheumatism," he said, bustling to get his coat.

"Might I not replace you, grandfather? It would be a pleasure, and I have no rheumatism."

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This idea pleased Hester. It would be only for a moment; but he was something new. She was so sadly familiar with every person and thing about that any novelty was delightful to her. But the captain was not to be shaken off. He pushed Roland back into his seat. "There are worse things than rheumatism," he said. And he scrambled into his coat and took Hester under his arm with unwonted formality. She felt annoyed and angry beyond description, vexed with her old friend. Why should he interrupt the innocent talk? Why interfere so pointedly to prevent the simplest communication between her and the stranger? A mere politeness, where could have been the harm of that? And then it was quite unnecessary that anybody should see her home. That the old man should risk an illness to do this, when she had so often run unattended from one door to the other, was more irritating than words could say. And, what was worst of all, it made the captain less perfect in her opinion—the captain of whom she had felt that, all the rest of the world failing

her, here was still an excellence upon which she could fall back.

Since they had come in, though the interval was short, the autumn evening had closed in completely. It was very damp and cold. The Common lay in a white mist; the sky hazy, with a few faint stars looking down through veils of vapour; the atmosphere heavy.

"Why should you come out to catch cold?" Hester said. "I want no one. I am quite able to take care of myself." [Pg 262]

"And I want no one, my dear, except myself, to have anything to do with you," said the old man. "I am not afraid to tell you my meaning, without disguise."

"Then stand at the door while I run home," she pleaded; but he would not spare her a step of the way. He hobbled along to the verandah, with his comforter twisted about his throat and mouth, speaking out of the folds of it with a muffled voice.

"If it was any girl but you I should be afraid to say it, lest the mere contradiction might be enough for them; but with you I am not afraid," he said.

Was his confidence justified? Was Hester too wise to be moved by that hint of opposition, that sense that a thing which is forbidden must be pleasant? It is dangerous to predict of any one that this will be the case; and perhaps the captain did his best to falsify his own hope. He took her to the very door and saw her admitted, as if there might be a chance up to the last moment of the alarming grandson still producing himself to work her harm. And then he hobbled back in the gathering mists. He even stood lingering at his own door before he went in to the fireside and the cheerful light.

"Neither Catherine nor Hester, neither the young nor the old," he said to himself. In his earnestness he repeated the words half aloud, "Neither Catherine nor Hester, neither money nor love." And then there came something of scorn into the old man's voice. "If his father's son is capable of love," he said. [Pg 263]

END OF VOL. I.

LONDON

R. CLAY, SONS, AND TAYLOR,

BREAD STREET HILL.

Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious errors and inconsistencies in spelling, punctuation and hyphenation have been corrected.

Archaic spellings have been retained.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HESTER: A STORY OF CONTEMPORARY LIFE,
VOLUME 1 (OF 3) ***

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