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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. III

London
MACMILLAN AND CO.
1883

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HESTER.

HESTER.

CHAPTER I.

BUSINESS AND LOVE.

Roland had but a few days to spend at Redborough, where he came on the footing of an intimate friend and relation, sought and courted on all hands. His time was already portioned out among the Vernons before he came to pay his respects to Mrs. John and her daughter, though that was on the morning after his arrival. At a still earlier hour Emma had rushed in very tearful and dejected to beg Hester to intercede for her that she might not go away.

"If I go now *he* may never speak at all," Emma said. "I am sure I did everything I could last night to bring it on. I told him Roland had come for me, that he couldn't do without me any longer; and if you could only have seen him, Hester! he grew quite white, poor fellow, and his eyes as big as saucers! I don't believe it is his fault. It must be his people; so often, when things are going just as you wish, their people will interfere. I am sure he is quite miserable. And if he doesn't speak now, I dare say he will never speak."

"How can you talk as if it were a matter of business?" cried Hester; "if he cares for you he is sure to 'speak,' as you call it. And as for bringing it on——"

"But, of course, it is a matter of business," said Emma, "and very important business too. What can be so important for a girl as settling? It is all very well for you to talk, but I am the youngest, and I have no fixed home, and I must think of myself. If he comes forward it makes all the difference to me. Why, Roland and everybody will think twice as much of me if I have an offer. Hester, there's a dear, do persuade Roland to let me stay. He doesn't want me a bit, that's all talk; he is just as happy without me. Perhaps he will tell you they have had enough of me here; but they don't say so, and you're not bound to go and inquire into people's feelings if they don't say so. I do believe grandpapa is tired of having me, but he will never turn me out; and when it is so essential to my best interests! Hester, I think you might have a little fellow-feeling. There's Edward Vernon, I'm sure you would be more comfortable if he were to——"

Hester turned upon her indiscreet companion with a blaze of indignation. The fact that there was truth in it made it doubly odious. Her whole frame trembled with angry shame. She threw up her hand with an impatient gesture, which frightened and silenced Emma, but which Hester herself afterwards felt to be a sort of appeal to her forbearance—the establishment of a kind of confidence.

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"What is that about Edward Vernon?" said Mrs. John, whose tranquil ear had caught something, naturally of that part of the conversation which it was most expedient she should not hear.

Emma paused, and consulted Hester with her eyes, who, however, averted her countenance and would not ask forbearance. A rapid debate ensued in Emma's mind. What is the use, she asked herself, of having a mother if you cannot tell her everything, and get her to help you? But on the other hand, if Hester did not wish it spoken of she did not dare to oppose an auxiliary who might be of so much service to her. So she answered carelessly—

"Oh, nothing! but don't you think, Mrs. Vernon, you who know the world, that for a girl to go away just when a gentleman is coming to the point, is a great pity? And just as likely as not nothing may ever come of it if her people interfere like this and drag her away."

"My dear," said Mrs. John, astonished, though mollified by the compliment to her knowledge of the world, "I cannot call to mind that I have ever heard such a question discussed before."

"Oh, perhaps not—not in general society; but when we are all women together, and a kind of relations, I am sure it is only charity to wish that a girl like me might get settled. And when you have had an offer you take such a different position, even with your own people. I want Hester to ask Roland to let me stay."

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"Hester! but why Hester? If you wish it I will speak to Mr. Ashton—or your grandparents would be more suitable," Mrs. John said.

And it was at this moment that Roland himself came in to pay his respects. When he had said everything that was polite—nay, more than polite, ingratiating and devoted, as if in a subdued and reverential way he was paying his court to the mother rather than the daughter—he contrived to make his way to where Hester sat apart, working with great but spasmodic energy, and not yet recovered from the ferment into which Emma had plunged her. "I scarcely saw you last night," he said.

"There were so many people to see," Hester replied, with a cloudy smile, without lifting her eyes.

"Yes, there were a great many people. And to-morrow night, I hear, at the Merridews——"

"I am not going."

"No? I thought I should have been able to see a little of you there. A ball-room is good for that, that one—I mean, two—may be alone in it now and then—and there were many things I wanted to say. But I thought you did go."

"Yes, often; but I am tired of it!" cried Hester. "It is too much; one wants something more than folly in one's life."

"This is not folly," he said, looking round at the quiet little room, the tranquil lady by the fire, the work at which Hester's hands were so busy. She was seated near the side window which looked out upon the road.

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"No; this is dulness—this is nothing," she said; "not living at all, but only going on because one cannot help it."

"I suppose, on the whole, the greater part of life is that; but you, with the power to make others happy, with so much before you——"

"I am sure the life that I know is all that," cried Hester; "we are here, we don't know why, we cannot get out of it, we must go on with it. It is a necessity to live, and prepare your dinner every day and mend your clothes, not because you wish to do so, but because you can't help yourself. And then the only relief to it is folly."

"Don't call an innocent little dance folly, with all its opportunities. If it gave me the chance of a long quiet talk—with you."

"If that is not folly, it is nonsense," Hester said, with a laugh, not unmoved by the tone, not unsubdued by the eyes.

"You may think so, but I don't. I have looked forward to it for so long. If life is nothing to you here, fancy what it is to me in the Stock Exchange."

"I have no doubt it is very interesting to you. It is something to do: it is change, and thought, and risk, and all that one wants."

"That is what Edward Vernon says," said Roland. "He, too, finds life monotonous—I suppose because he has everything he wishes for." [Pg 6]

"Has he everything he wishes for?" said Hester, with a catch of her breath, and a sudden glance up with keen, questioning eyes. The next moment she bent her head again over her work. "What I want is not dancing," she said.

"It is work, according to the fashion of young ladies. You don't know when you are well off. You have always wanted work," said Roland, "and barbarous parents will not let you. You want to go and teach wretched little children, and earn a little miserable money. You to be wasted on that! Ah! you have something a great deal better to do."

"What?" said Hester, raising her eyes and fixing them upon him. "I should like, not that, but to do as Catherine Vernon did," she cried, lighting up in every line of her animated countenance. "I should like to step in when ruin was coming and prop it up on my shoulders as she did, and meet the danger, and overcome it——"

"I thought you hated Catherine Vernon," Roland cried.

"I never said so," cried Hester; and then, after a pause, "but if I did, what does that matter? I should like to do what she did. Something of one's own free will—something that no one can tell you or require you to do—which is not even your duty bound down upon you. Something voluntary, even dangerous——" She paused again, with a smile and a blush at her own vehemence, and shook her head. "That is exactly what I shall never have it in my power to do." [Pg 7]

"I hope not, indeed, if it is dangerous," said Roland, with all that eyes could say to make the words eloquent. "Pardon me; but don't you think that is far less than what you have in your power? You can make others do: you can inspire (isn't that what Lord Lytton says?) and reward. That is a little highflown, perhaps. But there is nothing a man might not do, with you to encourage him. You make me wish to be a hero."

He laughed, but Hester did not laugh. She gave him a keen look, in which there was a touch of disdain. "Do you really think," she said, "that the charm of inspiring, as you call it, is what any reasonable creature would prefer to doing? To make somebody else a hero rather than be a hero yourself? Women would need to be disinterested indeed if they like that best. I don't see it. Besides, we are not in the days of chivalry. What could you be inspired to do—make better bargains on your Stock Exchange? and reward—— Oh, that is not the way it is looked at nowadays. You think it is you who——" Here Hester paused, with a rising colour, "I will not say what I was going to say," she said.

"What you were going to say was cruel. Besides, it was not true. I must know best, being on the side of the slandered. A man who is worth calling a man can have but one opinion on that subject."

Hester looked at him again with a serious criticism, which embarrassed Roland. She was not regarding the question lightly, as a mere subject of provocative talk, but was surveying him as if to read how far he was true and how far fictitious. Before he could say anything she shook her head with a little sigh. [Pg 8]

"Besides," she said, "it was not a hero I was thinking of. If anybody, it was Catherine Vernon."

"Whom you don't like. These women, who step out of their sphere, they may do much to be respected, they may be of great use; but——"

"You mean that men don't like them," said Hester, with a smile; "but then women do; and, after all, we are the half of creation—or more."

"Women do! Oh, no; that is a mistake. Let us ask the company present—your mother and my sister."

Hester put out her hand to stop him. "That goes far deeper," she said, with a rising blush. What did she mean? Roland was sufficiently versed in all the questions of this kind, which are discussed in idleness to promote flirtation. But he did not know why she should blush so deeply, or why her forehead should contract when he claimed his sister and her mother together as representatives of women. They were so, better than Hester herself was. Mrs. John represented all the timid opinions and obstinate prejudices of weakness; all that is gently conventional and stereotyped in that creature conventionally talked about as Woman from the beginning of time; while the other represented that other, vulgarer type of feminine character which, without being either strong enough or generous enough to strike out a new belief, makes a practical and cynical commentary upon the old one, and considers man as the natural provider of woman's comfort, and, therefore, indispensable, to be secured as any other source of income and ease ought to be secured. Hester was wounded and ashamed that her mother should be classed with Emma, but could say nothing against it; and she was moved with a high indignation to think that Roland was right. But he had not the least idea what she could mean, and she had no mind to enlighten him. Their conversation came to an end accordingly; and the sound of the others came in. [Pg 9]

"I don't see why I should go away," said Emma. "For, whatever he may choose to say, Roland doesn't want me, not a bit. Elizabeth is a very good cook, and that's all a man thinks of. I couldn't do him any good at home, and he doesn't like my acquaintances. A girl can't live without friends, can she, Mrs. John? If you are to have any amusement at all, you must be getting it when you're about twenty, that is the time. But men never care: they go out, and they have their own friends"

separate, and they never think of you. But here, without bothering him a bit, I have lots of nice people, and grandmamma has never said she was tired of me. Then why should he take me away?"

"There is no reason for talking of that just now at all," said Mrs. John politely, "for Mr. Roland is not going away himself as yet." [Pg 10]

"Oh, he cannot stay long," cried Emma, "he oughtn't to stay; he has got his business—not like me that have nothing to call me. Edward Vernon wouldn't like it a bit if Roland stayed away from his business."

"I am always hearing the name of Edward Vernon," said Mrs. John; "you mentioned it to Hester just now. What has he to do with Hester or with Mr. Roland's business? Though Catherine Vernon thinks so much of him, he is not one of my favourites. I like his cousin Harry better."

"And so do I," Roland said.

They all looked at him with surprise, and Hester with a sudden increase of colour. She was angry, though she could not have told why.

"He is very hot and eager in business," Roland said. "I suppose I ought to like him the better for that. And he has a keen eye too; but it goes to his head, and that is what one never should allow one's business to do."

"Ah!" cried Mrs. John, "if it can be prevented, Mr. Roland. That was what happened to my dear husband. He could not be cool, as, I suppose, it is right to be. But sometimes, don't you think one likes a person better for not calculating too much, for letting himself be carried away?"

Roland looked more dark than he had ever been seen to look before, and responded vaguely, "Perhaps," with a face that had no doubtfulness in it.

"Why should he not be hot and eager?" cried Hester; "I understand that very well. Everything is quiet here. A man, when he gets out of this still atmosphere, wants a little excitement, and to fling himself into it." [Pg 11]

"Ah!" said Mrs. John, "that is what your poor father always said."

But Roland had never looked so unsympathetic. "A man may lose his head in love or in war, or in adventure, or in pleasure, but he must not lose it on the Stock Exchange," he said; then, looking up, with an uneasy laugh, "I need not warn you, ladies, need I? for you will never lose your heads about shares and premiums. I am glad to think I am a very steady fellow myself."

"Oh, steady!" cried Mrs. John, alarmed. "I hope, I am sure, they are all *quite* steady. I never heard a word to the contrary. It would be dreadful for poor Catherine; after all, though we are not very good friends—not such good friends as I should wish to be—it would be dreadful; for if Edward was not steady— Oh, I hope, Mr. Roland, you are mistaken. I hope that it is not so."

"He means a steady head, mother; there is no question of anything else," said Hester, very red and troubled. Her secret consciousness in respect to Edward made life and conversation very difficult for her: she could not bear any animadversion upon him, though in her own heart she made many; and at the same time she could not defend him openly. What was he to her more than Harry was? The same far-off cousin—old friend: not so much, indeed, as Harry, for all the world knew that Harry would fain have established another relationship had it seemed good in Hester's eyes. [Pg 12]

"I meant nothing against his morals," Roland said.

"That is a great relief to my mind," said Mrs. John, "for Catherine Vernon is a good woman, though she and I have never been great friends; and it is a terrible thing to set your heart upon a child and have him turn out badly. There is nothing so heartrending as that. One of my mother's sisters, Aunt Eliza, of whom you have heard me talk, Hester, had a son——"

"Oh, mamma, I don't think we want to hear about that."

"And you were coming out for a walk," said Emma, who saw that her own affairs were slipping out of notice. "Didn't she say she would come out for a walk? And if we are going we had better not be long about it, for the days are so short at this time of the year."

"Put on your hat, Hester; it will do you good. You change colour so I do not know what to make of it," her mother said.

"And so do I now," cried Emma; "they always tell me it is indigestion, but that is not a nice reason to give when people think you are blushing about something. It is very disagreeable. Mine comes on often after dinner when we dine early, and all the afternoon I am just a fright! It is a blessing it goes off towards evening when one is seeing people. Roland, you must take Hester and me into Redborough. I want to buy some gloves, and I dare say so does she, for the Merridews to-night." [Pg 13]

"She is not going to the Merridews," said Mrs. John, with a plaintive sound in her voice.

"Oh, she told us something about that, but I didn't believe it was true. Why shouldn't she go to the Merridews?—she that is always made so much of, just like the sister of the house. If I had that position I never should miss one evening; and, indeed, I never have since I had my first invitation. Grandpapa did not like it at first, but of course he got reconciled. Oh, here you are, Hester; how quickly you do dress! To be sure, you never put on anything but that pea-coat of yours. But I don't like drawing on my gloves as I go out, as you do; I like to put them on carefully, and smooth them, and button them up."

"You are always so tidy," said Mrs. John, with a faint sigh. She could not but feel it would be an advantage if Hester, though so much superior, would get some of Emma's ways. She was so neat: never a hair out of order, or a shoe-tie loose. Whereas, now and then, in her own child, there were imperfections. But she smiled as she looked after them, going out to the door to see them go. Hester, with her varying complexion (which had nothing to do with her digestion), threw up her head to meet the wind with a movement so vigorous, so full of grace and life, that it was a pleasure to see. The mother thought that it was pretty to watch her drawing on her gloves, though, perhaps, it would have been tidier to button them carefully as Emma did, before she came down stairs; but then in those days gloves had few buttons and were easily managed. As soon as they had gone out of the gate of the Vernonly, Emma gave Hester a significant look, and even a nudge, if it must be told, and begged them to walk on while she ran in for an umbrella which she had forgotten. "For it always rains when one hasn't an umbrella," she said. It cost Hester an effort to remember what the look and the nudge meant. Then she laughed as she watched the schemer down to Captain Morgan's door.

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"Why do you want to take Emma away?" she said. "She seems to be happy here."

"Do you think she makes the old people happier? They don't say anything, but she seems to me to worry my old grandfather. I don't want to take her away. She has her little schemes on hand, no doubt, and means to settle or something; but I cannot let her tire out the old people. They are part of my religion," Roland said. This, too, was meant as provocation to draw Hester on to discuss the question of religion, perhaps to an attempt to convert him to sounder views, which is a very fruitful method. He looked at her with a pleased defiance in his eyes. But Hester was not to be drawn out on this subject. She had no dogmatic teaching in her, and did not feel qualified to discuss a man's religion. Instead, she returned to the subject of their previous discussion, herself abandoning Emma's cause.

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"What do you do on the Stock Exchange?" she said.

"That is a tremendous question. I don't know how to answer it. I should have to give you a lecture upon shares, and companies, and all the vicissitudes of the Funds."

"These, I suppose, are your material, just as written things are the material of a newspaper editor. I understand that," said Hester, "what I want to know is what you do."

"We buy and we sell," he said, with a laugh. "We are no better than any shopkeeper. We buy a thing when it is cheap, and hold it till it becomes dear, and then we sell it again."

"But who," said Hester, with a little scorn, "is so silly as to buy things *when they are dear*? Is it to oblige you? I thought that was against political economy—and everything of that kind," she added vaguely. It was not the subject Roland would have chosen, but out of that, too, he could draw the thread of talk.

"Political economy is not infallible," he said. "We praise our wares so, and represent their excellence so warmly, that there comes a moment when everybody wishes to buy them. Sometimes they deserve the commendations we bestow, sometimes they—don't. But in either case people buy. And then political economy comes in, and the demand being great increases the value; so that sometimes we make a nice little bit of profit without spending a penny."

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Hester looked at him with a blank face. She knew nothing about these mysteries. She shook her head.

"I don't understand business," she said; "but how can you buy without spending a penny? I wish I knew how to do that."

"I should like to do it for you," said Roland, with a look that said still more; for even stockbroking will do as a vehicle for flirtation. "I should like to buy you a quantity of Circassians, for instance, exactly at the right moment, neither too soon nor too late, and sell them next day, perhaps, when the market had turned, and hand you over a thousand pounds or two which you should have made without, as I said, spending a penny. That would make the profession romantic, poetic, if one could conduct such operations for *you*. Probably I shall put that money into the pocket of some bilious city person who does not want it, instead of into your fair hands——"

"Which do. I don't know if they are fair hands, but they want it certainly. A thousand or two! enough to make people comfortable for life. And what are Circassians?" Hester asked.

"They are stock. You must accept certain words as symbols, or we shall never make it clear. And my business is to watch the market for you, to catch the moment when the tide is turning. There is a great deal of excitement in it."

"And is that how Edward loses his head?"

She spoke in a low tone, and Roland stopped suddenly in what he was about to say, and turned upon her with real surprise. After this he put on an air of mock mortification—mock, yet not without a mixture of the true.

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"Is it for this," he said, "that I have been devising delicate operations for you, and explaining all my mysteries? to find you at the end not in the least interested in my work or in your possible fortune, but considering everything in the light of Edward Vernon? Acknowledge that this is hard upon me."

"I was thinking only," said Hester, with again that sudden flush of colour, "of what you said, that Edward lost his head. It is not much wonder if what you say can be. He would like to be rich; he would like to be free. He would prefer to get a fortune of his own, especially if it can be done that

way, rather than to wait for years and years, till he has made money, or till Catherine dies. That is generous, you know. He does not want to wait till she dies, as if he grudged her life. It would be terrible for her to think that he did not wish her to live as long as she could. But at the same time he wants, and so do we all, to be free."

"I am so much obliged to you for explaining Edward Vernon's motives," said Roland, much piqued. It was an experience he was not familiar with, to have himself forgotten and his rival expounded to him. His rival! was he his rival? In the sting of this sudden revelation of preference, Roland all but vowed that he would enter the lists in earnest and chase this Edward, this country-fellow whom she thought so much of, from the field.

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Hester was confused, too, when her investigation into her cousin's mind was thus received. It was true enough; it was the problem which had interested her in the first place—not directly Edward in person who was the subject of it. She had tried to explain his position to herself. Now that her interest was found out, and she discovered it to be an offence to her companion, she threw herself back instinctively on a less alarming question.

"I think a great deal about Catherine," she said.

"About Catherine—Cousin Catherine—whom I thought you disliked with all your heart?"

"You may be astonished, but it is true. I think a great deal about her. I think of her, after being kind to everybody—for now that I am grown up I begin to understand, she has been very kind to everybody; not loving them, which takes the grace out of it—but yet kind, after being so kind, to be left alone with nobody caring for her, and perhaps the one she loves best expecting when she will die. No," said Hester, "I am glad Edward loses his head—that is what he is thinking of. Not to wait or feel as if he would like by an hour to shorten her life, but only for himself, like a man, to get free. I am very glad of it," she added hotly, with another overwhelming blush, "for Catherine's sake."

Roland was bewildered and doubtful what to think, for truth was so strong in Hester that it was hard to believe she was sheltering herself behind a fiction. But he was very much mortified too.

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"I don't think," he said, plaintively, "that I want to talk either of Cousin Catherine or of Mr. Edward, whom she thinks a great deal more of than he deserves—as, perhaps others do, too."

"And we have come on so fast and forgotten Emma!" cried Hester, with a sense of guilt. "We ought to go back and meet her. She has been a long time getting that umbrella. Don't you think you had better leave her with Mrs. Morgan a little longer since she likes to be here?"

"I shall not disturb her if—you wish her to stay," he meant to say if she wishes to stay, but changed his phrase and gave it emphasis, with a look of devotion. "If I thought you had any regard for my poor little sister how glad it would make me. It would do her so much good; it would alter her way of looking at things."

"Oh, you must not think," cried Hester, meaning, like him, to say one thing and saying another, "that Emma is likely to be influenced by me. She knows what she thinks much better than I do — Mr. Ashton, would it not turn one's head and make one unfit for one's other business if one was trying to make money in *that* way?"

"Perhaps," Roland said.

"Has it not that effect upon you?"

"But it is my business. I don't act for myself. I am tempted sometimes to do things I ought not to do, and sometimes I fall. Even you, if you were tempted, would sometimes fall. You would dabble in Circassians, you would find a new company too much for your virtue; shares going to-day for next to nothing but sure to be at a premium next week—if the bubble doesn't burst in the meantime."

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"And does it always happen that the bubbles burst?"

"Oh, not always; but after you have done with them you don't care what becomes of them. I never thought I should have had you for half an hour all to myself, and talked of business the whole time. It is incredible; and there is that little Emma running this way as if she thought we were inconsolable for the loss of her. I wanted to tell you how much I have been thinking of all our talks since I have been in my little house alone. Did you never think of coming to London? The very feeling of being in a place so full of life and action, and thinking, makes your veins thrill. I think you would like to be there. There is so much going on. And then I might have the hope of seeing you sometimes. That is one for you and two for myself."

"We could not afford it," said Hester, colouring again. "I think I should like it. I am not sure. To look on and see everybody doing a great deal would be intolerable if one had nothing to do."

"What are you talking of?" cried Emma coming up breathless. "I couldn't find that umbrella. I went up and down into every room in the house, and then I found I had left it in your drawing-room, Hester, and your mamma looked up when I went in, and said, 'Back already!' I think she must have been dozing, for we could not possibly have gone to Redborough and back in this time, could we, Roland? You two looked so comfortable by yourselves I had half a mind not to come at all: for you know two's company but three's none. And then I thought you didn't know my number, and Roland would never have had the thought to bring me my gloves. But don't be afraid, I dare say I shall pick up some one on the way."

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They walked into the town after this, and bought Emma's gloves. Hester could not be tempted into a similar purchase, nor could she be persuaded to go to the Merridews. And she resisted all

Roland's attempts to make himself agreeable, even after Emma encountered young Reginald Merridew, who was glad enough to help her to buy her gloves. Though it was not many months since she had seen him, Hester felt that she had outgrown Roland. His eyes were very fine, but they did not affect her any more. He brought no light with him into the problems of life, but only another difficulty, which it was more and more hard to solve. A sort of instinctive consciousness that something was going to happen seemed in the air about her. All was still, and everything going on in its calm habitual way. There were not even any heavings and groanings, like those that warn the surrounding country before a volcano bursts forth. Nevertheless, this girl, who had been so long a spectator, pushed aside from the action about her, but with the keen sight of injured pride and wounded feeling, seeing the secret thread of meaning that ran through everything, felt premonitions, she could not tell how, in the heated air, and through the domestic calm.

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CHAPTER II.

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A SPECULATOR.

Roland's Christmas visit to his friends was not the holiday it appeared. His engagements with them had been many during this interval, and attended both by loss and gain; but the gain had outbalanced the loss, and though there had been many vicissitudes and a great many small crises, the Christmas balance had shown tolerably well, and every one was pleased. Edward's private ventures, which he had not consulted any one about, but in which the money of the bank had been more or less involved, had followed the same course. He had a larger sum standing to his individual credit than ever before, and, so far as any one knew, had risked nothing but what he had a right to risk, though, in reality, his transactions had gone much further than any one was aware of, even Ashton; for he had felt the restraints of Roland's caution, and had already established, though to a limited extent, dealings with other agents of bolder disposition. And, indeed, his mind had gone further than his practice, and had reached a point of excitement at which the boundaries of right and wrong become so indistinct as to exert little, if any, control over either the conscience or the imagination. Through his other channels of information he had heard of a speculation greater than he had yet ventured upon, in which the possible gain would be immense, but the risk proportionate—almost proportionate—though the probabilities were so entirely in favour of success that a sanguine eye could fix itself upon them with more justification than is usual. It was so vast that even to Edward, who had been playing with fire for months back, the suggestion took away his breath, and he took what was in reality the wise step of consulting Ashton. It was wise had he intended seriously to be guided by Ashton, but it was foolish as it happened, seeing that a day or two's contemplation of the matter wrought in him a determination to risk it, whether Ashton approved or not. And Roland did not approve. He came down at the utmost speed of the express to stop any further mischief if he could. He had himself always kept carefully within the bounds of legitimate business; sometimes, indeed, just skirting the edge, but never committing himself or risking his credit deeply, and he had never forgot the solemn adjuration addressed to him by both the old people at the Vernonry. If Catherine Vernon or her representatives came to harm it should not be, he had determined, by his means. So he had answered Edward's appeal in person; and, instead of communicating with him only, had spoken of the matter to Harry, supposing him to be in all Edward's secrets, a thing which disturbed Edward's composure greatly. It was his own fault he felt for so distrusting his own judgment; but he durst not betray his displeasure: and so the proposal which he had meant to keep to himself had to be discussed openly between the partners. Harry, as may be supposed, being passive and unambitious, opposed it with all his might. Roland had been shut up with them in Edward's room at the bank for hours in the morning, and the discussion had run high. He had been a kind of moderator between them, finding Harry's resistance to some extent unnecessary, but, on the whole, feeling more sympathy with him than with the other. "It isn't ourselves only we have to consider," Harry said; and he repeated this, perhaps too often, often enough to give his opponent a sort of right to say that this was a truism, and that they had heard it before.

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"A thing does not become more true for being repeated," Edward said.

"But it does not become less true," said Roland; "and I think so far that Harry is right. With all your responsibilities you ought to go more softly than men who risk nothing that is not their own. You are in something of the same position as trustees, and you know how they are tied up."

"This is a statement which hardly comes well from you," said Edward, "who have been our adviser all along, and sailed very near the wind on some occasions."

"I have never advised you to anything I did not think safe," said Roland.

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Edward was so eager and so confident of his superiority over his cousin, that it was difficult to keep the suspicion of a sneer out of his voice in this discussion, though for Roland Ashton, whatever his other sentiments might be, he at least had no feeling of contempt.

"And there's Aunt Catherine," said Harry. "Of course a great part of the money's hers. Her hair would stand on end if she knew we were even discussing such a question."

"Aunt Catherine is—all very well; but she's an old woman. She may have understood business in her day. I suppose she did, or things would not have come to us in the state they are. But we

cannot permit ourselves to be kept in the old jogtrot because of Aunt Catherine. She departed from her father's rule, no doubt. One generation can't mould itself upon another. At least that is not what I understand by business."

"And there was John Vernon, don't you know," said Harry. "He was a caution! I shouldn't like to follow in his ways."

"John Vernon was a fool; he threw his chance away. I've gone into it, and I know that nothing could be more idiotic. And his extravagance was unbounded. He burned the candle at both ends. I hope you don't think I want to take John Vernon for my model."

"It seems to me," said Harry, "that it's awfully easy to be ruined by speculation. Something always happens to put you out. There were those mines. For my part I thought they were as safe as the bank, and we lost a lot by them. There was nobody to blame so far as I know. I don't mean to stand in the way, or be obstructive, as you call it, but we have got to consider other people besides ourselves."

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Roland did not look upon the matter exactly in this way. He was not of Harry's stolid temperament. He heard of a proposition so important with something of the feelings of a war-horse when he sniffs the battle. But his opposition was all the more weighty that it was more or less against his own will.

"In your place I do not think I should venture," he said. "If I were an independent capitalist, entirely free——"

"You would go in for it without a moment's hesitation! Of course you would. And why should we be hampered by imaginary restrictions? Aunt Catherine—if it is her you are thinking of—need know nothing about it, and we risk nobody so much as we risk ourselves. Loss would be far more fatal to us than to any one else. Am I likely to insist upon anything which would make an end of myself first of all if it went wrong?"

But the others were not convinced by this argument. Harry shook his head, and repeated his formula.

"It wouldn't console anybody who was injured, that you ruined yourself first of all," he said.

"Nor would it comfort me for the loss of a fortune that other people had rejected it," cried Edward with an angry smile.

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His mind worked a great deal faster than the conversation could go, and the discussion altogether was highly distasteful to him. Harry had a right to his say when the subject was broached, but it was beyond measure embarrassing and disagreeable that Harry should have heard anything about it. It was all Ashton's fault, whom he had consulted by way of satisfying his conscience merely, and whom he could not silence or find fault with for betraying him, since, of course, he wanted no one to suppose that he acted upon his own impulse and meant to leave Harry out. He could not express all this, but he could drop the discussion, and Ashton (he thought to himself) along with it. Let him prose as he would, and chime in with Harry's little matter-of-fact ways, he (Edward) had no intention to allow himself to be stopped.

"I would let it alone, if I were you," Roland said. "It is a great temptation, and of course if you were entirely independent—— But I would not risk a penny of other people's money."

"That's just what I say. We have others to consider besides ourselves," said the steadfast Harry.

Edward made no reply. He was outvoted for the moment by voices which, he said to himself, had no right to be heard on the question. The best thing was to end the discussion and judge for himself. And the contemplation of the step before him took away his breath; it took the words out of his mouth. There would be nothing to be said for it. In argument it would be an indefensible proceeding. It was a thing to do, not to think, much less talk about. No one would have a word to say if (as was all but absolutely certain) his operations were attended by success. In that event his coolness, his promptitude, his daring, would be the admiration of everybody; and Harry himself, the obstructive, would share the advantage, and nothing more would be heard of his stock phrase. Edward felt that in reality it was he who was considering others, who was working for everybody's benefit; but to form such a determination was enough to make the strongest head swim, and it was necessary that he should shake off all intrusion, and have time and solitude to think it over in private.

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The way in which he thus dropped the discussion astonished both the other parties to it a little. Edward was seldom convinceable if he took an idea into his head, and he never acknowledged himself beaten. But Harry at first was simple enough to be able to believe that what he had himself said was unanswerable, and that as nothing could be done without his acquiescence, Ned showed his sense by dropping the question. Roland was not so easily reassured; but it was not his business, which makes a wonderful difference in the way we consider a subject, and it was not for him to continue a subject which the persons chiefly concerned had dropped. He strolled with Harry into his room presently on a hint from Edward that he had something particular to do. Harry was not very busy. He did what came under his special department with sufficient diligence, but that was not oppressive work: the clerks took it off his hands in great part. In all important matters it was Mr. Edward who was first consulted. Harry had rather a veto upon what was proposed, than an active hand in it; but he was very steady, always present, setting the best example to the clerks. Roland talked to him for a quarter of an hour pleasantly enough about football, which eased the minds which had been pondering speculation. The result of the morning's conference was shown in one way by his ready and unexpected adherence to Mrs. John's statement that she liked Harry best. Roland thought so too, but he did not give any reason

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for it; and indeed, so far as intellectual appreciation went, there was perhaps little reason to give.

After Emma's gloves were bought, the group sauntering through Redborough just at the hour when all the fine people of the place were about, were met in succession by the two cousins. Harry had time only to pause for a minute or two, and talk to the girls on his way to a meeting of the football club, at which the matches of the season were to be settled; but Edward, who was going their way, walked with them as far as the Grange. He was pale and preoccupied, with that fiery sparkle in his eyes which told of some pressing subject for his thoughts, and though those eyes shot forth a passing gleam when he saw that Roland kept by Hester's side, and that he was left to Emma, the arrangement perhaps on the whole was the most suitable one that could have been made, for Emma wanted little help in keeping up something which sounded sufficiently like conversation. Her voice flowed on, with just a pause now and then for the little assenting ejaculations which were indispensable. Edward said "Yes," sometimes with a mark of interrogation, sometimes without; and "Indeed," and "To be sure," and "Exactly," as we all do in similar circumstances; and the pair got on very well. Emma thought him much nicer than usual, and Hester going on in front, somewhat distracted from Roland's remarks by the consciousness of the other behind her, was perhaps more satisfied to hear his stray monosyllables than if he had maintained a more active part in the conversation. When they stopped in front of the Grange, where Catherine Vernon, always at the window, saw the group approaching, they were called up stairs to her by a servant—an invitation, however, which Hester did not accept. "My mother will be waiting for me," she said; and while the others obeyed the summons, she sped along the wintry road by herself, not without that proud sense of loneliness and shut-out-ness which the circumstances made natural. Edward lingered a moment to speak to her while the others went in, having first ascertained that they were shaded by the big holly at the gate and invisible from the window.

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"I must not go with you, though I want to talk to you," he said. "When will this bondage be over? But at the Merridews to-night—"

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"I am not going," she said, waving her hand as she went on.

She was half pleased, yet altogether angry, despising him (almost) for his precautions, yet glad that he wanted to talk to her, and glad also to disappoint him, if it is possible to describe so complicated a state of mind. She went along with a proud, swift step, her head held high, her girlish figure instinct in every line with opposition and self-will: or so at least Catherine Vernon thought, who looked after her with such attention that she was unaware of the entrance of the others, whom she liked so much better than Hester. She laughed as she suffered herself to be kissed by Emma, who was always effusive in that way, and fed upon the cheeks of her friends.

"So Princess Hester has not come with you," Catherine said. "I suppose I should have gone down to the door to meet her, as one crowned head receives another."

"Oh, she had to go home to her mother," said Emma, who never spoke ill of anybody, and always took the most matter-of-fact view of her neighbours' proceedings.

Catherine laughed, and was amused (she thought) by the girl's persistent holding aloof.

"All the same a cup of tea would not have poisoned her," she said.

When the Ashtons left the Grange it was nearly the hour of dinner, and Catherine did not remark the silence of her companion. Edward had been moody of late; he had not been of temper so equable, or of attentions so unfailing, as in the earlier years. But she was a tolerant woman, anxious not to exact too much, and ready to represent to herself that this was but "a phase," and that the happier intercourse would return after a time. She wondered sometimes was he in love? that question which occurs so unnaturally to the mind at moments when things are not going perfectly well with young persons, either male or female. Catherine thought that if his choice were but a good one, she would be very glad that he should marry. It would give to him that sense of settledness which nothing else gives, and it would give to her a share in all the new events and emotions of family life. If only he made a good choice! the whole secret of the situation of course was in that. At dinner he was more cheerful, indeed full of animation, doing everything that could be done to amuse and please her, but excused himself from following her to the drawing-room afterwards.

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"You are going to Ellen's folly, I suppose," she said, which was the name that the Merridew entertainments held in the house.

"Very likely—but later," said he; "I have a great deal to do."

Catherine smiled upon his diligence, but held up a finger in admonition.

"I never approved of bringing work home," she said. "I would rather for my own part you stayed an hour longer at the bank. Home should be for rest, and you should keep the two places distinct; but I suppose you must learn that by experience," she said, putting her hand caressingly upon his shoulder as he held the door open for her: and she looked back upon him when she had passed out with a little wave of her hand. "Don't sit too long over your papers," she said.

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He had *trop de zèle*. No fear of Edward shrinking from his work. But experience would teach him that it was better to give himself a little leisure sometimes. Would experience teach him? she asked herself, as she went up stairs. He was of a fervid nature, apt perhaps to go too far in anything that interested him. She reflected that she had herself been older before she began to have anything to do with business, and a woman looks forward to home, to the seat by the fire, the novel, the newspaper (if there is nothing better), the domestic chat when that is to be had, with more zest than a man does. What she herself liked would have been to have him there

opposite to her as he used to be at first, talking, or reading as pleased him, telling her his ideas. Why was it that this pleasant state of affairs never continued? He preferred to sit in the library now, to work, or perhaps only, she began to fear, to be alone. The idea struck Catherine sadly now she came to think of it. There was a great difference. Why should men prefer to sit alone, to abandon that domestic hearth which sounds so well in print, and which from Cowper downward all the writers have celebrated. Even Dickens (then the master of every heart) made it appear delightful and attractive to everybody. And yet the young man preferred to go and sit alone. A wife would alter all that, provided only that the choice he made was a good one, Catherine Vernon said. The drawing-room was a model of comfort; its furniture was not in the taste of the present day, but the carpets were like moss into which the foot sank, and the curtains were close drawn in warm, ruddy, silken folds. The fire burnt brightly, reflected from the brass and steel, which it cost so much work to keep in perfect order. Catherine sat in the warmest place just out of reach of the glare, with a little table by her favourite easy-chair. Impossible to find a room more entirely "the picture of comfort" as people say. And few companions could have been found more intelligent, more ready to understand every allusion, and follow every suggestion, than this old lady, who was not at all conscious of being old. Yet her boy, her son, her nephew, her chosen, whom she had taken to her heart in place of all the other inmates who once dwelt there, sat down stairs! How strange it was; yet notwithstanding Catherine deposited herself in her seat by the fire, with a sort of subdued happiness, consequent on the fact that he was down stairs. This gave a secondary satisfaction if nothing better was to be had. It is all that many people have to live upon. But if he had a wife that would make all the difference. A wife he could not leave to sit alone; provided only that his choice was a right one! If Catherine had known that his choice, so far as he had made a choice, had fallen upon Hester, what would her sentiments have been? but fortunately she did not know.

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But if she could have looked into the library down stairs, which had been given up to Edward as his room, what would she have seen there? The sight would have driven out of her mind all question about a problematical wife: though indeed Edward always prepared for domiciliary visitations, and believing them to be the fruit of suspicion, not of love, was ready in that case to have concealed his occupation at the first sound of the door opening. He had an open drawer close to him into which his materials could have been thrown in a minute. He took these precautions because, as has been said, Catherine would sometimes carry him with her own hands a cup of tea in affectionate kindness, and he thought it was inquisitiveness to see what he was doing! She had not done this now for a long time, but still he was prepared against intrusion. The papers he was examining he had brought himself in a black bag from the safe in the bank. He had locked the black bag into an old oak escritoire till after dinner. He was looking over them now with the greatest care, and a face full of suppressed, but almost solemn excitement. They were securities of all kinds, and meant an amount of money which went to Edward's head even more than the chances of fortune. All that in his power; no chance of being called upon to produce them, or to render an account of the stewardship which had been so freely committed to him! It was enough to make any man's head go round. To hesitate upon a speculation which might bring in cent. per cent. when he had all these to fall back upon, papers upon which he could easily find, to meet a temporary need, any amount of money! and of course no such need could be anything but temporary! Edward was as little disposed to risk the future of the bank as any one. He had wisdom enough to know that it was his own sheet anchor, as well as that of the family, and he had a pride in its stability and high reputation, as they all had. That Vernon's should be as safe as the Bank of England was a family proverb which admitted of no doubt. But why should Vernon's be affected except to its advantage by really bold speculation? It was the timid, half-hearted sort of operations that frittered away both money and credit, which ruined people, not anything which was really on a grand scale. Edward represented to himself that ventures of this great kind were rarely unsuccessful. There was a security in their magnitude—small people could not venture upon them; and what even if it did not succeed? It blanched his countenance and caught his breath to think of this, but (he said to himself) every possibility, even the most unlikely, must be taken into account. If it did not, here was what would keep the credit of the bank scatheless until another luckier stroke should make up for failure. For in such pursuits the last word was never said. Could you but go on you were sure one time or another to satisfy your fullest desires. This was the worst in case of failure: but there was in reality no chance of failure, every human probability was in favour of a great, an almost overwhelming success.

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There was almost a sense of triumph, though the thrill of excitement had alarm in it also—in the final calculations by which he made up his mind to throw Ashton and prudence to the winds. He wrote with a heart leaping high in his breast to the other broker, whom he had already employed, before he rose from his writing table. Ashton was a fool—he would lose a large commission, and make nothing by his preachment; and to think of that preachment made Edward smile, though the smile was constrained and dry—not a cheerful performance. Harry and Ashton—they were a sensible couple to lecture him as to what was best! It seemed to Edward that he had himself far more insight and faculty than a dozen such. Ashton indeed might know a thing or two. He had proved himself a fool in this case, but naturally he was not a fool. Advice might be received from him, but dictation, never. And as for Harry with his football, a ninny who had never been trusted with any but the mechanical working of the bank, it was too ridiculous that Harry should take upon himself to advise. Edward got his letter ready for the post with something of the feeling with which a conspirator may be supposed to light the match by which some deadly mine is to be fired. It may blow himself into atoms if he lingers, and the strong sensation of the possibility is upon him even though he knows it cannot happen except by some extraordinary accident. Edward put the letter where he knew the butler would find it, and send it away for the late post. It would thus be out of his power to recall, even though a panic should seize him. When he had

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done this, he felt an overwhelming need of the fresh air and movement to calm his nerves and distract his thoughts. Should he go to Ellen's folly as was his custom? He put on his coat and went out, forgetting that it was his usual custom to go up stairs and say good-night to Catherine before doing so. There was no intentional neglect in this, but only the intensity of his abstraction and self-absorbedness. When he got out the cold breeze in his face was pleasant to him, brain and all. Then he remembered that Hester had said she would not go to the Merridews, and obeying his impulse without questioning what he expected from it, he turned away from the lights of the town, and took his way along the moonlit road towards the Vernonry. He did not expect to see her—he expected nothing in particular; but his thoughts, his heart, drew him in that direction—or his fancy, if nothing more.

Catherine, in the warmth and lonely luxury of her drawing-room, heard the door shut, and wondered, with a new little arrow of pain going into her heart—Was it possible that he could have gone out without saying good-night? She was like a mother who is beginning to discover that she is of no particular consequence in the economy of her child's life. When you seize upon the office of parent without being called to it by God, you must accept the pains as well as the pleasures. This new step in the severance between them hurt her more than she could have thought possible; the merest trifle! He might have forgotten; it might be fully accounted for—and, if not, what did it matter? It was nothing; but she stole behind the heavy curtains, and looked out at the corner of the blind with a wistful anxiety to see him, as if the sight of him would afford any comfort. Had Edward seen it he would have gnashed his teeth at her inquisition, at her watch and surveillance, without a thought of the trembling of profound tenderness, surprise, and pain which was in her. But Catherine was too late to see him. He had got into the shadow of the great holly, and there paused a moment before he turned his back upon Redborough and the dance. She saw a solitary figure on the road in the opposite direction, and wondered vaguely who it could be at that hour, but that was all. That it should be Edward did not enter into her thoughts.

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But to Edward the silence and stillness were very grateful, emerging out of the very heat and din of conflict as he had just done. The cold too did him good; it refreshed his weary mind and excited brain, and composed and stilled the ferment in his whole being. The vast darkness of the world about him, the broad white light of the moon streaming along the road, but retiring baffled from the inequalities of the common; the spectral outline of every object, enlarged by the blackness behind of its own shadow—all had a vague effect upon him, though he made but little account of the features of the scene. He was in a state of mental exaltation, and therefore more open than usual to all influences, though it was not any lofty or noble cause which raised him into that spiritual susceptibility. He could see a long way before he reached it, the end window of Mrs. John's house shining along the road, its little light looking like a faint little ruddy earth-star, so near the ground. The mother and daughter were still sitting over their fire, talking—or rather it was the mother who talked, while Hester sat with her hands in her lap, half-listening, half-thinking, her mind escaping from her into many a dream and speculation, even while she gave a certain attention to her mother's broken monologue, which was chiefly about the dances and parties of the past.

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"I never refused a ball when I was your age," Mrs. John said. "It would have been thought quite unnatural; and though I am old now, I feel the same as ever. What can be nicer for a girl than to have a nice dance to go to, when she is sure of plenty of partners? If it was in a strange place, or you did not know the people, I could understand. It did hurt me a little, I confess, to hear that little Emma, with her white eyes, rolling away like a princess, to get all the attention, while my girl, that had so much better a right, stayed at home."

"Never mind, mamma," said Hester, with a smile. "It was my own fault; there was no wicked stepmother in question. And even if there had been, you know, after all, it was Cinderella that got the prince."

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"Stepmother!" cried Mrs. John. "My dear! my dear! how could you have had a stepmother, and me surviving your poor dear papa all these years? I dare say if it had been me that died you would have had a stepmother, for gentlemen don't think of second marriages as women do. However, as it could not have happened, we need not think of that. Don't you hear steps on the road? I could be almost certain that I heard some one pass the window about five minutes ago; and there it is again. Can there be anything wrong with the Captain or old Mrs. Morgan? Dear me! what a dreadful thing if they should be taken ill, and nobody to send for the doctor! Listen! it is coming back again. If it was some one going for the doctor, they would not walk back and forward like that under our window. I declare I begin to get quite frightened. What do you think it can be?"

"If you think they may be ill I will run round directly," said Hester, rising to her feet.

"But, my darling! it might be robbers, and not Captain Morgan at all."

"I am not afraid of robbers," said Hester, which perhaps was not exactly true. "Besides, robbers don't make a noise to scare you. I must go and see if there is anything wrong."

Mrs. John did all she could at once to arouse her daughter to anxiety about the old people, and to persuade her that it was dangerous to run round the corner at nearly eleven o'clock. But eventually she consented to let Hester venture, she herself accompanying her with a candle to the door.

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"It will be far better, mamma," Hester said, "if you will stand at the parlour window, and let me feel there is some one there."

This Mrs. John, though with much trembling, at length agreed to do. She even opened the

window a little, though very cautiously, that nobody might hear, reflecting that if it was a robber he might jump in before she could get it closed again. And her anxiety rose almost to the fever point in the moments that followed. For Hester did not pass the window on her way to the Morgans' door. On the contrary, Mrs. John heard voices in the direction of the gate of the Heronry, and venturing to peep out, saw two dark figures in the moonlight—a sight which alarmed her beyond expression. It was nearly eleven o'clock, and all the inmates of the Heronry were in bed or going to it. Was it really robbers?—and why was Hester parleying with them?—or were these two of the robbers, and had they made away with her child? She was so alarmed at last that she hurried to the door, carrying her candle, and went out into the cold without a shawl, shading the light with her hand, and looking wildly about her. The candle and the moonlight confused each other, and though her heart beat less loudly when she perceived it was Hester who was talking across the gate, yet the sense of the unusual filled her with horror. "Who is it?" she cried, though in a whisper. "Hester! oh, what is the matter? Is it a doctor? Who is it? Is there anything wrong?"

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"It is Edward Vernon; may he come in?" Hester said.

"Then it is Catherine that is ill," cried Mrs. John. "Oh, I knew something must be going to happen to her, for I dreamt of her all last night, and I have not been able to think of anything else all day. Surely he may come in. What is it, Edward? Oh, I hope not paralysis, or anything of that kind."

CHAPTER III.

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A LATE VISITOR.

He was not a frequent visitor: indeed it is doubtful whether, save for a visit of ceremony, he had ever been there before. As it was so near bedtime the fire was low, and the two candles on the table gave very little light in the dark wainscoted room. Outside it had seemed a ruddy little star of domestic comfort, but within the prospect was less cheerful. They had been preparing to go to bed. Mrs. John's work was carefully folded and put away, even the little litter of thimbles and thread on the table had been "tidied," as her usage was. A book lying open, which was Hester's, was the only trace of occupation, and the dark walls seemed to quench and repel the little light, except in some polished projection here and there where there was a sort of reflection. Mrs. John hastily lit the two candles on the mantelpiece which were always ready "in case any one should come in," and which mirrored themselves with a sort of astonishment in the little glass against which they stood. She was eager to be hospitable, although she had a somewhat warm realisation of Edward as on the other side: perhaps, indeed, this of itself made her more anxious to show him "every attention," as a sort of magnanimous way of showing that she bore no malice.

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"It is rather too late to offer you tea," she said, "but perhaps a glass of wine, Hester—for it is a cold night and your cousin has had a long walk. I am very much relieved to hear that Catherine is quite well. For the first moment I confess I was very much alarmed: for she has used her head a great deal, and people say that paralysis—"

"I don't think she is at all a subject for that: her nerves are in perfect order," Edward said.

"That is a great thing to say for the strongest of us," said Mrs. John, sitting down in her chair again and furtively drawing her shawl round her; for he could not surely mean to stay long at that hour, and it seemed a pity to put more coals on the fire; "nerves is the weak point with most ladies. I know to be sure that Catherine is a very remarkable person, and not at all like the ordinary run. She has a masculine mind I have always heard. You are like Hester, you are not at the ball to-night—but you go generally, I hope?"

"I go sometimes; there was no particular attraction to-night," said Edward.

He saw that Hester understood, and that the ready colour rose to her face. How he longed to take the little tedious mother by the shoulders and send her up stairs! A sort of longing for sympathy, for some one to share his second and hidden life with him had seized upon him. He could not have told her all, even if he could have got Hester to himself, but he would have told her something, enough to keep the too full cup from running over. But Mrs. John settled herself as comfortably as she could in her chair. She tried to keep awake and make conversation. She would not allow one of the opposite side to suppose that she was wanting in courtesy. Hester sat down in the background and said nothing. She did not share Edward's faith that her mother would soon be tired out and leave them to themselves, but it was impossible that she should not to some extent share his excitement of suspense and be anxious to know what he had to say.

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"I like young men to go to balls," Mrs. John said; "where could they be so well as amusing themselves among their own kind of people? and though perhaps Ellen may be a little silly, you know, I am sure she means well. That is what I always say to Hester. Young people are apt to judge severely, but Ellen always meant well. She might promise too much now and then, but so do we all. It is so easy to make yourself agreeable by just saying what will please; but then sometimes it is very difficult to carry it out."

"Nothing could be more true," said Edward, with a little bow.

"Yes, it is very true," continued Mrs. John. "It seems all so easy at the moment: but afterwards you have to take into consideration whether it is suitable or not, and whether the person is just

the right kind, and to make everything fit: and all that is so difficult." Then there was a little pause, and Mrs. John began to feel very sleepy. "Do you often—take a walk—so late?" she said. "Oh, I know some gentlemen do. Hester's poor papa; but then there was the club—I used always to think it was the club——"

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"Indeed I ought to apologise for venturing to ask admission at such an hour," said Edward. "I should not have taken it upon me had not Hester come out to the gate."

"Oh, that does not matter a bit," said Mrs. John, waving her hand. She could scarcely keep her eyes open. After eleven o'clock—for the hour had struck since he came in—Catherine ought to have had "a stroke" at least to justify such a late visit. "You are sure you are not keeping anything from us about poor dear Catherine?" she said anxiously. "Oh, I think it is always better if there is any misfortune to say it out at once."

Thus the conversation, if conversation it could be called, went on for some time. Hester did not say a word. She sat a little behind them, looking at them, herself in a state of growing impatience and suspense. What could he have to say that made him come at such an hour—and was it possible that he ever could get it said? There went on for some time longer an interchange of hesitating remarks. Mrs. John got more and more sleepy. Her eyes closed in spite of herself when Edward spoke. She opened them again widely when his voice stopped, and smiled and said something which was generally wide of the mark. At last Hester rose and came to the back of her chair and stooped over her.

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"Mamma, you are very tired, don't you think you had better go to bed?"

"I hope—" cried Edward, "I fear that my ill-timed visit——"

"Not for the world, dear," said Mrs. John in an undertone: "no doubt he'll be going presently. Oh no, you must not think anything of the sort—we often sit up much—later than this—" and she sat very upright in her chair and opened her eyes wide, determined to do her duty at all hazards. Then Edward rose, and looked at Hester with an entreaty which she could not resist. She was so anxious too to know what he wanted.

"Don't come out, mother; I will open the door for Edward," she said.

"But you don't know the right turn of the key. Well then, perhaps—if your cousin will excuse me—but be sure you lock the door right. It is a difficult door. Put the key in as far as it will go—and then turn it to the right. Let me see, is it the right? I know it is the wrong way, not the way you generally turn a key. Well then, good-night. I hope you don't think it very uncivil of me to leave you to Hester," Mrs. John said, shaking hands, with that extremely wide-awake look which sleepy persons put on.

Edward went out into the dark passages, following Hester and her candle with a sense of something that must be said to her now. He had not thought of this when he set out. Then he had been merely excited, glad of the relief of the air and silence, scarcely aware that he wanted to pour out his soul into the bosom of some one who would understand him, of her who alone he thought could be trusted fully. But the obstacles, the hindrances, had developed this longing. Why should he have made so inappropriate a visit except under the stimulus of having something to say? And she, too, was now expecting breathlessly, something which he must have to say. When she set down her candle and opened the door into the verandah, she turned round instinctively to hear what it was. The white moon shone down straight through the glass roof, throwing black shadows of all the wintry plants in the pots, and of the two who stood curiously foreshortened by the light above them. She did not ask anything, but her whole attitude was a question. He took both her hands in his hands.

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"It is nothing," he said, "that is, I don't know what there is to tell you. I had come to a conclusion, after a great deal of thought. I had settled to begin in a new way, and I felt that I must talk it over, that I couldn't keep silent; and there is no one I could speak to with freedom but you."

She did not withdraw her hands, or show any surprise at his confidence; but only whispered "What is it, Edward?" breathlessly, with all the excitement that had been gathering in her.

"I don't know how I can tell you," he said; "it is only business. If I were to go into details you wouldn't understand. It is only that I've made up my mind to a new course of action. I am burning my ships, Hester. I must get rid of this shut-up life somehow. I have gone in to win—a great fortune—or to lose——"

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"Edward!" she said, with an unconscious pressure of his hands. "Tell me—I think I could understand."

"So long as you feel with me, that is all I want," he said. "I feel better now that I have told you. We shall make our fortune, dear, or—but there is no or—we must succeed. I know we shall; and then, Hester, my only love——"

He drew close to her, and kissed her in his excitement, straining her hands. It was not a love-kiss, but the expression of that agitation which was in his veins. She drew back from him in astonishment, but not in anger, understanding it so.

"What is it? To win a great fortune, or—to lose—what? Edward, you are not risking—other people?" she said.

"Pshaw!" he said, almost turning away from her. Then, next moment, "Never mind other people, Hester. That will come all right. I hope you don't think I am a fool. I have made a new departure, that is all, and with everything in my favour. Wish me good luck, and keep my secret. It seemed

too big for me to keep all by myself. Now that I have put half of it upon you I shall be able to sleep."

"But you have not told me anything," she said.

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Upon which he laughed a little, in an agitated way, and said—

"Perhaps that is all the better. You know everything, and yet you know nothing. I have been kept in long enough, and done as other people would, not as I wished myself; and now that is over. There is no one in the world to whom I would say so much, but you."

Hester was pleased and touched to the bottom of her heart.

"Oh, if I could only help you!" she cried; "if I could do anything, or if you would tell me more! I know I could understand. But anyhow, if it is a relief to you to tell me just as much as that; I am glad! only if I could but help you——"

"At present no one could help; it is fortune that must decide."

"You mean Providence," said Hester, softly. She had never used the phraseology of religious sentiment as many girls do at her age, and was very shy in respect to it. But she added, under her breath, "And one can always pray."

At this Edward, which was a sign of grace in him, though she did not know it as such, drew back with a hasty movement. It gave him a strange sensation to think of the success which he was seeking by such means being prayed for, as if it had been a holy enterprise. But just then Mrs. John stirred audibly within, as if about to come and inquire into the causes of the delay. He kissed her again tenderly, without any resistance on her part, and said—

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"Good-night—good-night! I must not say any more."

Hester opened the outer door for him, letting in the cold night air. It was a glorious night, still as only winter is, the moonlight filling up everything. She stood for a moment looking after him, as he crossed the threshold. When he had made a few steps into the night, he came back again hastily, and caught her hands once more.

"Hester, we win or lose. Will you come away with me? Will you give up all this for me? You don't love it any more than I do. Will you come with me and be free?"

"Edward, you don't think what you are saying. You forget my mother," she said.

He gave an impatient stamp with his foot; contradiction was intolerable to him, or any objection at this moment. Then he called "Good-night," again, more loudly into the air, as though to reach Mrs. John in the parlour, and hurried away.

"Edward was a long time saying good-night," said Mrs. John. "I suppose you were talking about the ball; that is always what happens when you give up a thing for a whim; you always regret it after. Of course you would both have preferred to be there. I suppose that is why he came in this evening, a thing he never did in his life before. Well, I must say we are all indebted, more or less, to Ellen Merridew, Hester. She has drawn us together in a way there never was any chance of in the old times. Fancy Edward Vernon coming into our house in that sort of unceremonious way! It was too late. I would never encourage a gentleman to come so late: but still it showed a friendly spirit, and a confidence that he would be welcome, which is always nice. I must tell him next time I see him that I shall be delighted at any time to have him here, only not quite so late at night."

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"I dare say it will not happen again," Hester said.

"Why shouldn't it happen again? It is the most natural thing in the world; only I shall tell him that usually we are all shut up by ten o'clock. It did give me a great fright to begin with, for I thought he must have come to tell us that Catherine was ill. She has always been so strong and well that I shouldn't wonder at all if it was something sudden that carried her off in the end; and whenever it does come it will be a great shock; besides that, it will break up everything. This house will probably be sold, and——"

"Catherine Vernon does not look at all like dying," Hester said. "Please do not calculate upon what would happen."

"My dear, it does not make a thing happen a day the sooner that we take it into consideration; for we will have to, when the time comes. We shall all have to leave our houses, and it will make a great deal of difference. Of course we can't expect her heirs to do the same kind of thing as Catherine has done. No, I confess that was what I thought, and it was a great relief to me to hear—did you lock the door, Hester? I hope you remembered to turn the key the wrong way. The fire is quite safe, I think, and I have shut the shutters. Carry the candle and let us go to bed."

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Mrs. John continued to talk while they were undressing, though she had been so sleepy during Edward's visit. She would permit no hasty manipulation of Hester's hair, which had to be brushed for twenty minutes every night. She thought its beauty depended upon this manipulation, and never allowed it to be omitted, and as this peaceful exercise was gone through, and her mother's gentle commentary ran on, it is impossible to describe the force of repressed thought and desire for silence and quiet which was in Hester's veins. She answered at random when it was necessary to answer at all, but Mrs. John took no notice. She had been roused up by that curious visit. She took longer time than usual for all her own little preparations, and was more particular than usual about the hair-brushing. The fire was cheerful in the outer room, which was the mother's, and on account of this fire it was the invariable custom that Hester should do her hair-brushing there. Her mother even tried a new way of arranging Hester's hair, so full was she of

that mental activity which so often adds to the pangs of those who are going through a secret crisis. It seemed hours before the girl was finally allowed to put out the candle, and steal back into the cold moonlight, into her own little room where the door always stood open between her and her mother. Hester would have liked to close that door; her thoughts seemed too big, too tumultuous, not to betray themselves. Soon, however, Mrs. John's calm, regular breathing, showed her to be asleep, and then Hester felt free to deliver herself up to that torrent of thought.

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Was it possible that not very long since she had scorned herself for almost sharing Emma's ignoble anxiety that he should "speak." It had chafed and fretted her almost beyond endurance to feel herself thus on the same level as Emma, obliged to wait till he should declare his wishes, feeling herself so far subordinate and dependent, an attitude which her pride could not endure. Now he had spoken indeed—not in the conventional way, saying he loved her and asking her to marry him, as people did in books. Edward had taken it for granted that she was well aware of his love—how could it be otherwise? Had not she known from the beginning, when their eyes met, that there was an interchange in that glance different from and more intimate than all the intercourse she had ever had with others? Even when she had been so angry with him, when he had passed by her in Catherine Vernon's parties with but that look, indignant as she had been, was there not something said and replied to by their eyes such as had never passed between her and any other all her life long?—"My only love." She knew she was his only love. The remembrance of the words made her heart beat, but she felt now that she had known them all along. Since the first day when they met on the common, she a child, he in the placidity of unawakened life, there had been nobody to each but the other. She knew and felt it clearly now—she had known it and felt it all along, she said to herself—but it had wanted that word to make it flash into the light. And how unlike ordinary love-making it all was! He had come to her, not out of any stupid doubt about her response to him, not with any intention of pleading his own cause, but only because his burden was too much for him, his heart too full, and she was the only one in all the world upon whom to lean it. Hester said to herself, with fine scorn, that to suppose the question, "Do you love me?" to be foremost in a man's mind when he was fully immersed in the business and anxieties of life, was to make of love not a great but a petty thing. How could he fail to know that as he had looked upon her all those years so she had looked upon him? "My only love"—the words were delightful, like music to her ears; but still more musical was the thought that he had come to her not to say them—that he had come to lean upon her, upon her arm, and her heart—to tell her that something had happened to him which he could not tell to any one else in the world. To think that he should have been drawn out of his home, along the wintry road, out into the night, solely on the hope of seeing her and reposing his over-full mind upon her, conveyed to Hester's soul a proud happiness, a sense of noble befittingness and right, which was above all the usual pleasure (she thought) of a newly disclosed love. He had disclosed it in the noblest way, by knowing that it needed no disclosure, by coming to her as the other part of him when he was in utmost need. Had Edward calculated deeply the way to move her he could not have chosen better; but he did it instinctively, which was better still—truly needing, as he said, that outlet which only the most intimate unity of being, the closest of human connections, could give. Hester could think of nothing but this in the first rapture. There were other things to be taken into consideration—what the momentous step was which he had taken, and what was the meaning of that wild proposal at the end. To go away with him, win or lose— She would not spoil the first sweet impression with any thought of these, but dropped asleep at last, saying to herself "My only love" with a thrill of happiness beyond all words. She had believed she would not sleep at all, so overflowing was her mind with subjects of thought, but these words were a sort of lullaby which put the other more important matters out of her head. "My only love"—if it was he who had said them, or she who had said them, she could scarcely tell. They expressed everything—the meaning of so many silent years.

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Edward was making his way as quietly as possible into the house which had been his home for so many years, while Hester turned over these things in her mind. He had loitered on the way back, saying to himself that if Catherine should chance not to be asleep, it was better that she should suppose him to have gone to the Merridews. He felt himself something like a thief in the night as he went in, taking his candle and going softly up the carpeted stairs not to disturb her—a proceeding which was for his sake, not for hers, for he had no desire to be questioned in the morning and forced to tell petty lies, a thing he disliked, not so much for the sake of the lies as for the pettiness of them. But Catherine, disturbed by a new anxiety which she did not understand, was lying awake, and did hear him, cautious as he was. She said to herself, "He has not stayed long to-night," with a sense half of satisfaction, half of alarm. Never before during all the years he had been under her roof had this feeling of insecurity been in her mind before. She did not understand it, and tried to put it aside and take herself to task for a feeling which did Edward injustice, good as he was, and had always been, in his relations with her. If some youthful tumult was in his mind, unsettling him, there was nothing extraordinary in that—if he was "in love," that natural solution of youthful agitations. It is common to say and think that mothers, and those who stand in a mother's place, are jealous of a new comer, and object to be no longer the first in their child's affections. Catherine smiled in the dark, as she lay watching and thinking. This should not stand in Edward's way—provided that he made a right choice! But whatever choice he made, it would be for him, not her, she reflected, with a magnanimity almost beyond nature, and it would be strange if she could not put up with it for his sake. She had not, indeed, the smallest idea in which direction his thoughts had turned. But there was something in the air which communicated alarm.

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When Hester woke next morning, it was not with the same sense of beatitude which had rapt her from all other considerations on the previous night, notwithstanding her high certainty that the

mere love declared was but secondary in her mind to the noble necessity of having to share the burdens and bear part in the anxieties of her lover. Everything else he said had, in fact, been little to her in comparison with the three words which had been going through her mind and her dreams the whole night, and which sprang to her lips in the morning like an exquisite refrain of happiness, but which gradually, as she began to think, went back out of the foreground, leaving her subject to questions and thoughts of a very different description. What had the crisis been through which he had passed? What was the new departure, the burning of the ships? There must be some serious meaning in words so serious as these. And then that wild suggestion that she should fly with him, whether they gained or lost, "away from all this; you don't love it any more than I do"—what did that mean? Alarm was in her mind along with the excitement of a secret half-revealed. An eager and breathless longing to see him again, to know what it meant, gained possession of her mind. Then there floated back into her ears Roland's remark, which had half-offended her at the time, which she had thought unnecessary, almost impertinent, that Edward "lost his head." In what did he lose his head? She remembered the whole conversation as her mind went back to it. Edward was too hot and eager; he had a keen eye, but he lost his head; he was tired of the monotony of his present life. And then there came his own statement about burning his ships. What did it all mean? She began to piece everything together, dimly, as she could with her imperfect knowledge. She had no training in business, and did not know in what way he could risk in order to gain—though of course this was a commonplace, and she had often heard before of men who had lost everything or gained everything in a day. But when Hester thought of the bank, and of all the peaceable wealth with which Vernon's was associated, and of the young men going to their office tranquilly every day, and the quiet continual progress of their affairs, she could not understand how everything could hang upon a chance, how fortune could be gained or lost in a moment. It was scarcely more difficult to imagine the whole economy of the world dropping out in a moment, the heavens rolling up like a scroll, and the foundations of the earth giving way, than to imagine all that long-established framework of money-making collapsing so that one of the chief workers in it could talk of burning his ships and suggest a moment when he should fly away from all this—which could only mean from every established order of things. That her heart should rise with the sense of danger, and that she should be ready to give her anxious help and sympathy and eager attention, to the mystery, whatever it was, did not make any difference in Hester's sudden anxiety and alarm. The earth seemed to tremble under her feet. Her whole life and the action of the world itself seemed to hang in suspense. She did what she had never in her life thought possible before. She went out early, pretending some little business, and hung about on the watch, with her veil down, and her mind in a tumult impossible to describe, to meet Edward, if possible, on his way to the bank. Could it be Hester, so proud, so reserved as she was, that did this? Her cheeks burned and her heart beat with shame: but it seemed to her that she could not endure the suspense, that she must see and question him, and know what it was. But Edward had gone to the bank earlier than usual, which was a relief as well as a disappointment unspeakable to her. She stole home, feeling herself the most shameless, the least modest of girls; yet wondered whether she could restrain herself and keep still, and not make another effort to see him, for how could she live in this suspense? Punishment came upon her, condign and terrible. She fell into the hands of Emma Ashton, who was taking a little walk along the road in the morning, to wake her up a little, she said, after the ball last night, and who, utterly unconscious of Hester's trouble and agitated looks, had so many things to tell her, and turned back with her, delighted to have a companion. "For though a little exercise is certainly the best thing for you, it is dull when you take it all by yourself," Emma said.

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CHAPTER IV.

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DOUBTS AND FEARS.

The abruptness with which Edward Vernon retired from the discussion with his partner and agent had a singular effect upon both. Neither accepted it as done in good faith. It surprised and indeed startled them. What they had looked for was a prolonged discussion, ending in all probability in a victory for Edward, who was by far the most tenacious of the three, and least likely to yield to the others. So easy a conclusion of the subject alarmed them more than the most obstinate maintenance of his own views. They were so much surprised indeed that they did not communicate their astonishment to each other on the spot by anything more than an interchange of looks, and parted after a few bewildered remarks about nothing in particular, neither of them venturing to begin upon a subject so delicate. But when they next met reflection had worked upon both. Neither had been able to dismiss the matter from his thoughts. They met indeed in a most inappropriate atmosphere for any such grave discussion, at Ellen Merridew's house, where they mutually contemplated each other from opposite sides of the room, with an abstraction not usual to either. It had a great effect upon both of them, also, that neither Hester nor Edward appeared. Roland had known beforehand and reconciled himself as well as he could to the former want: and Harry did not know it, and was full of curious and jealous alarm on the subject, unable to refrain from a suspicion that the two who were absent must have somehow met and be spending at least part of the time together free from all inspection—a thing which was really happening, though nothing could be more unlikely, more unprecedented than that it should happen. Roland did not think thus; he knew very well that Edward had not attempted to hold any intercourse with Hester, and felt that as far as this was concerned there was no extra danger in

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the circumstances: but Harry's alarm seemed to confirm all his own ideas on the other matter. He missed Hester greatly for his own part—not that he did not do his best to make several of the Redborough young ladies believe that to recall himself to her individual recollection was the special object of his visit—but that was a mere detail of ordinary existence. It was Hester he had looked forward to as the charm of the evening, and everything was insipid to him without her, in the feminine society around him. It was not till after supper, when the fun had become faster and more furious that he found himself standing close to Harry whose countenance in the midst of all this festivity was dull and lowering as a wintry sky. Harry did not dance much; he was a piece of still life more than anything else in his sister's house: loyally present to stand by her, doing everything she asked him, but otherwise enduring rather than enjoying. This was not at all Roland's *rôle*: but on this special evening when they got together after midnight the one was not much more lively and exhilarating in aspect than the other. They stood up together in a doorway, the privileged retreat of such observers, and made some gloomy remarks to each other. "Gets to look a little absurd, don't it, this sort of thing, when you have a deal on your mind?" Harry said out of his moustache. And "Yes. Gaiety does get depressing after a while," Roland remarked. After which they relapsed again into dead silence standing side by side.

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"Mr. Ashton, what do you mean by it?" cried Ellen. "I have given up Harry: but *you* usually do your duty. Good gracious! I see *three* girls not dancing, though I always have more men on purpose. I don't know what you boys mean."

"Let us alone, Ashton and I, Nell—we've got something to talk about," said Harry.

His sister looked up half alarmed in his face.

"I declare since you've gone so much into business you're *insupportable*, Harry," she cried. It seemed to bring the two men a little closer to each other when she whisked off again into the crowd.

"It's quite true," said Harry, "let's go into the hall, where there's a little quiet. I do want awfully to talk to you. What do you think about Ned giving up that business all at once, when we both stood up to him about it? I was awfully grateful to you for standing by me. I scarcely expected it; but as for Ned giving in like that, I can scarcely believe it even now."

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"It was not much like him, it must be confessed," Roland said.

"Like him! he never did such a thing in his life before; generally he doesn't even pay much attention to what one says. He has a way of just facing you down however you may argue, with a sort of a smile which makes me fit to dance with rage sometimes. But to-day he was as meek as Moses—What do you think? I—don't half like it, for my part."

"You think after all he was in the right perhaps?"

"No, I don't. I never could do that. To risk other people in that way is what I never would consent to. But a fellow who is so full of fight and so obstinate, to give in—that's what I don't understand."

"You think perhaps—he has not given in," Roland said.

Harry gave him a bewildered look, half grateful, half angry. "Now I wonder what I've said that has made you think that!"

"Nothing that you have said—perhaps only an uneasy feeling in my own mind that it isn't natural, and that I don't understand it any more than you."

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"Well," said Harry, with a long breath of relief, "that is just what I think. I don't believe for a moment, you understand, that Ned, who is a real good fellow all through"—here he made a slight pause, and glanced at Roland with a sort of defiance, as if expecting a doubt, which however was not expressed—"means anything underhand, you know. Of *course* I don't mean that. But when a man knows that he is cleverer than another fellow, he'll just shut up sometimes and take his own way, feeling it's no use to argue—I don't mean he thinks himself cleverer than you, Ashton; that's a different affair. But he hasn't much opinion of me. And in most things no doubt he's right, and I've never set up to have much of an opinion."

"There you are wrong, Vernon," said Roland, "you have the better judgment of the two. Edward may be cleverer as you say, but I'd rather throw in my lot with you."

"Do you really say so?" cried Harry, lighting up; "well, that is very kind of you anyhow. My only principle is we've got others to consider besides ourselves."

"Precisely so," said Roland, who had heard this statement already, "and you were quite right to stick to it: but I confess I am like you, not quite comfortable about the other matter. Has he means enough of his own to go in for it? If so, I should think that was what he intended."

Harry shook his head. "We had none of us any means," he said. "Aunt Catherine took us, as you might say, off the streets. We were not even very near relations. She's done everything for us: that's why I say doubly, don't let us risk a penny of her money or of what she prizes above money. You may think we were not very grateful to her," Harry continued, "but that's only Ellen's way of talking. If there was anything to be done for Aunt Catherine that little thing has got as true a heart as any one. But we were not wanted, as you may say. Ned was always the favourite, and so Nell set up a little in opposition, but never meaning any harm."

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"I feel sure of that," said Roland, with a warmer impulse than perhaps Mrs. Ellen in her own person would have moved him to. And then he added, after a pause, "I think I'll open the subject again. If Edward Vernon means to do anything rash, it's better he should be in my hands than in some, perhaps, that might be less scrupulous. I'll see him to-morrow about it. There's no time

lost, at least——"

"That's capital!" cried Harry, warmly; "that's exactly what I wanted. I didn't like to ask you; but that's acting like a true friend: and if, as a private person, there's anything I could do to back him up—only not to touch Vernon's, you know——"

Their privacy was broken in upon by the swarm of dancers pouring into the coolness of the hall as the dance ended; but up to the moment when the assembly broke up Harry continued, by an occasional meaning look now and then across the heads of the others, to convey his cheerful confidence in Roland, and assurance that now all would go well. Ashton, too, had in himself a certain conviction that it must be so. He was not quite so cheerful as Harry, for the kind of operations into which Edward's proposal might bring him were not to his fancy. But the very solemn charge laid upon him by the old people had never faded from his memory, and Catherine Vernon in herself had made a warm impression upon him. He had been received here as into a new home—he who knew no home at all; everybody had been kind to him. He had met here the one girl whom, if he could ever make up his mind to marry (which was doubtful), he would marry. Everything combined to endear Redborough to him. He had an inclination even (which is saying a great deal) to sacrifice himself in some small degree in order to save a heartbreak, a possible scandal in this cheerful and peaceful place. Edward Vernon, indeed, in himself was neither cheerful nor peaceable; but he was important to the preservation of happiness and comfort here. Therefore Roland's resolution was taken. He had come on purpose to dissuade and prevent; he made up his mind now to further, and secure the management of this over-bold venture, since no better might be. He knew nothing, nor did any but the writer of it know anything, of the letter which Catherine Vernon's butler had carefully deposited in the postbag, and sent into Redborough an hour or two before this conversation, to be despatched by the night mail. The night express from the north called at Redborough station about midnight, and many people liked to travel by it, arriving in town in the morning for their day's business, not much the worse if they had good nerves—for there was only one good train in the day.

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Next morning, accordingly, just after Hester had returned with Emma from that guilty and agitated walk, which she had taken with the hope of meeting Edward, and hearing something from him about his mysterious communication of the previous night—Roland too set out with much the same purpose, with a grave sense of embarking on an enterprise he did not see the end of. He met the two girls returning, and stopped to speak to them.

"Hester has been at Redborough this morning already," Emma said. "I tell her she should have been at Mrs. Merridew's last night, Roland. It was a very nice dance—the very nicest of all, I think; but perhaps that is because I am so soon going away. A regular thing is so nice—always something to look forward to; and you get to know everybody, and who suits your steps best, and all that. I have enjoyed it so very much. It is not like town, to be sure, but it is so friendly and homely. I shall miss it above everything when I go away."

"It was unkind not to come last night, my only chance," said Roland. He had no conception that Hester could have the smallest share in the grave business of which his mind was full, and, grave as it was, his mind was never too deeply engaged in anything for this lighter play of eye and voice. She seemed to wake up from a sort of abstraction, which Emma's prattle had not disturbed, when he spoke, and blushed with evident excitement under his glance. There was in her, too, a sort of consciousness, almost of guilt, which he could not understand. "I hope you were sorry," he added, "and were not more agreeably occupied: which would be an additional unkindness."

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"I am afraid I can't say I am sorry."

Her colour varied; her eyes fell. She was not the same Hester she had been even last night; something had happened to the girl. It flashed across his mind for the moment that Edward had been absent too, which gave a sting of pique and jealousy to his thoughts: but reassured himself, remembering that these two never met except at the Merridews. Where could they meet? Edward, who conformed to all Catherine Vernon's ways, though with resentment and repugnance, and Hester, who would conform to none of them. He was glad to remind himself of this as he walked on, disturbed by her look, in which there seemed so much that had not been there before. She seemed even to have some insight into his own meaning—some sort of knowledge of his errand, which it was simply impossible she could have. He told himself that his imagination was too lively, that this little society, so brimful of individual interests, with its hidden motives and projects, was getting too much for him. He had not been in the habit of pausing to ask what So-and-So was thinking of, what that look or this meant. In ordinary society it is enough to know what people say and do; when you begin to investigate their motives it is a sign that something is going wrong. The next thing to do would be to settle down among them, and become one of the Redborough coterie, to which suggestion Roland, with a slight shiver, said Heaven forbid! No, he had not come to that point. Town and freedom were more dear to him than anything he could find here. Hester, indeed (if he was sure he could afford it), might be a temptation; but Hester by no means meant Redborough. She would not cling to the place which had not been very gracious to her. But he could not afford it, he said to himself, peremptorily, as he went on. It was not a thing to be thought of. A young man making his way in the world, living, as yet a bachelor life, may have a little house at Kilburn with his sister; but that would not at all please him with a wife. And Hester meant her mother as well. It was out of the question; it was not to be thought of. But why did she look so strangely conscious? why was she so pale, so red, so full of abstraction and agitation to-day? If anything connected with himself could have caused that agitation, Roland could not answer for it what he might be led to do.

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This thought disturbed him considerably from the other and graver thoughts with which he had started; but he walked on steadily all the same to the bank, and knocked at the door of Edward's room. Edward was seated at his table reading the morning's letters with all the calm of a reasonable and moderate man of business—a model banker, with the credit and comfort of other men in his hands. He looked up with a smile of sober friendliness, and held out his hand to his visitor. He did not pretend to be delighted to see him. The slightest, the very most minute shadow of a consciousness that this was not an hour for a visitor, was on his tranquil countenance.

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"You man of pleasure," he said, "after your late hours and your dances, how do you manage to find your way into the haunts of business at this time in the morning!" and he glanced almost imperceptibly at his letters as he spoke.

"I am in no hurry," said Roland. "Read your letters. You know I have nothing particular to do here. I can wait your leisure; but I have something to say to you, Vernon, if you will let me."

"My letters are not important. Of course I will let you. I am quite at your disposal," Edward said; but there was still a shade of annoyance—weariness—as at a person importunate who would not take a hint and convey himself away.

"I wanted to speak to you about the subject of our conversation yesterday."

"Yes, which was that?"

"It was important enough to have remained in my memory," said Roland, with a little offence, feeling himself put in the wrong from the beginning. "I mean the proposals we were discussing—your ideas on the subject of the——"

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"Oh *that!* but you put a stop to all my ideas, Harry and you in your wisdom. I thought you must have meant that little matter about Aunt Catherine's books. Yes, it seemed to me, so far as my lights went, that the proposals were very promising: and I might have stood out against Harry, who will never set the Thames on fire; till you came down upon me with your heavy guns—you whom I expected to be on my side."

"Then you have really given it up?" cried Roland, with a sigh of relief.

"Didn't you mean me to do so? That is what I thought, at all events. You were so determined about it, that I really don't see what else I could have done, unless," he said, with a smile, "I had been a capitalist, and completely independent, as you said."

"I am most thankful to hear it, Vernon. I had not been able to divest myself of the idea that you were still hankering after it," said Roland; "and I came, intending to say to you, that if your heart was really set upon it—rather than that you should put yourself into hands, perhaps not so scrupulous——"

"Ah! I see: rather than that a rival should get the business—let us speak plainly," said Edward, with a pale smile.

"That is not speaking plainly. It is altogether different from my meaning; but take it so, if you please. I am glad to know that there is no necessity for my intrusion anyhow," Roland said; and then there was a little pause.

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At last Edward got up, and came forward, holding out his hand.

"Pardon the little spite that made me put so false an interpretation on your motive, Ashton. I know that was not what you meant. I was annoyed, I confess, that you did thwart me yesterday in a matter I had so much at heart."

"I felt that you were annoyed; but what could I do? I can only advise according to my judgment. Anyhow, Vernon, I came here intending to say, 'Let me do the best I can for you if you persist; don't throw yourself among those who promote that kind of speculation, for they are not to be trusted to.' But I am above measure glad to find that you have no hankering after it. That is far the best solution. You take a weight off my mind," Roland said.

Edward did not answer for the moment. He went back and reseated himself at his table. When he showed his face again, Roland saw he was laughing.

"After all you said to me yesterday, and Harry! think of Harry's grand argument coming down upon me like a sledge-hammer, as potent, and alas, quite as heavy—how could you think it possible that I should persist? I am not such a determined character. Besides, don't you know I have never been trained to act for myself?"

His laugh, his look, were not very convincing, but at all events they were conclusive. After another pause, Roland rose.

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"I am interfering with your work," he said. "I thought it my duty to come at once; but now that it's all over, I must not waste your time. Pardon my officiousness."

"Nothing of the sort," said Edward, smiling cheerfully; "the kindest feeling. I know it is. Are you going to see Harry? He is in his room, I know."

"Yes, I think I'll just speak to him. There is some football match that Emma wants to see."

"More pleasuring," said Edward, and laughed again. There was in him such an air of having found his visitor out, that Roland could not divest himself of a certain embarrassment. Edward, he felt, knew as well as he did, that he was going to report his failure to Harry. It fretted him beyond description to be thus seen through, he, who had thought himself so much more than a match for any provincial fellow of them all. "But you are quite right to consult Harry about

football; he is the greatest possible authority upon that subject," Edward said.

"Oh, it is not of the slightest importance; it is merely that Emma, who does not really care a straw for football, and only wants something to do, or see——"

"That is surely reason enough," said Edward, and his complaisance went so far that he left his papers again, and led the way to Harry's room, where he looked in, saying, "Here's Ashton come to inquire about that match."

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"Eh? Match?" cried Harry, in much surprise. Then his faculties kindled at the sight of Roland's face. "Will you play for us, Ashton? I didn't know you went in for football. I just wanted a man to be——"

"It was for Emma; your sister told her she must go and see it."

"I'll leave you to your explanations," said Edward, with a laugh of triumph. And indeed the two conspirators looked at each other somewhat crestfallen, when he had gone away.

"He takes it quite lightly," said Roland, with the sense of talking under his breath, "as if he had never thought of the matter again—does not conceal that he was vexed, but says of course there was an end when I came down upon him with my heavy guns."

Then they looked at each other guiltily—ashamed, though there was nothing to be ashamed of, like plotters found out.

"Well, that's something tided over," Harry said.

"I hope so: but I must not stay, to confirm his suspicions. Tell me when the match is for Emma, for she does want to go and see it, that's quite true."

"I don't care for girls about," said Harry; "they never understand the game, and it makes fellows nervous. It's on Saturday, if she wants to come."

"I'll tell her it makes fellows nervous," said Roland, as he went away. He said it in a louder tone than usual, that he might be heard in Edward's room, and then despised himself for doing so. Altogether he had seldom felt more small or more completely baffled and seen through than when he retired from those doors which he had entered with so kind a purpose. It is embarrassing to have the tables turned upon you, even in the smallest matters. He felt that he had been made to appear officious, intrusive, deceitful, even to himself, making up plots with one man against another, prying into that other's purposes, attributing falsehood to him. This was how his generous intention was cast back upon his hands. He tried to smile cynically, and to point out to himself the foolishness of straining to do a good action; but he was not a cynic by nature, and the effort was not successful. In any way, however, in which it could be contemplated, it was evident that all had been done that it was possible to do. If Edward had made up his mind to the risk, he could not stand between him and ruin. The matter was taken entirely out of his hands.

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Edward, for his part, returned to his room, and shut himself in with feelings much less victorious than those he made apparent. The excitement of the great decision had a little failed and gone off. He was in the chill reactionary stage, wondering what might befall, feeling the tugs of old prejudice, of all the traditions of honour in which he had been brought up, dragging at his heart. No man brought up as Edward had been could be without prejudices on the side of right. It alarmed and wounded him to-day to think that he had last night considered the property of the bank and its customers as a foundation upon which to start his own venture. The sophisms with which he had blinded himself in his excitement failed him now—the daylight was too clear for them. He perceived that it was other people's goods, other people's money, which he was risking; that even to take them out, to look at them, to think of them as in his power, was a transgression of the laws of honour. Those chill drawings back of customary virtue, of the prejudices of honour, from the quick march of passion which had hurried him past every landmark in that haste to be rich, which would see no obstacle in its way, plunged Edward into painful discouragement. He seemed to himself to have fallen down from a height, at which he had been master of his fate, to some deep-lying underground where he was its slave, and could only wait till the iron car of necessity rolled on and crushed him. He had set, he felt, machinery in motion which he could not stop, which might destroy him. He sat and looked out affrighted upon all the uncomprehended forces which seemed to have got into movement against him. He, a poor adventurer, with nothing that was his own, to thrust himself into the midst of the commercial movements in London, which nobody out of them could understand fully; he to risk thousands who had nothing; he to "go in to win" who had nothing to stand upon! He saw all round him, not only destruction, not only ruin, but contempt and outrage. He had once seen a miserable "welsher" hunted from a racecourse, and the spectacle, so cruel, so barbarous, yet not unjust, came back to his mind with a horrible fascination. He remembered the poor wretch's hat battered down upon his head, blinding him—the clothes torn from his back, the cruelty with which he was pursued, and still more, the mud and dirt, that meant not only punishment but unutterable contempt. Under that recollection Edward sat shivering. What was he better than the welsher? Though he sat there, to all appearance, spruce and cool, reading his morning's letters, he was already in this state of miserable depression and terror when Roland came in. The post that morning had brought him no fresh alarm, no new excitement. He was safe for that day; nothing could yet have been done in his affairs that was not remediable. It was possible even that by telegraphing now he could stop all those horrible wheels of destiny, and undo the decision of last night. As a matter of fact, no intention of doing so was in his mind; but the idea came uppermost now and then in the boiling up and ferment within him: to stop everything still, to relapse into the Edward of three months

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ago—submissive, respectable, keeping every punctilio of the domestic laws, as well as those of recognised honesty and prudence. But he never meant it; he was alarmed at himself, shaken out of all that ease which excitement gives, that possibility of believing what we wish; but though everything that last night pointed to success seemed now to point to despair, he felt himself clinging on to the chance with desperation commensurate with the gloomy prospect. Whatever it was to lead to, he must yet go on. After all, prudence itself sometimes fared as badly as hardihood. An investment that had been calculated upon as the surest and safest would sometimes turn out disastrous. Who could tell? The chances of money were beyond all calculation. And, after all, no one could say that the ruin of the bank would be for his good. It would be ruin to himself. It was not a thing that anybody could suppose he would risk without deliberation.

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He was in this condition, surging and seething, when Roland visited him, and brought him suddenly to himself with the force which an encounter with the world outside so often gives to a struggling spirit. He felt, with a wonderful sense of self-satisfaction, that he was equal to the emergency, and confronted it with a sudden gain of calm and strength which seemed to him almost miraculous, like what men engaged in holy work are justified in considering help from above. It could not be help from above which supplied Edward with self-possession and strength for his first steps in the career of evil, but still the relief was great. He got the better of Roland, he extinguished the little virtuous plot which he divined between him and Harry, and he returned to his room with a smile on his face. But once back again there he did not feel triumphant. He felt that he was not trusted—that already they suspected him of having broken loose from their society and acting for himself. He said to himself angrily that but for this he would probably have telegraphed to contradict that momentous letter of last night. But how could he do it now? it would be pandering to their prejudices, owning that he had taken an unjustifiable step. And how was it unjustifiable? Was it not he who was the virtual head, upon whose judgment and insight everything depended? Supposing Catherine to be consulted, as had ceased to be the case for some time, partly with, partly against, her own will—but supposing her to be consulted now, would not she certainly give her adherence to Edward's judgment rather than Harry's? It was not a question there could be a moment's doubt about. She would shake her head, and say, "You are far more venturesome than ever I was, but if Edward really thinks——" Was not that always what she had said? And ten years of experience had given him a right to be trusted. He was acting for the best; he looked for nothing but success. It was nerves, mere nerves that had affected him—a reaction from the excitement of last night.

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And thus everything settled down. When he had got over it, Edward was the most serene of all the doubtful group which surrounded him, not knowing what to make of him. Harry, who took a matter-of-fact view, came next. He now thought it highly probable, on the whole, that his cousin had thought better of it. How could he do anything else?—he had not means of his own to risk to such an extent, which was a thought very satisfactory to Harry. Roland Ashton was as much dissatisfied as men usually are who endeavour in vain to see into the minds of their neighbours, and offer good offices which are not wanted. But the most uneasy of all was Hester, who that day, for the first time, took upon her the most painful burden of women—the half knowledge which is torture, which the imagination endeavours to supplement in a thousand unreal ways, knowing them to be unreal, and dismissing them as quickly as they are formed—and the bitter suspense, the sensation that at any moment things may be happening, news coming which will bring triumph or misery, but which you cannot foresee or accelerate, or do anything but wait for. She did her best to pray, poor girl! breathing broken petitions for she knew not what, as she went about her little occupations all that lingering day. Surely he would try to see her again, to satisfy her, and tell what it was he had done, and how it could be possible, winning or losing, to fly, as he had suggested, from everything here. To fly—how could it be? Why should it be? All the other mysteries came in that to wonder unspeakable and dismay.

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CHAPTER V.

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A DISCOVERY.

There was a dinner-party that evening at the Grange. It was given on account of Ashton, now well known in Redborough; and Catherine Vernon had taken the trouble to go herself to beg Captain Morgan to be of the party: but the old man had refused steadily.

"I will have none of your fine company," he said. "No, no; you do enough for me here. When you come to see us it always is a pleasure, both to my old woman and me: but a dinner, no. I have not had on my evening coat this dozen of years. It's not likely it would be in the fashion now."

"What does it matter about fashion? You shall come as you are if you would like that better," Catherine said; but she did not mean it, and of that they were all perfectly aware. "It is to do honour to Roland. You are no longer so anxious to separate yourself from Roland as when he came here first," she said.

The old man did not say anything, but his wife answered for him.

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"We will not commit ourselves, Catherine, you know our way; but we think the boy does us credit. I think it might be that if we were left to ourselves we might even do a little match-making for him if we could."

"Are you come to that?" said Catherine: but there was an echo of a sigh in her voice. "That seems to me to mean a confession—that we are not enough for them any longer, but still that we will not give in; we will be enough for them in another way."

"Why should we be enough for them? We could not think that was possible, living far off as we do, and in a different way. No, but out of pure love, which is just as foolish as anything else. I am the wisest in this respect, for I know it will not do."

"And who is the lady?" Catherine asked with a smile.

The next moment she saw very well who it was, for they did not make her any reply. Old Mrs. Morgan folding her hands said quietly, "It will never answer," and the captain, leaving the mantelpiece against which he had been leaning with his face fully presented to her questioning, went and sat down in his usual place near the window, which afforded no such facilities to a penetrating eye. They did not mean to tell her, and she knew. She laughed to carry off the little annoyance with which this preference and prejudice, as she called it, always moved her, and said, "You should exert yourself in his sister's favour; by all she tells me she would not be ungrateful," in a way which communicated the annoyance she felt back again to her friends.

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"We will not meddle with Emma," said old Mrs. Morgan. "I am tempted to think sometimes that the blood gets thin in a race when it runs too long, like the last cup of my tea—which he says is just hot water."

"Not so, not so," said old Captain Morgan. "You are growing a materialist in your old age; that is sometimes just the very essence and cream of all. In story-books, when there are an old couple left like you and me, the last child left with them to make them happy is a creature that is perfect."

"Oh, this is heresy indeed," cried Catherine. "I will not have you compare Emma to your last cup of tea. There is nobody I meet with so original; and is she to stay longer and have her chance? or has she come to the height of her desires and persuaded the gentleman to speak—there is nothing I want so much to know."

But here Catherine became vaguely sensible of a sentiment which, according to their own account, had died out long ago in these old people. They had declared themselves above prejudice in respect to their own flesh and blood. The captain indeed had thrown off all responsibility, and announced at Roland's first coming that he was not prepared to answer for him: and Emma had not been so congenial to them as Roland. Notwithstanding, when their grandchild was thus freely criticised it galled them both. The old lady betrayed a little rising colour of vexation and shame, and Captain Morgan got up again restlessly and went and stood against the window, shutting out half the light, and turning his back—which was a very strong step, though but for a moment—upon his guest.

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"She has not been brought up like other girls," said Mrs. Morgan. "Perhaps it was none of our duty; it is hard to say. We knew nothing of her: poor little motherless thing, we might have brought her away with us; but these are all questions it is little use going into now. Such as she is, she is a good girl in her way. When she is married, for she will be sure to marry, she will make a good, careful wife."

"One would think I had been saying harm of Emma," cried Catherine, with some quickness; "when the fact is I am one of those that like her most. She is the most piquant variety of her species. There is nobody that amuses me so much. She knows what she wants, which so few do, and she means to have it. She is quite honest and straight-forward. You do me injustice in this."

There was nothing said in reply, and Catherine did not like the position. Perhaps the universal submission to which she was accustomed had spoilt her, though she was so sure of seeing through it. She got up to go away.

"I must do without you then, uncle, if I am not to have you; though I think it is a little hard upon me—and upon Roland too."

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"We are always here when you want us, Catherine; as much as is in us is always at your service. It is not much," said the old man, hobbling after her to the door; "but your fine house and your fine people are not in *her* way nor in mine. And what should I do going back to the world, and *her* in the arm-chair? You see yourself that would never do."

"It would delight her!" said Catherine, pausing at the door; "you know that. Fancy her keeping you by her because she is not able to go out too! It almost looks as if—but that is impossible—you did not understand a woman yet."

The old captain laughed and shook his white head.

"Persuade yourself that!" he said; "make yourself think that: that will chime in with the general opinion, Catherine. If I were an old man on the stage I would say, there's no understanding women. If I don't understand her and all her ways, I am a sillier old blockhead than you think."

"Then you know that what I say is true—that she would like you to come—that it would please her —"

"Then it is she that is the silly old woman that does not understand her old man," Captain Morgan said.

Catherine left them with the impression that they were in a mood beyond her comprehension. It was a fine, clear, almost warm day, and the roads dry and walking pleasant. She had come on foot, as was not very usual with her, and meant to walk home. She set out on her return waving

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her hand to Mrs. Morgan, but in no very cheerful frame of mind. She had not been cheerful when she left home. Her mind misgave her as it had not done before for more years than she could count. What was the reason she could scarcely tell. Edward was not really less kind, less observant of her comfort. The change she saw in him was one indescribable, which no one else would have suspected, which in all probability existed in her imagination alone. Why should she suppose evils that had no existence? There was no one like him, no son so dutiful to his mother, no one so ready to make any sacrifice for the pleasure of his home. If his looks had been a little abstracted lately, if he had spent his time away from her, if his work in his own room, which she had made so comfortable for him, which she had been so anxious to assure him the exclusive proprietorship of, had increased of late, perhaps this was merely the natural course of events. Or if he had fallen in love—what then? Did the boy perhaps think that she would be jealous and stand in the way of his happiness? How little he knew! Provided only his choice was a right one; she would open her arms and her heart. She would be ready to do anything for their comfort. There was no sacrifice she would not gladly make. Notwithstanding that somewhat nonsensical mystical flourish of the old captain's about his understanding of his wife, Catherine believed, and with much show of truth, that men rarely understood women, and never knew how ready they were to arrange everything, to give up everything for the comfort and pleasure of those they loved. What a welcome she would herself give to Edward's wife, though he was trembling and putting off and afraid to tell her! What a reception that young woman should have! Provided always—but with Edward's good taste and good sense how could he go wrong in such a choice?

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It was at this moment that a shuffling light step became audible, hurrying along the road, and a voice calling "Catherine—is it really Catherine?" followed by another step and another voice, with a fainter sound in the repetition, but also calling upon "Catherine!" Catherine Vernon paused and looked round, her face losing its gravity and brightening into its usual humorous look of half-contemptuous toleration.

"It is Catherine!" cried Miss Vernon-Ridgway; "I told you so. Dear Catherine, isn't this long walk too much for you, and on such a cold day? Take my arm—please take my arm: or won't you come back to our little house and rest, and we'll send for the carriage? It is a long walk for us who are not used to luxury, and what must it be to you?"

It was true that the Miss Vernon-Ridgways were under fifty, and Catherine was sixty-five; but she was far more vigorous than they were, and more capable of exercise. She turned round upon them smiling, but kept her arms close by her side, and refused any support.

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"I assure you," she said, "I am quite capable of walking. You know I have always been accustomed to exercise."

"Ah yes," said the sisters, "you were brought up sensibly, dear Catherine, not spoiled darlings as we were. We have never quite got over it, though we should have known better long ago, if experience was all: no one can tell how we miss our carriage; and when we see you on foot, who can command every ease, it quite wounds our feelings," said Miss Martha, coming in at the end in a little provocation by herself.

"It is very kind of you: but it does not at all hurt my feelings. This is a fine day for a walk, and I hope you are enjoying yours, as I do," said Catherine, with her laughing look.

They both shook their heads.

"We do what we have to do, and I hope we don't complain. But I declare I feel hurt that you should have been at the Heronry and not paid us a visit. I wish not to be jealous. You were no doubt talking things over with Mrs. John?"

"I know nothing that there is to talk over with Mrs. John," said Catherine, tartly. "I was visiting my old uncle, which is a duty I never like to neglect."

"Oh!" said one sister, and "Ah!" said the other. Then they cried eagerly each to each, "I knew it was a vile story. Of course we have been misinformed."

"What was there to be misinformed about?" said Catherine; then as she looked from one to another, a sensation of coming trouble shot across her. "And what," she added with a smile not so easy as the former one, "am I supposed to have to say to Mrs. John?"

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"Oh, it was all an accident of course," said Miss Matilda. "But you might tell Catherine all the same. It is best that people should know; and then they know what steps to take," said Miss Martha. "To be sure Catherine would know what steps to take," Matilda added again.

"This may all be very amusing," said Catherine, "but as I don't know the word of the puzzle, I don't see the joke, you know. One would think something had happened in which I was concerned."

"I am not sure if you would think anything had happened. Oh yes, I am sure we thought so last night," cried the sisters one after another. "You see the least little thing looks important when you are going to bed—after eleven o'clock at night."

"What was this great event?" said Catherine, with a certain sternness in her tone.

There was a great flutter of nods and looks between the sisters. They came close to her, one on either side, and Miss Matilda, always the boldest, put a hand to Catherine's elbow by way of supporting her if support were needed.

"Dear Catherine, do turn back with us to our little place! it is close by, and we can give you an easy chair and a cup of tea. You will bear it better there than here."

"Did you say *bear* it better?"

"Oh! did I say it—*bear* it—Martha? I am sure I don't know. I think I said hear it, Catherine. Oh! for Heaven's sake don't look so stern. Perhaps you will think nothing of it——"

Catherine gave her foot a stamp upon the ground. She said—

"Tell me at once what you have got to tell," in a voice which was almost threatening. They looked at each other again, and then Miss Matilda began—

"I don't want to get any one into trouble, I am sure," she said in a faltering but eager voice. "It frightened us so—that was the thing. It frightened us about you. I said to Martha, 'Dear Catherine must be ill; nothing less than that would bring him here at such an hour.' You see the voices roused us just as we were going to bed. Mrs. John's door was locked, for I had heard her do it; she always does it herself, and, judging by her usual hours, she must have been in bed—when we heard voices at the gate: oh, I was not surprised at that. Sometimes it is old Captain Morgan himself, who I am sure, with every respect for him, ought not to be out of doors at such hours; sometimes the young gentleman, the grandson—I don't remember his name; or it used to be Harry Vernon in his time. We all know that girl; we needn't say anything more on that subject. I merely remarked, 'There she is at the gate again.' And Martha said——"

"Oh, I said, 'Fiddlesticks, she is at the ball; it must be one of the maids.' I am so unsuspecting," said Miss Martha. [Pg 95]

"And then we listened as you may suppose. There was just a little corner of the window open. Of course if it had been one of the maids I should have thought it my duty—— Catherine, you are getting quite tired."

"I freely confess, yes—of your story. What do I care for your maids and their lovers? You can settle these surely without me."

"Oh, if you will only wait a little! Very soon we could hear that it was, if you please, Miss Hester's voice, and she was inviting some one in. Oh, pressing him—almost forcing him. Shouldn't you say so Martha? like the woman in the *Pilgrim's Progress*."

"Yes, just like that kind of woman. Won't you come in, just for a moment—just to rest a bit," said Martha, changing her voice into a sort of squeak of the most unsexed kind. "And he resisted as long as he could; but she would take no denial. You can't expect a young man to say 'No' if a girl puts herself at his feet like that. So he yielded at last, poor young fellow. We didn't blame him a bit, did we, Martha?"

"Oh, not a bit! poor young man, with such a creature as that laying herself out——"

"And who was this whom you are so sorry for?" Catherine said.

As if she did not know! She had been rather glad of all the delays and *longueurs* of the tale, and marched along through it, glad to make them out of breath, almost hoping to be at her own door before the crisis; but in this she did not succeed. She did not look at them even, but kept her eyes upon the path with steady indifference. [Pg 96]

"Dear Catherine!—but you won't blame him, poor young fellow! It was your own Edward, that dear boy——"

Prepared as she was, the name gave her a shock, as perhaps Miss Matilda, still holding her elbow, felt; but if so, it was only for a moment. "Edward!" she said with a laugh. "You mean Harry, I suppose? Edward was at home and busy, occupying himself in a very different sort of way."

At this the sisters interchanged glances again, and shook their heads in unison. "Ah, Catherine, that is just how you are deceived. We know Harry Vernon's voice very well. It was Edward."

Catherine turned upon them with a countenance perfectly cloudless, a laugh upon her lips. "When I tell you," she said, "that he was in my own house! he could not, I think, be in two places at once—my house, his house—it is all the same. He was at home—" she added after a moment, in a deeper tone, "and with me."

"Oh! with you!" The sisters broke off with sudden fright, not venturing to persevere. So sudden a check quenched Miss Matilda's lively genius altogether. It was her sister, the practical member, who added with a spasmodic gasp, "Oh, of course, Catherine, if he was with you——"

"Yes, of course he was with me; he is only too attentive. I could wish he took a little more amusement. So your fine story is at an end, you see. If it had been any one else I might have thought it my duty to inquire into it; but as I can prove it not to be Edward—not that I see much harm in it if it had been Edward," she added, turning upon the accusers again. "I am not fond of Hester Vernon, but she is his cousin all the same." [Pg 97]

"Oh, no harm! oh, I never thought so," cried the gossips, alarmed and faltering. "It was only just—it was merely—it frightened us, thinking that dear Catherine must be ill, or something happened——"

"Did you think then that your dear Catherine, if she were ill, would send for Hester Vernon?—as her prime favourite, I suppose, and the one that loved her best among all those who——"

Catherine paused; the native magnanimity in her, beneath all the pettiness which her laughing cynicism had taught her, would not insult even these heartless women by a reminder in so many words of their dependence. It cost her all her strength to stand up erect before them, and put off their assault. They had got at her heart, but they should never know it. She stood ample and

serene between the two slim shabby figures and smiled defiance. Never were talebearers more completely discomfited. They turned upon each other with mutual reproaches in the confusion of the moment. "You need not have made such a fuss, Matilda." "I told you, Martha, you oughtn't to be so confident about a voice."

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"Come," said Catherine, "we had better say nothing more about it; evidently there has been a mistake. Hester, who ought to be more careful if she is to live at the Vernonry, must have another admirer with whose voice you are not acquainted. But it is unwise to form conclusions on no better ground than the sound of a voice, and perhaps not very charitable or kind of you, so much older than she is, to tell anything that is uncomfortable about that girl, who is no favourite of mine already, to me. Don't you think you would do better if you warned her, or her mother?" Catherine's countenance was so calm, her eyes so commanding, that the Miss Vernon-Ridgways, altogether defeated in their malicious intention, which was chiefly to wound herself, felt their knees tremble under them, and were genuinely awe-stricken for perhaps the first time in their lives.

"Oh, as for that—it was not Hester we were thinking of—it was you," they faltered between them, "that you might not allow—or be exposed—" Their words got incoherent and ran away to nothing, into breaks and frightened lapses. And when Catherine, opening her eyes still wider, said, "For me! to warn me!" and laughed them to scorn, Matilda, who being the most forward was at the same time the most sensitive, was so overcome by anger and alarm and mortification that she began to cry for sheer despute, and felt in her inmost heart that she hated the woman who could humiliate her so.

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"You were kindly afraid that I should be tired a few minutes ago: and standing does tire me, though I like a walk," Catherine said. "I will say good-bye now. Perhaps you meant it kindly; and if so, I'll thank you too—all the more as it's a mistake—for that is the best of it," she said with a laugh, waving her hand: and leaving them, walked on homewards with an alert and energetic step. But it would have been balm to their feelings if they had been able to see how very little like laughter was her face when she had once turned her back upon them. There was nobody to observe her along that quiet road. The nursemaids with their children had all turned townwards some time ago. There was not a soul between her and the gate of the Grange. Catherine's face lengthened and darkened as if by a sudden effect of years; the sanguine life and confidence and force went out of it. She looked an old woman in that moment, as indeed she had a right to do, but did not, nature interposing for her aid. She said to herself that she would not think, would not ask herself what it meant until she should get home, and could feel the shelter of her own walls about her. She wanted shelter and privacy before she faced the fact which had been dimly shadowing before her, but never in this form. She was a very resolute woman, and had not come so far in life without having to confront and overcome many things that looked terrible enough at the first glance. But never since those early days which were so far off that they were half forgotten had she been called upon to face those troubles which sap the strength out of heart and will, the disappointments and bitterness brought upon us by those we love. She had few of these sufferings for what seems the saddest reason, that she had nobody to love. But it was not so sad as it appears. She had a number of people whom she loved well enough to be delighted by their prosperities, and overcast by their troubles. She had all the advantages of affection without being so closely knit to any as to have its drawbacks too. But this easy position changed when she became, so to speak, the mother of Edward Vernon. It was not the doing of providence, it was her own doing. She had taken it upon herself, and for years past she had said to herself that the boy had made her know, as she had never known before, what happiness was. But now here was, swinging round slowly, revealing itself to her in glimpses, the reverse of the medal, the other side of the picture. Was he deceiving her? She had taken up his defence boldly, not caring what she said: but she had believed what she heard all the same, and had known it to be true. Was this why he had not cared to see her, to bid her good-night, before he came out to have that meeting with Hester—like a shopgirl and shopboy, she said to herself, her lip quivering with passion, vexation, derision, all bound together by the pain that produced them—at the gate? The commonplace character of the meeting, the look of petty intrigue in it, humbled her pride in her boy. If they had met at Ellen's dance, or in any legitimate way, she thought it would not have mortified her so much—but like a lady's maid and a footman, like Jane the scullery-girl and her young man! She laughed to herself at the thought, but the laugh was more painful than tears.

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By and by, however, Catherine came to take a little comfort out of the fact that Edward had not come to bid her good-night. Not considering for a moment that any incident of all this might be accidental, though everything was so, she concluded that his heart had failed him, that he had felt himself incapable of the treachery of kissing her cheek in the usual tender way when about to do a thing which he knew would be so displeasing to her. When this occurred to Catherine the whole aspect of the matter changed: her features relaxed, her colour came back. This, no doubt, was how it had been. The girl had met him at Ellen's folly—how truly a folly had never been proved till now: and she was pretty and clever. Catherine was too proud to deny her her natural advantages; and men were fools, as was well known—the best of them, the wisest of them!—where women were concerned. She had led him into some engagement, some light wager perhaps, some defiance of what he would venture to do. And Edward had been silly enough to be led away. She did not want him to be too wise. If he was silly, it was no more than everybody else had been before him. But he, dear boy, true boy, having involved himself in a piece of folly, had shown that high respect to her, that he would rather let her suppose he had forgotten and neglected her, than come to her with the usual greeting when he knew he was doing something which would seem treachery to Catherine. Thus she, who for the first moment had known no wish but that of pushing homeward and hiding her sudden downfall within her own house where

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nobody could intrude upon her, had so triumphantly explained all that trouble away before she got home, that she entered the Grange radiant, with no sense of having a downfall to hide. The casuistry of love is more skilful than any device of philosophy. She explained everything to herself. She wondered that she had not read it in his face all the evening. She felt that it had been there, if she had only had eyes to see. A foolish talk carried a trifle too far—a bold girl, not bad, no, not bad—that was not necessary, and Catherine would be just—pleased to get a little triumph when she could over the other side: and a foolish promise, not intended, had drawn him, perhaps against his will. By this subtle demonstration—which no faculty less keen than that of love could have made—Catherine proved, to her full satisfaction, the fundamental truth in him which no little trumpery deceit (of a kind so innocent as this!) could undermine. All this fine fabric was raised on the most insignificant foundation of fact. But what did that matter? it was enough. And if Catherine had been told that Edward's forgetfulness of the good-night had been accidental, and that his meeting with Hester was accidental, and that no incident of the night had been planned beforehand, she would have simply and flatly denied the possibility. She knew better; and she preferred the matter as it stood.

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The dinner-party was an insignificant affair to her after this. She did full justice to it, and to Roland Ashton, the chief guest, the man whom she delighted to honour, and for whose pleasure and profit the best people in Redborough were called together. He was already known to many of them, and it was Catherine's pleasure to make her relationship and interest in the young visitor clear. But her mind was eager to get through the commonplace courtesies of the evening—to come to the moment when Edward and she should meet alone. She could not pass her discovery over without note. She would tell him what she had heard, and what she had divined. She would give him the tender warning which such an affection as hers had a right to offer. If it was more than a passing flirtation (which she did not believe), to beg him to reconsider it; if his heart should be touched (which Heaven forbid! but the thought made her smile, it was so profoundly unlikely), to intreat him to reflect, and see how little satisfaction could come to him from such intercourse. She went over and over again the interview that was to come—so often, indeed, that she exhausted it, and when the moment did come, did not remember half of what she intended to say. It came, indeed, in a way entirely contrary to that she had imagined. After the party had dispersed, Edward took Roland into his room to smoke with him—which she ought to have recollected he was in the habit of doing—and then, what was more disappointing still, went out with him to accompany him part of the way. She was going down stairs to Edward's room, that she might get these explanations off her mind without a moment's delay, and was taken entirely by surprise when she heard the door close, and two voices continuing outside.

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"Has Mr. Edward gone out?" she asked, with a trembling she could scarcely control, of the butler, when he came up to put out the lights.

"I was to say, ma'am, as he'd be back in half an hour," said the man.

Catherine sent her maid to bed, and kept her particular lamp burning on her little table, waiting there in the dimness of the large deserted room, hearing every crackle and rustle of the night. It seemed to her far more than half an hour before she heard Edward's key in the door; but she was resolved not to be balked now. She had no idea, poor lady, that he thought her suspicious, inquisitive, and watchful, making domiciliary visits in order to find him out in something, which was very far from Catherine's disposition. She went down accordingly to lose no time, and met him in the hall. He was astonished to see her, as was natural enough; and she had an uneasy tremor upon her, which was natural too, but which looked like cold. He was full of apologies for having kept her up.

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"If I had known you would have waited for me, Aunt Catherine——"

"You did not say good-night to me last night, Edward. I did not like that to happen two nights running. I will go into your room, not to hurry you up stairs."

"I can't think how that happened," he said, following her into the cosy room, with its red curtains and cheerful fire, and all the conveniences and prettiness she had accumulated for him there. "I had been thinking hard, and my mind was full of balance-sheets and figures. I entirely forgot I had not seen you."

She turned round upon him, taking his arm between her hands, and looking with a tender smile into his face.

"No, my dear boy, I know better than that. You had a reason—which shows me how well I have divined you, and how true you are, Edward. I have been told where—you went to last night."

This startled him greatly for the moment. He looked at her with an alarmed expression: but seeing no anger in her face, said quickly—

"That was all quite accidental, Aunt Catherine. You don't think I went there on purpose, do you?" without shrinking at all from her eyes.

"Yes, Edward, I thought you did. Perhaps I was wrong. I thought there might have been some silly bargain—some promise made without thought: and that you felt a little treacherous—that is a harsh word—deceitful—that is worse—to me, and would not come back and kiss me when you might be supposed to be going against me. I forgave you entirely, Edward, for that good thought."

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He was a little touched in spite of himself.

"You are very good, Aunt Catherine—far better to me than I deserve; but, as a matter of fact, it was all purely accidental. I had been very busy, and felt feverish and sleepless. I went out to have

a turn in the moonlight: chance took me that way. There was light in Mrs. John's window. They heard my steps, and looked out in great surprise, and asked me to come in. I could scarcely satisfy her," he said, with an embarrassed little laugh, "that you were not ill, and had not sent for her to nurse you. It was as good as a play," he went on, still laughing, followed in every word by her anxious eyes, "to see poor Mrs. John's struggle between politeness and sleep. She was very sleepy, poor little woman! but dreadfully polite. You may suppose I was surprised enough to find myself there."

"Yes," she said, still holding him, still reading his face with her anxious eyes, but feeling the ground cut from under her feet. She was a little breathless with anxiety and excitement. "I wonder—that you did not tell me of it—this morning."

"Dear Aunt Catherine," he said, "pardon me, but you have a little prejudice, you know, against these people. And it was so entirely accidental. You might have thought, had I told you, that it had been done on purpose."

"Did I ever doubt what you said to me, Edward?"

"No," he said, taking her hands in his tenderly, as she thought; and indeed the action was not without real tenderness, for his heart was touched. "No," he said, smiling, "but yet you would have had a little doubt—a little wonder whether it was really so."

"And it *was* really so?" she said, looking into his face, "really—really—no little shadow of a wish for—a little provocation, a little talk, a little fun if you like, Edward? Oh, no, I have no prejudice. I should know it was quite natural. And you mean that there was nothing at all, nothing of this—a mere accident, nothing more?"

He kissed her cheek, and he laughed at her in a filial way.

"Didn't I tell you, Aunt Catherine? You believe me—oh, yes; but then you ask me if really—really I am saying what is true? Really—really as often as you like; it was accident, and nothing more."

This was how all the eloquent things which Catherine had prepared to say were never said. She went up to bed pleased and happy, yet not so pleased as if he had confessed her version of the story to be the true one. She did not doubt his word—oh no, no—but yet—the other version looked more true to nature. She could have understood it better that way.

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CHAPTER VI.

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IN THE LABYRINTH.

After these events there seemed a lull, in which nothing more seemed to happen. Though time is so short, and our modern pace of living, we flatter ourselves, so much more rapid than of old, how few after all are the periods in which things happen, and with what long stretches of vacant days between! Hester could hardly explain to herself how it was that Edward Vernon's sudden evening visit, so unexpected, so unprecedented, had made an entire revolution in her life. There had been no mutual confessions of love, no proposal, no acceptance such as are supposed to be necessary. There was nothing to confide to her mother, had it been possible to take any one into that strait union of two suddenly become one. The effect bewildered her entirely, and she could not tell how it had been produced; but yet it was so. They had been on the eve of this, she felt, for years, and the first time that they met, in a moment of complete freedom, their souls flowed together, flowed into one. Perhaps he had not meant it when he came. The dim parlour and the sleepy mother, trying hard to be polite, quite unconscious how unnecessary her presence was; the young man, with his eager eyes, scarcely keeping himself in—came before her like a curious picture a hundred times in a day: and then the sudden sweep of the torrent after it, the almost involuntary, impetuous, unalterable junction of these two hearts and lives. But the shock even of happiness when it comes so suddenly is great; and Hester was not sure even that she was happy. He seemed to have led her to the edge of some labyrinth, without freedom to leave it, or to advance into its mysteries. There was a clue, indeed, but it was lying in loose coils at her feet, and who could tell if it ever could be sufficiently straightened, sufficiently tightened, to give any real guidance? There was no habit of meeting in their lives, no way of seeing each other even, without attracting suspicion. He sent her a letter next morning, full of love, and of ecstatic realisation that she was his, and that in all his difficulties he was sure of her sympathy, but it was understood that he was not to make such a breach of all his habits as to come to see her; and Hester was too proud to break through hers, as she had done that one morning in order to see him. So that everything remained a secret between them, and save for the sudden understanding into which they had leaped, the sort of betrothal which both took for granted, there was no difference in their outward lives; which was a state of things infinitely painful to the girl who lived her usual daily life with her mother and her friends in a state of guilty abstraction, thinking of *him* all the time, and feeling herself a domestic traitor. She felt that it was but the shell of her that remained, following mechanically the usual occupations, talking from the lips outward, absorbed in a long perpetual reverie of new consciousness, new hopes and fears. That secret world had need to have been bright to make up to her for the sense of guilt and treachery with which she entered into it: and it was not bright. The air was dark and tremulous as in that sad valley, sad yet sweet, which, in Dante, lies outside of hell. She never could tell at what moment some dark unknown shape of calamity might appear through its twilight coming towards them;

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for Edward had been driven to her by anxiety and trouble, and the sense of a burden which he could not bear alone. What was it? He did not tell her in his letter. The other little notes he wrote were but appeals to her sympathy—petitions to her to love him, to think of him. Ah! Hester thought to herself, no fear of that—but how? What was she to think? in what way was her imagination to follow him, groping dimly amid scenes she did not understand? His secret was as a germ of fire in her heart—which by times blazed up into hot flames, devouring her with all the anguish of that thirst to know which is one of the tortures of uneasy love. What was it that troubled him so, that alarmed him so, that might ruin and overwhelm him—that might make him fly, which was the most mysterious hint of all? But to all these questions she got no satisfaction. For the first few days she had a little furtive outlet to her anxiety in questioning Roland, which she did with a vague sense of treachery to Edward, as if she were endeavouring to surprise his secrets by a back way, but very little perception of the false impression which her interest in his communications was making upon Roland, who himself became day by day more ready to believe that marriage might become a possible venture, and that the decision of it rested chiefly with himself. He knew no other reason why she should question him than interest in himself, and it was with a grateful zeal that he attempted to gratify a curiosity which was so legitimate, yet so unusual. He explained his trade with that pleasure which the wisest of men feel in talking about themselves, and never divined that her rapid mind passed everything through one narrow test, *i.e.* whether it was possible that it could concern Edward. She did not even remark the *attendrissement* with which he received her questions, with eyes that said volumes. These eyes overflowed with pleasure and sentiment as he made his little disquisitions.

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"After this," he said, with a laugh, "you will be armed *cap-à-pied* against any doubtful agency, and able when you like to speculate for yourself."

"And why should not I speculate," said Hester, "if I had any money? It is like fighting, I suppose. It feels like living, they say. But after all it is no true life—only figures, as you tell me."

"Figures," said Roland, "mean so much; in this elemental way they mean money. And money means——"

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"Figures over again," Hester said, with a certain weary disdain. It was not possible that this alone could be the tragic danger, the burden of the soul that Edward meant. But Roland was thinking his own thoughts, and interpreted her comments in a way of his own.

"It means most things in this world," he said; "unfortunately, however high-minded we are, we can do nothing without it. It means of course show and luxury, and gaiety, and all the things you despise; but at the same time—— It means," he said, after a little pause, "the house which two people could make into paradise. It means ease of mind, so that a man can rise every day without anxiety, knowing that he has enough for every claim upon him. Ah! how can I say all that it means—you would laugh, or be frightened. It means the right to love, and the right to say it." Roland was making use of all his well-worn artillery, but of something more besides which he had not quite understood the existence of—something which lent a very eloquent tremor to his voice and doubled the seduction of his eyes.

"Oh! I was not thinking of anything half so sentimental," said Hester. She never looked at him, to be affected by his glances, or paid any attention to his voice. And yet there had been a moment when Roland's departure made the world itself shrink and look narrow: but she remembered nothing about that now. "To tell the truth, all I was thinking of was buying and selling," she said; "for business means that, doesn't it? Of course I suppose, as we must have money to live, you may say that money is the first thing in life, more necessary than bread; but I did not mean that."

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Conversations which ended in this way were, however, very little serviceable to Hester, for how could she tell which of these mysteries of the craft had entangled Edward, or if any of them could justify the seriousness of his excitement, the tragic sense of a possible catastrophe, the wild expedient of flight, which had been in his words! All this talk about the vicissitudes of money was too petty to satisfy her mind as a reason. And still less was that talk calculated to promote Roland's purpose, who did not care very much what he was saying so long as he could recommend himself to her favourable opinion. What he wanted was to show her that the future had large possibilities of advancement. He wanted, without committing himself or doing anything that could be afterwards commented upon as "behaving badly," to leave upon Hester's mind a delicate intimation that he meant to come back, to speak more plainly, to say things more worthy of her attention; and that she might be able to make up her mind in the meantime and not be taken by surprise. Roland was not so romantic as to be unaware that the advantages lay on his own side; he had solid gifts to give, and a position to offer, which could not be carelessly considered by any person of sense. And he was well aware that there was no crowd of candidates contending for Hester's hand. She had to him the air of a girl neglected, altogether out of the way of forming any satisfactory engagements, almost painfully divested of that "chance" which Emma looked at with such sensible if matter-of-fact eyes. Roland, to do him justice, was all the more willing to show her a romantic devotion on this account, but it kept him free from anxiety about his own hopes. There had been Harry indeed—but she would not have Harry. And Edward he was aware had paid her furtive "attentions" at Ellen Merridew's parties; but what could Edward do? He could not pay serious addresses to any one, in his circumstances, far less to Hester: and he was not the fellow to marry a girl without money and under the cold shade of Catherine's disfavour. This last was one of the things that made Roland himself hesitate—but he thought it might be got over. And there could be no doubt that his mind had made great strides towards making itself up during this Christmas visit. But it was a short visit on the whole, for he had not much time to spare for pleasure, and his business had been summarily ended. Emma thought it was owing to Hester's interference that she was left behind, Reginald Merridew having not yet

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"spoken;" but there was in reality a certain sympathy in Roland's mind with his sister's honest desire to be settled, and there would be much convenience in it could it be accomplished, he felt. He went away accordingly, slightly depressed by Hester's indifferent farewell, and remembering the look of over-clearness in her eyes when he had gone away the first time with a sort of fond regret. He was sure that day that she had shed a few tears over his departure, of which there was no appearance now. But soon he recovered his spirits, asking himself to look the situation in the face. Who else was there? What rival could he have? There was nobody. She was stranded in that old house as if it had been a desolate island. And she could not be content to vegetate there for ever, a girl of her spirit. There was a practical element in Roland's character, notwithstanding his romantic eyes.

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And Hester was so ungrateful that his departure was almost a relief to her. She forgot altogether that she had cried the first time when he went away, and she was glad to be set free from the hope, which at the same time was a fear, of finding out something about Edward's troubles from his chance revelations. Her mind turned now with unbroken eagerness to the sole means of intercourse which she had with her lover, which could be calculated upon with any freedom, which were Ellen's parties—the *Thés Dansantes*! It seemed incredible that her entire existence should be concentrated in a weekly assembly so frivolous, so thoughtless, and nonsensical, and that all those grave and troublous thoughts should seek interpretation in a dance. But so it was. The first of them brought her only disappointment, and that of a kind that she felt almost maddening—for Edward did not appear. He gave her no warning, which was cruel, and when she found, after hours of waiting, that he was not expected, the shock of resentment and shame and dismay almost stunned her: but pride carried the day. She threw herself into the current with a sort of desperation, and held her place with the gayest: then entered, sombre and silent, upon another week of suspense. The second occasion was not so bad. He was there, and appropriated her as usual, and breathed hints into her ear which kept her in a whirl of excitement.

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"How can I explain to you," he said, "here? And even if I could explain to you, I don't want to do it, for it is all miserable trade, which you would not understand—which I don't wish you to understand."

"But I want to understand it, Edward. You don't think how cruel it is to me to tell me just so much, then leave me outside."

"Should I *not* have told you so much?" he said, looking at her. "You are right. I believe you are right, Hester; but my heart was running over, and to no one else could I say a word. I could not put a little bit of my burden upon any one but you. I know it was selfish, dear."

"Oh, Edward; it is not that. I will bear your burden; I am glad to help you; I would bear it all for you if I could," she cried with her bright eyes widening, her cheeks glowing with enthusiasm. "Don't you *know* that I would bear it all if I could? It is not that. But tell me, only tell me a little more."

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He shook his head.

"Hester," he said, "that is not what a man wants in a woman; not to go and explain it all to her with pen and ink, and tables and figures, to make her understand as he would have to do with a man. What he wants, dear, is very different—just to lean upon you—to know that you sympathise, and think of me, and feel for me, and believe in me, and that you will share whatever comes."

Hester said nothing, but her countenance grew very grave.

"Don't you think that a woman could do all that—and yet that it would be easier for her if she understood what it was, and why it was?" she said, after a pause.

"Dear," said Edward, gazing at her with glowing eyes. He was in a hopeful mood, and he allowed himself to indulge the love and pleasure he felt in her, having bound her to him with a chain more fast than iron. "Darling! was it ever known that a woman, a girl like you (if there ever was a girl like my Hester), thought of what would be easiest? And you who would bear it all, you said."

"So I should—gladly; but then I should understand."

"My only love! understanding is nothing, it matters nothing; another fellow, any man, a clerk in the office, would understand. I want your sympathy. I want—you."

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"Oh, Edward!" she cried, "you have me and my sympathy—even if you were wrong you should have my sympathy. But is it just, is it good, do you think, that you should ask all that and tell me nothing? I am a woman, but I am not a fool. I can understand most things. Try me—tell me—I will set my mind to it. Sympathy that is ignorant cannot be so good as sympathy that knows."

He made a little pause, and then he said, looking at her, she felt, severely, with a scoff in his voice—

"And where is this explanation to take place? Will you appoint to meet me somewhere with my balance-sheet and my vouchers? Perhaps you will come to my room at the bank? or appoint an accountant whom you can trust?"

"Edward!" she drew her hand out of his arm and then put it back again after a moment's hesitation, "do you want me to look a wretch even to myself? Why should you say all this? and why—why be so unjust to me? You forget that when one knows nothing one thinks all sorts of things, and invents a hundred terrors. Tell me how it is in the general not details. You do not want silly sympathy."

"I want all your sympathy, silly or not. I want you. Hester, if we are to escape notice we must

dance like the rest; we cannot stand and talk all night. And I am just in the mood for it!" he cried.

Many people no doubt have waltzed with very little inclination for it, people who were both sad and sorry, disappointed, heartbroken; but few more reluctant than Hester, who felt her position intolerable, and by whom the complacent injustice of it, the calm assertion that such blind adherence was all that was to be looked for from a woman, was more irritating and offensive than can be described. Was it possible that he thought so? that this was what she would have to encounter in the life she should spend with him? Her advice, her intelligent help, her understanding, all ignored, and nothing wanted but a kind of doggish fidelity, an unreasoning belief? Hester felt it cruel to be made to dance even, to be spun through the crowd as if in the merest caprice of gaiety while at such a crisis of her fate.

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But neither this nor their subsequent conversations made any difference; the evening passed for her as in a dream. Edward, who was not much of a dancer, and seldom cared to perform these rites with any partner but herself, danced repeatedly with others that night, while Hester stood by looking on with gathering bewilderment. She had a headache, she said. It was her mother's way of getting free of every embarrassment, and Hester was acquainted with the expedient, though she had not hitherto been tempted to use it. She sat by Mrs. Merridew, the mother of the house, who was a kind woman, and disposed to be good to her. "Just say the word, my dear, and as soon as our carriage comes I will take you home," this lady said; "for to sit with a racking headache and watch other young folks dancing is more than flesh and blood can bear." But alas! Mrs. Merridew's carriage was not ordered till two o'clock, and Hester had to bear her burden. And of course it was not thus that the evening ended. He came to seek her at Mrs. Merridew's side, and heard the account of her headache with a sympathetic countenance.

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"This was our dance," he said; "but come into the hall instead, where it is cool, and let me get you some tea." He placed her there in the shelter of the evergreens, when all the hubbub of the next dance was in full progress. They were quiet, almost alone, and Edward was in a fever of high spirits and excitement. He had said little about love in that strange moment when he had taken possession of her. Now he made up for all deficiencies. She endeavoured at first to bring him back to what she called the more important subject. "Can any subject be more important?" he said with tender reproach. And she was silenced, for what could she say? And the moments flew too fast and were too brief to be lost in any struggle. They parted with a few mysterious words whispered into her ear, which did much however to bring back the painful tension which had relaxed a little in his presence. "If I send to you, you will see me, Hester?" he whispered. "You won't think of proprieties? I might have to put your love to the test—to ask you——"

"What?" she cried with almost a spasm of alarm. He gave her hand a warning clasp as he put her into the fly, and then stooping to arrange the shawls around her, kissed it secretly. And that was all. She drove home in the silence and dark, feeling every word thrill her through, going over it again and again. What was this test of love that might be required of her? What did he expect her to do for him, in ignorance, in blind trust? Hester had too high a spirit to accept this *rôle* with ease. She was bewildered—dazzled by the lavish outpouring of his love; but all that did not blind her to the strange injustice of this treatment, the cruelty of her helpless position. For what could she do? She could not desert him in his hour of need; if he made this call upon her which he spoke of so mysteriously, it would no doubt be in his utmost need, when to desert him would be like a traitor. And Hester knew that she could confront any danger with him or for him—but what was it? A dilemma so terrible had never presented itself to her imagination. There was a cruelty in it, a depreciation of all the nobler parts of her, as if only in ignorance could she be trusted. Her mother's questions about the ball, and whether she had danced much, and who her partners had been, were insupportable, as insupportable as the maunderings of Emma. In short, if there was anything that could have made this mystery and darkness in which her way seemed lost, more hard to bear, it was the background of amusement and supposed light-heartedness against which it was set. "My head ached," she said. "I scarcely danced at all," by way of freeing herself; but this opened only another kind of torture, for poor Mrs. John, well used to the feminine indulgence of headaches, had a whole surgery of little remedies, and bathed her child's forehead, and drew back her hair, and would have administered sal-volatile, tea, eau-de-cologne—there was no telling how many cures—if she had been allowed.

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"Let me fan you then, my love: sometimes that does me a great deal of good. Just let me pour a little eau-de-cologne first; you don't know how cooling it is."

"Oh, mamma! let me be still; let me be in the dark; go to bed, and don't mind me," cried Hester.

"My love! how could I do that and leave my child to suffer," said Mrs. John, heroically—and it was heroic, for the night was cold, the fire burning low, the hour three o'clock. Hester, with her brain throbbing, all inaccessible to eau-de-cologne, did not know how to free her mother from this too generous unnecessary martyrdom. She began to talk to break the spell.

"Emma is very happy," she said, "she danced with Edward Vernon. She thinks perhaps it may make the other speak, or that even Edward himself—" Hester broke off with a quiver in her lip. "I am becoming malicious like the rest," she said.

"That is not malicious, dear," said Mrs. John. "Emma is very amusing, being so frank, but she is right enough when you come to think of it; for what can she do if she does not marry? And I am sure Edward Vernon, though Catherine makes such a fuss about him, is nothing so very great. I wonder what he meant coming here that one night, and so late."

"It was by accident," Hester said.

"It was a very odd accident," cried her mother, "no one else ever did so."

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"He had been sitting late over his work, and his head was very full of—business."

Mrs. John looked in all the confidence of superior wisdom into her daughter's face. A smile dawned upon her lips.

"Perhaps you think he was coming to confide his troubles about his business, Hester, to you and me."

"And why not?" said Hester, raising herself from her bed.

Mrs. John dropped her fan in her surprise, and sat down abruptly upon the little chair by Hester's bedside, to her daughter's great relief.

"Why not?" she said. "I think, though you are my own, that you are the strangest girl I ever knew. Do you think a man *ever* talks to women about these things? Oh, perhaps to a woman like Catherine that is the same as a man. But to anybody he cares for—never, oh, never, dear! I suppose he has a respect for you and me; think of any man venturing to bring business into my drawing-room, though it is only a poor little parlour now, not a drawing-room at all. Oh, no, that could never—never be! In all my life I never descended so low as that," Mrs. John said, with dignity. "I used to be brought into contact with a great many business people when your poor dear papa was living; but they never talked 'shop,' as they call it, before me."

"But my father himself?" said Hester, her eyes blazing with the keenest interest; "you knew all his affairs?" [Pg 124]

Mrs. John held her delicate little hands clasped for a moment, and then flung them apart, as if throwing the suspicion away.

"Never!" she cried; "he respected me too much. Your poor papa was incautious about money, Hester, and that has done a great deal of harm to both of us, for we are poor, and we ought to have been rich; but he always had too much respect for me to mix me up with business. You are very inexperienced, my dear, or you would know that such a thing could not be."

Hester followed her mother with her large eyes, with a wondering wide gaze, which answered well enough for that of believing surprise, almost awe, which Mrs. John was very willing to recognise as a suitable expression. And there was indeed a sort of awe in the girl's perception of her mother's perfectly innocent, perfectly assured theory of what was right in women. What wonder that a man should think so, when women themselves thought so? This strange discovery composed and stilled her when at last she was left in the dark and in peace.

Hester kept gazing through that wintry blackness, with eyes still wide open, and her clear brows puckered with wonder and alarm. Was it natural, then, a thing she could accept as just, that it was enough for her to sympathise, to share the consequences, to stand by the chief actor whatever happened, but never to share in the initiative or have any moral concern in the motive or the means of what was done? A sense of helplessness began to take the place of indignation in her mind. Was that what they called the natural lot of women? to suffer, perhaps to share the blame, but have no share in the plan, to sympathise, but not to know; to move on blindly according to some rule of loyalty and obedience, which to any other creature in the world would be folly and guilt? But her mother knew nothing of such hard words. To her this was not only the right state of affairs, but to suggest any better rule was to fail in respect to the lady whose right it was to be left ignorant. Hester tried to smile when she recalled this, but could not, her heart being too sore, her whole being shaken. *He* thought so too perhaps, everybody thought so, and she alone, an involuntary rebel, would be compelled to accept the yoke which, to other women, was a simple matter, and their natural law. Why, then, was she made unlike others, or why was it so? [Pg 125]

Edward had been in great spirits that night. The next time they met was in the afternoon late, when Hester was returning from a visit to Mrs. Morgan. It was nearly dark, and it startled her to see him standing waiting for her under one of the trees past the gate of the Heronry. She went slowly, somewhat reluctantly, to join him on the sign just discernible in the dark which he made her. He caught her hand quickly, as she came up, and drew it within his arm.

"You have been so long with that old woman, and I have wanted you so," he cried, leading her away along the deserted country road, which struck off at right angles with the Common. "Couldn't you divine that I wanted you? Didn't you know by instinct I was longing for consolation?" [Pg 126]

"Oh, Edward! what is wrong? What has made so great a change in you?" she cried.

He drew her arm closer and closer through his, and leaned upon her as if his appeal for support was physical too.

"I told you it was too long to explain," he said; "it is all the worry of business. Sometimes things seem going well, and then I am top-gallant high, and vex you with my levity, as the other night—you know you were vexed the other night: and then things turn badly, and I am low, low down in the depths, and want my love to comfort me. Oh, if you only belonged to me, Hester, and we had a home somewhere where I could go in to you and say 'Console me!'"

"But Edward, your business never used to be a fever and an excitement like this."

"How do you know? I did not dare to come to you; and you were a child then. Ah, but you are quite right, Hester; it was different. But a man cannot vegetate for ever. I endured it as long as I could. Now it is all on a turn of the cards, and I may be able to face the world to-morrow, and have my own way."

"On a turn of the cards! Edward, you cannot mean it is play? You are not a—gambler?" Hester [Pg 127] gave a little convulsive cry, clutching him by the arm with both her hands.

He laughed. "Not with cards, certainly," he said. "I am a respectable banker, my darling, and very knowing in my investments, with perhaps a taste for speculation—but that nobody has brought home to me yet. It is a very legitimate way of making a fortune, Hester. It is only when you lose that it becomes a thing to blame."

"Do you mean speculation, Edward?"

"Something of that sort; a capital horse when it carries you over the ford—and everything that is bad when you lose."

"But do you mean—tell me—that it is simple speculation—that this is all that makes you anxious?" Hester had never heard that speculation was immoral, and her mind was relieved in spite of herself.

"Only—simple speculation! Good Lord! what would she have?" he cried, in a sort of unconscious aside, with a strange laugh; then added, with mock gravity, "that's all, my darling; not much, is it? You don't think it is worth making such a fuss about?"

"I did not say that," said Hester, gravely, "for I don't understand it, nor what may be involved; but it cannot touch the heart. I was afraid—"

"Of something much worse," he said, with the same strange laugh. "What were you afraid of?—tell me. You did not think I was robbing the bank, or killing Catherine?"

"Edward!"—she did not like these pleasantries—"why do you talk so wildly? Come in with me, and [Pg 128] my mother will give you some tea."

"I want you, and not any tea. I should like to take you up in my arms, and carry you away—away—where nobody could know anything about us more. I should like to disappear with you, Hester, and let people suppose we were dead or lost, or whatever they pleased."

"I wonder," said Hester, "why you should have lived so long close to me, and never found out that you wanted me so much till now. Oh, don't laugh so! You have always been very cool, and quite master of yourself, till now."

"It was time enough, it appears, when you make so little response," he said; "but all that is very simple if you but knew. I had to keep well with so many. Now that it is all on a turn of the dice, and a moment may decide everything, I may venture to think of myself."

"Dice! What you say is all about gambling, Edward."

"So it is, my sweetest. It is a trick I have got. Chance is everything in business—luck, whatever that may be: so that gambling words are the only words that come natural. But don't leave the talking to me; you can talk better than I can; you are not a silent angel. Tell me something, Hester. Tell me what you thought that night. Tell me what this little heart is saying now."

Hester was not touched by that reference to her little heart, which was not a little heart, but a great one, bounding wildly in her breast with perplexity and pain, as well as love, but ready for any heroic effort. [Pg 129]

"If I were to tell you perhaps you would not like it, Edward. It makes me happy that you should want me, and lean on me, and give me your burden to bear; but I want so much more. Perhaps I am not so gentle as women ought to be. My mother would be content, but I am not. I want to know everything, to help you to think, to understand it all. And besides, Edward—No, one thing is enough; I will not say that."

"Yes, say everything; it is all sweet from you."

"Then, Edward, come home and let my mother know. She will betray nobody. We ought not to meet in the dark like two—to send little hidden notes. We are responsible to the people who love us. We ought to be honest—to mamma, to Catherine Vernon."

"We ought to go and hand in the banns, perhaps," he said, with sudden bitterness, "like two—honest shopkeepers, as you say. Catherine Vernon would give me away. And is this all you know of love, Hester?—it is the woman's way, I suppose—congratulations, wedding presents, general triumph over everybody. How should you understand me when I speak of disappearing with my love, getting lost, dying even, if it were together—?"

There was a pause, for Hester was wounded, yet touched, both to the heart. She said, after a moment, almost under her breath, "I can understand that too." The faltering of her voice, the droop of her head, and his own need for her, more urgent than either, changed Edward's sarcastic mood. He drew her closer to him, and put down his face close to her ear. [Pg 130]

"We must not fight," he said, "my only love. I am going away, and I can't quarrel with you, my only love! And I am your only love. There has never been anybody between us. I will come back in two or three days; but Hester, another time, if it should be for good, would you come?—you would come?—with me?"

"Elope!" she said, breathless, her eyes large in the darkness, straining upon the face which was too near her own to be very clear.

He laughed. "If you like the word; it is an innocent word. Yes, elope then," he said.

"But why?—but why? It would wound them all—it would break their hearts; and for what reason?" Hester cried.

CHAPTER VII.

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ALARMS.

Edward was about a week away from home. He had often been away before, and his absence had caused no particular commotion: but now it affected a good many people. To Catherine, if it were possible, it might be said to have been a certain relief. He and she had got over that explanation when she had intended to say so many things to him, and had found the words taken out of her mouth. All things had gone on again in their usual way. But the suspicion which he had supposed to exist so long without any reason now had actually arisen in her mind. She showed it less than he had supposed her to show it when she had no such feeling. She was on her guard. She did not worry him any longer by her old affectionate way of going to the window to watch him when he went out; that had been simple love, admiration of his orderly, regular ways, pleasure in the sight of him: but somehow instinctively since she had begun to doubt she came to perceive the interpretation he had put upon it, and she did it no longer. But at night when all was still in the house and Edward down stairs at work in his room, or supposed to be at work, if any sound of the door closing echoed upwards, Catherine would steal behind the curtains and watch if it was he who was going out, and which way he took. She believed him, of course; but yet there was always in her soul a wish to ask—was he really, really sure that he was true? Doubts like these are beyond the power of any but the sternest self-command to crush, and Catherine was capable of that in his presence. She would not betray her anxiety to him: but when he was not there no such effort was necessary, and she betrayed it freely, to the silence, to the night, when there was nobody to see.

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And her thoughts had travelled fast and far since that evening. She had no longer any doubt that he loved somebody, and she had made up her mind that it was Hester who was the object of his love. This had caused her perhaps the greatest mental conflict she had ever known in her life—for her life had this good thing in it, that it had been wonderfully free from struggle. She had been the arbiter of all things in her little world, and nobody had made any actual stand against her will. Many pretences had surrounded her, feigned assents and furtive oppositions, but nobody had stood out against her. It was a great wonder to her that he or any one should do so now (though he did not: he had opposed her in nothing, nor ever said a word from which it could be inferred that he rejected or questioned Catherine's sway), but with all her natural strength of mind she set herself to reconsider the question. If she disliked Hester before, if for all these years the bright-eyed, all-observant girl, mutely defiant of her, had been a sort of Mordecai to Catherine, it is not to be supposed that she could easily receive her into favour now. Her parentage, her looks, her mind, her daring setting up of her own personality as a child, as if she were something important, had all exasperated Catherine. Even the consciousness of her own prejudice, of the folly of remembering against a girl the follies of her childhood, helped to aggravate this sentiment; nor was it likely that the fact that this girl was Edward's chosen love should make her heart softer. She said to herself that she could not endure Hester; but yet she prepared herself for the inevitable from the first day. Perhaps she thought it well to propitiate fate by going to the very furthest length at once, and forecasting all that the most evil fortune could bring her.

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It cost her a sharp and painful struggle. No one knew what was going on in her mind in those wintry days of the early year: her preoccupation was attributed to other things: afterwards, when events seemed to account for it, her wonderful prevision was admired and wondered at. But in reality the previsions in Catherine's mind were all of one kind. She saw a series of events happen in succession, as to which she was as confident as if they were past already; and in her imagination she did the only thing that nobody expected of her, the thing which fate did not demand of her—she made up her mind that she would make no stand against this hateful thing. What was the use of it? If the young but held out, even the most unwise and the most cruel, they must win in the end. It would not be for her dignity, she said to herself, to stand out. She would make no opposition to Edward's choice. The separation that must ensue she would bear as she could—with dignity at least if nothing else. The elevation of her enemy and her enemy's house she must submit to. She would withdraw, she would have no hand in it; but at least she would not oppose. This, by dint of a hard fight, Catherine obtained of herself. She would say nothing, forestall nothing, but at the same time oppose nothing. All the long hours which a lonely woman must spend by herself she appropriated to this. She must lose Edward; had she not lost him now? He had been her sole weakness, her one delusion; and it was not, she said to herself, a delusion—the boy had loved her and been true to her. He had made her happy like a mother with a true son. But when that vagrant sentiment comes in which is called love (the fools! as if the appropriation of the name to one kind of affection, and that the most selfish of all, was not a scorn to love, the real, the all-enduring!) what was previous virtue, what was truth, and gratitude, and everything else in life, in comparison? Of course they must all give place to the fascination of a pair of shining eyes. Father and mother, and home and duty, what were they in comparison? Everybody was aware of that, and the old people struggled often enough as was well known. Sometimes they appealed to heaven and earth, sometimes were hysterical and made vows and uttered curses. But in the long run the battle was to the young ones. They had time and passion, and universal human sympathy, on their side, whereas the old people had none of all these, neither time to wait, nor passion to inspire, nor sympathy anywhere in heaven or earth. Catherine said to herself proudly that she would not expose herself to the pity which attends the

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vanquished. She would retire from the fray. She would clothe herself in double armour of stoicism, and teach herself to see the humour in this as in so many things. Was not seeing the humour of it the last thing that remained to the noble soul amid the wonder of life?

Her sense, however, of this great downfall which was approaching, and in which she meant to enact so proud and magnanimous a part, was so strong and bitter that Edward's absence was a relief to her. She expected every day that he would present himself before her, and burst forth into some agitated statement—a statement which she would not help out with a word, but which she would receive, not as he would expect her to receive it, with opposition and wrath, but with the calm of one who knew all about it, and had made up her mind to it long ago. But when he was absent she felt that there was a respite. She was freed from the eager desire she had, against her will, to know what he was doing, where he went, who he was with, which tormented her, but which she could not subdue. All this ferment of feeling was stilled when he was away. She did not ask why he should go away so often, what the business was that called him to London. For the first time in her life she was overmastered by a conflict of individual feeling; and she was glad when there came a lull in it, and when the evil day was postponed. She went on seeing her friends, visiting and being visited, keeping a fair face to the world all the time. But it began to be whispered in Redborough that Catherine Vernon was beginning to fail, that there were signs in her of breaking up, that she began to show her age. People began to ask each other about her. "Have you seen Catherine Vernon lately? How did you think she was looking?" and to shake their heads. Some said she had been so strong a woman always, and had taken so much out of herself, that probably the break-up would be speedy if it was true that she was beginning to break up; while others held more hopefully that with her wonderful constitution she might yet rally, and see twenty-years of comfort yet. The fact was that she was not ill at all. It seemed to herself that she was more keenly alive, more highly strung to every use of existence than ever. She saw better, heard more quickly, having every sense on the alert. Nothing had so quickened her and stimulated her powers for years. She was eager for every new day which might carry some new crisis in it. She did not even feel the deadly chill of Edward's desertion for the intense occupation which the whole matter brought her. And then, though she said to herself it was certain, yet it was not so certain after all. It might turn out that she was mistaken yet. There was still an outlet for a secret hope. Sometimes indeed a flattering unction was laid to her heart, a feeling that if it is only the unforeseen that happens, the so carefully thought out, so elaborately calculated upon, might not happen. But this Catherine only permitted herself by rare moments. For the most part she felt very sure of the facts, and almost solemnly cognisant of what was to come.

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In this way the spring went on. It had appeared to Edward himself as certain that some great *coup* must have settled his fate long before. It was his inexperience, perhaps, and the excitement of his determination to act for himself, which had made everything appear so imminent; but after all it did not turn out so. The course of events went on in that leisurely current which is far more deadly in its sweep than any sudden cataract. He did not lose or gain anything in a moment, his ventures either did not turn out so vast as he imagined, or they were partial failures, partial successes. Step by step he went on, sacrificing, jeopardising, gradually, slowly, without being himself aware of what he was doing, the funds he had under his control. He had been ready in the first passion of his desire for wealth to risk everything and finish the whole matter at one swoop; but that passed over, and he was not really aware how one by one his counters were being swept out of his hands. It went on through all the awakening time of the year, as it might have gone on for half a life time, and he was impatient of the delay. Besides, this new accompaniment, this love which he would not have suffered himself to indulge had he not believed everything on the eve of a crisis, became a great addition to his difficulties when the crisis did not come. The habit of resorting to Hester was one which grew upon him. But the opportunities of indulging in it were few, for he was as anxious not to betray himself nor to let Catherine suspect what was going on, as at the beginning, when he believed that all would be over in a week or two. And Hester herself was not a girl with whom it was easy to carry on a clandestine intercourse. The situation chafed her beyond endurance. She had almost ceased now to think of the mystery in which he hid his proceedings, or to rebel against the interest and sympathy which he demanded from her blindly, out of the keen humiliation and distress which it cost her to feel that she was deceiving her friends and the world, conspiring with him to deceive Catherine. This consciousness made Hester disagreeable to live with, an angry, resentful, impatient woman, absorbed in her own affairs, little accessible to the world. Her mother could not understand what had come to her, and still less could the old Morgans, who loved and had understood her so completely, understand. She avoided them now, she cared for nobody. Week by week with a joyless regularity she went to Ellen Merridew's dances, where half the evening at least was spent with Edward in a curious duel of mingled love and dislike—yes, sometimes hatred almost. It seemed to her that her distaste for everything that was going on was more than her love could balance, that she so hated the expedients he drove her to, that he himself took another aspect in her eyes. Sometimes she felt that she must make the crisis which he had so often anticipated, and instead of consenting to fly with him must fly by herself, and cut the tie between them with a sharp stroke. It was all pain, trouble, misery—and what was worse, falsehood, wherever she turned. As the year slid round into sunshine, and the days grew longer, everything became intolerable to Hester. His absence was no relief to her. She had his secret to keep whether he was there or away, or rather her secret: for nothing she felt could be so dreadful to her as the secrecy in which her own life was wrapped, and which he was terrified she should betray.

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And though it was now nearly six months after Christmas, Emma Ashton still lived with the old Morgans, and pursued her adventures with her bow and spear in the dances and entertainments

of the neighbourhood. Reginald Merridew so far from "speaking" had been sent off by his father to America, professedly on business, but, as was well known in the family, to put a stop to the nonsense which at his age was so utterly out of the question; and though other expectations had stirred her from time to time, nothing had given certainty to her hopes of being settled. She was going home at last, to Roland, in the beginning of June, and the old people were looking forward to their deliverance with no small impatience. Emma never failed at the *Thés Dansantes*. The old fly with the white horse rumbled along in the dusk of the early summer nights and mornings, carrying these two young women to and fro almost as regularly as the Thursday came—Hester reluctant, angry, and pale, obeying a necessity which she resented to the very depths of her being; Emma placid, always with a certain sense of pleasure animating her business-like arrangements. Catherine, who did not sleep very well on these nights, got to recognise the sound, and would sometimes look out from her window and wonder bitterly whether *that girl* too was glancing out, perhaps with triumph in her eyes as she passed the shut-up house, thinking of the day when it would be her own. It gave her a little pleasure on the first of June when she heard the slow vehicle creeping by to think that Edward had been called away that afternoon, and that if Hester had expected to meet him she would be disappointed. That was a little consolation to her. She heard it creeping back again about one in the morning, earlier than usual, with a satisfied smile. There had been no billing and cooing that evening, no advance made towards the final triumph. She thought there was a sound of disappointment even in the rumble of the fly; and so indeed there might have been, for Emma was sobbing, and discoursing among her tears upon the sadness of her prospects. It was the last *Thé Dansante* to which Emma could hope to go. "And here I'm going just as I came," Emma said, "though I had such a good opening, and everybody has been so kind to me. I can't say here that it has been for want of having my chance. I have been introduced to the best people, and grandmamma has given me two new dresses, and you have never grudged me the best partners, I will say that for you, Hester; and yet it has come to nothing! I am sure I sha'n't be able to answer Roland a word if he says after this that balls are an unnecessary expense—for it is not much I have made by them. To think that not one single gentleman in all Redborough—! Oh, Hester, either Elinor and Bee tell awful stories of what happened to them, or things have changed dreadfully, quite dreadfully, since their day!"

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Hester could find no words in which to console this victim of the times. She listened indeed somewhat sternly, refusing compassion. "To be sure, there was poor Reginald, it was not his fault," Emma sobbed. "If I should live to be a hundred I never should believe it was his fault. But, after all, he was very young, and he could have had no money to speak of, and what should I have done with him? So perhaps that was for the best. But then there was Dr. Morris, whom I could have got on with; that was his mother's doing:—ladies are always jealous, don't you think?—and I should not have minded that Captain Sedgely, that volunteer captain. But it is of no use talking, for this is my last Thursday. Oh, you don't mind; you have a good home, and a mother, and everything you can desire. There is no hurry about you."

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Hester made no reply. It seemed to her that she would be willing to change lives even with Emma, to fall to her petty level, and estimate the chances of being settled, and count the men whom she could have managed to get on with, rather than carry on such an existence as hers. It was no glance of triumph, but one of humiliation, that she had cast, as they passed, upon the shuttered windows and close-drawn white draperies at the Grange. In her imagination she stole into the very bedchamber where Catherine had smiled to think of her disappointment, and delivered her soul of her secret. "I am not ashamed that we love each other: but I am ashamed that we have concealed it," she imagined herself saying. She was very unhappy; there seemed no consolation for her anywhere. Edward had warned her in a hurried note that he was called to town. "I think it is coming at last," he said. "I think we have made the grand *coup* at last." He had said it so often that she had no faith in him; and how long was it to go on like this—how long?

Meanwhile the house of the young Merridews was still ringing with mirth and music. There was no restraint, or reserve, or prudence or care-taking, from garret to basement. Algernon, the young husband who was now a father as well, had perhaps taken a little more champagne than usual in honour of his wife's first re-appearance after that arrival. She was so brave, so "plucky," they all said, so unconventional, that she had insisted on the *Thés Dansantes* going on all the same, though she was unable to preside over them, and was still up, a little pale but radiant with smiles, at the last supper-table when every one was gone. Harry had been looking very grave all the evening. He had even attempted a little lecture over that final family supper. "If I were you, Algy and Nell," he said, "I'd draw in a little now. You've got your baby to think of—save up something for that little beggar, don't spend it all on a pack of fools that eat you up."

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"Oh, you old Truepenny," Ellen said, without knowing what she meant, "you are always preaching. Hold your tongue, Algy, you have had too much wine; you ought to go to bed. If I can't stand up for myself it's strange to me. Who are you calling a pack of fools, Harry? It's the only thing I call society in Redborough. All the other houses are as stiff as Spaniards. There is nobody but me to put a little life into them. They were all dead-alive before. If there's a little going on now I think it's all owing to me."

"She is a wonderful little person is Nell," cried her husband, putting a half-tipsy arm round her. "She has pluck for anything. To think she should carry on just the same, to let the rest have their pleasure when she was up stairs. I am proud of her, that is what I am. I am proud—"

"Oh, go to bed, Algy! If you ever do this again I will divorce you. I won't put up with you. Harry, shut up," said the young mistress of the house, who was fond of slang. "I can look after my own affairs."

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"And as for the money," said Algy, with a jovial laugh, "I don't care a — for the money. Ned's

put me up to a good thing or two. Ned's not very much on the outside, but he's a famous good fellow. He's put me up," he said, with a nod and broad smile of good humour, "to two—three capital things."

"Ned!" cried Harry, almost with a roar of terror and annoyance, like the cry of a lion. "Do you mean to say you've put yourself in Ned's hands?"

Upon which Ellen jumped up, red with anger, and pushed her husband away. "Oh, go to bed, you stupid!" she cried.

Harry had lost all his colour; his fair hair and large light moustache looked like shadows upon his whiteness. "For God's sake, Ellen!" he said; "did you know of this?"

"Know of what?—it's nothing," she cried. "Yes, of course I know about it. I pushed him into it—he knows I did. What have you got to do with where we place our money? You may be sure we sha'n't want you to pay anything for us," she said.

Harry had never resented her little impertinences; he had always been submissive to her. He shook his head now more in sorrow than in anger. "Let's hope you won't want anybody to pay for you," he said, and kissed his sister and went away.

Harry had never been in so solemn a mood before. The foolish young couple were a little awed by it, but at last Ellen found an explanation. "It's ever since he was godfather to baby. He thinks he will have to leave all his money to him," she said; and the incident ended in one of Algy's usual bursts of laughter over his wife's *bons mots*.

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Harry, however, took the matter a great deal more seriously; he got little or no sleep that night. In the morning he examined the letters with an alarmed interest. Edward was to be back that evening, it was expected, and there was a mass of his letters on his desk with which his cousin did not venture to interfere. Edward had a confidential clerk, who guarded them closely. "Mr. Edward did not think there would be anything urgent, anything to trouble you about," he said, following Harry into the room with unnecessary anxiety. "I can find that out for myself," Harry said, sharply, turning upon this furtive personage. But he did not meddle with any of the heap, though it was his right to do so. They frightened him, as though there had been infernal machines inside, as indeed he felt sure enough there were—not of the kind which tear the flesh and fibre, but the mind and soul. When he went back to his room he received a visit very unexpectedly from the old clerk, Mr. Rule, with whom Hester had held so long a conversation on the night of the Christmas party. It was his habit to come now and then, to patronise everybody, from the youngest clerks to the young principals, shaking his white head and describing how things used to be "in John Vernon's time." Usually nobody could be more genial and approving than old Rule. He liked to tell his story of the great crisis, and to assure them that, thanks to Miss Catherine, such dangers were no longer possible. "A woman in the business just once in a way, in five or six generations," he thought an admirable institution. "She looks after all the little things that you young gentlemen don't think worth your while," he said. But to-day Mr. Rule was not in this easy way of thinking. He wanted to know how long Edward had been gone, and where he was, and when he was expected back? He told Harry that things were being said that he could not bear to hear. "What is he doing away so often? Is it pleasure? is it horse-racing, or that sort of thing? Forgive me, Mr. Harry, but I'm so anxious I don't know what I'm saying. You have always taken it easy, I know, and left the chief management to Mr. Edward. But you must act, sir, you must act," the old clerk said.

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Harry's face had a sort of tragic helplessness in it. "He's coming back to-night—one day can't matter so much. Oh, no, it's not horse-racing, it's business. Edward isn't the sort of fellow——"

"One day may make all the difference," cried the old man, but the more fussy and restless he was, the more profound became Harry's passive solemnity. When he had got rid of the old clerk he sat for a long time doing nothing, leaning his head in his hands: and at last he jumped up and got his hat, and declared that he was going out for an hour. "Several gentlemen have been here asking for Mr. Edward," he was told as he passed through the outer office. "Mr. Merridew, sir, the old gentleman: Mr. Pounceby: and Mr. Fish has just been to know for certain when he will be back." Harry answered impatiently what they all knew, that his cousin would be at the bank to-morrow morning, and that he himself would return within the hour. There were some anxious looks cast after him as he went away, the elder clerks making their comments. "If Mr. Edward's headpiece, sir, could be put on Mr. Harry's shoulders," one of them said. They had no fear that *he* would be absent when there was any need for him, but then, when he was present, what could he do?

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Harry went on with long strides past the Grange to the Heronry; it was a curious place to go for counsel. He passed Catherine sitting at her window, she who once had been appealed to in a crisis and had saved the bank. He did not suppose that things were so urgent now, but had they been so he would not have gone to Catherine. He thought it would break her heart. She had never been very kind to him, beyond the mere fact of having selected him from among his kindred for advancement; but Harry had a tender regard for Catherine, a sort of stolid immovable force of gratitude. His heart melted as he saw her seated in the tranquillity of the summer morning in the window, looking out upon everything with, he thought, a peaceful interest, the contemplative pleasure of age. It was not so, but he thought so—and it seemed to him that if he could but preserve her from annoyance and disturbance, from all invasion of rumour or possibility of doubt as to the stability of Vernon's, that there was nothing he would not endure. He made himself as small as he could, and got under the shadow of the trees that she might not observe him as he passed, and wonder what brought him that way, and possibly divine the anxiety that was in him. He might have spared himself the trouble. Catherine saw him very well,

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and the feeling that sprang up in her mind was bitter derision, mixed with a kind of unkindly pleasure. "If you think that *you* will get a look from her, when she has *him* at her feet?" Catherine said to herself, and though the idea that Hester had *him* at her feet was bitter to her, there was a pleasure in the contempt with which she felt Harry's chances to be hopeless indeed. She was very ungrateful for his kindness, thinking of other things, quite unsuspecting of his real object. She smiled contemptuously to see him pass in full midday when he ought to have been at his work, but laughed, with a little aside, thinking, poor Harry, he would never set the Thames on fire, it did not matter very much after all whether he was there or not. The master head was absent, too often absent, but Edward had everything so well in hand that it mattered the less. "When he is settled he will not go away so often," she said to herself. What a change it would have made in all her thoughts had she known the gloomy doubts and terrors in Harry's mind, his alarmed sense that he must step into a breach which he knew not how to fill, his bewildered questionings with himself. If Edward did not turn up that night there would be nothing else for it, and what was he to do? He understood the common course of business, and how to judge in certain easy cases, but what to do in an emergency he did not know. He went on to the Heronry at a great rate, making more noise than any one else would with the gate, and catching full in his face the gaze of those watchful observers who belonged to the place, Mr. Mildmay Vernon in the summer-house with his newspaper, and the Miss Vernon-Ridgways at their open window. He thought they all rose at him like so many serpent-heads erecting themselves with a dart and hiss. Harry was so little fanciful that only an excited imagination could have brought him to this.

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Mrs. John was in the verandah, gardening—arranging the pots in which her pelargoniums were beginning to bloom. She would have had him stay and help her, asking many questions about Ellen and her baby which Harry was unable to answer.

"Might I speak to Hester?" he said. "I have no time to stay; I would like to see her for a moment."

"What is it?" cried Mrs. John. Harry's embarrassment, she thought, could only mean one thing—a sudden impulse to renew the suit which Hester had been so foolish as to reject. She looked at him kindly and shook her head. "She is in the parlour; but I wouldn't if I were you," she said, her eyes moist with sympathy. It was hard upon poor Harry to be compelled thus to take upon himself the credit of a second humiliation.

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"I should like to see her, please," he answered, looking steadfastly into Mrs. John's kind, humid eyes, as she shook her head in warning.

"Well, my dear boy; she is in the parlour. I wish—I wish—— But, alas! there is no change in her, and I wouldn't if I were you."

"Never mind, a man can but have his chance," said magnanimous Harry. He knew that few men would have done as much, and the sense of the sacrifice he was making made his heart swell. His pride was to go too; he was to be supposed to be bringing upon himself a second rejection; but "Never mind, it is all in the day's work," he said to himself, as he went through the dim passages and knocked at the parlour door.

Hester was sitting alone over a little writing-desk on the table. She was writing hurriedly, and he could see her nervous movement to gather together some sheets of paper, and shut them up in her little desk, when she found herself interrupted. She gave a great start when she perceived who it was, and sprang up, saying, "Harry!" breathlessly, as if she expected something to follow. But at first Harry was scarcely master of himself to speak. The girl he loved, the one woman who had moved his dull, good, tenacious heart—she whom, he thought, he should be faithful to all his life, and never care for another; but he knew that her start, her breathless look, the colour that flooded her face, coming and going, were not for him, but for some one else, and that his question would plunge her into trouble too; that he would be to her henceforth as an emissary of evil, perhaps an enemy. All this ran through his mind as he stood looking at her and kept him silent. And when he had gathered himself together his mission suddenly appeared to him so extraordinary, so presumptuous, that he did not know how to explain it.

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"You must be surprised to see me," he said, hesitating. "I don't know what you will think. You will understand I don't mean any impertinence, Hester—or prying, or that sort of thing."

"I am sure you will mean to be kind, Harry; but tell me quick—what is it?" she cried.

He sat down opposite, looking at her across the table. "It is only from myself—nobody's idea but mine; so you need not mind. It is just this, Hester, in confidence. Do you know where Edward is? It sounds impertinent, I know, but I don't mean it. He's wanted so badly at the bank. If you could give me an address where I could telegraph to him? Don't be vexed; it is only that I am so stupid about business. I can do nothing out of my own head."

"Is anything going wrong?" she cried, her lips quivering, her whole frame vibrating, she thought, with the beating, which was almost visible, of her heart.

"Well, things are not very right, Hester. I don't know how wrong they are. I've been kept out of it. Oh, I suppose that was quite natural, for I am not much good. But if I could but telegraph to him at once, and make sure of getting him back——"

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"I think, Harry—I have heard—oh, I can't tell you how! he is coming back to-night."

"Are you quite sure? I know he's expected, but then—— So many things might happen. But if he knew how serious it was all looking——"

Her look as she sat gazing at him was so terrible that he never forgot it. He did not understand it then, nor did he ever after fully understand it. The colour had gone entirely out of her face; her

eyes stared at him as out of two deep, wide caves. It was a look of wonder, of dismay, of guilt. "Is he wanted—so much?" she said. Her voice was no more than a whisper, and she gave a furtive glance at the door behind her as if she were afraid some one might hear.

"Oh, wanted—yes! but not enough to make you look like that. Hester, if I had thought you'd have felt it so! Good Lord, what can I do? I thought you might have told me his address. Don't mind, dear," cried the tender-hearted young man. "I've no right to call you dear, but I can't help it. If it's come to this, I'd do anything for him, Hester, for your sake."

"Oh, never mind me, Harry—it is—nothing. I have got no address: but I know—he's coming to-night."

"Then that's all right," Harry said. "I wanted to make sure of that. I don't suppose there is anything to be frightened about so long as he is on the spot you know—he that is the headpiece of the establishment. He is such a clear-headed fellow, he sees everything in a moment, and he has got everything on his shoulders. It's not fair, I know. I must try and shake myself up a little and take my share, and not feel so helpless the moment Ned's away—that's all," he said, getting up again restlessly. "I have only given you a fright and made you unhappy; but there's no reason for it, I assure you, Hester, so long as Ned is to be here."

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What he said did not comfort her at all, he could see. Her face did not relax nor her eyes lose their look of horror. He went away quite humbly, not saying a word to Mrs. John, who on her part gave him a silent, too significant, pathetic grasp of her hand. Harry was half tempted to laugh, but a great deal more to weep, as he went back again to Redborough. He reflected that it was hard upon a fellow to have to allow it to be supposed that he had offered himself to a girl a second time when he was doing nothing of the kind. But then he thought of Hester's horrified look with a wonder and pain unspeakable, not having the remotest idea what such a look might mean. Anyhow, he concluded, Edward was coming home. That was the one essential circumstance after all.

CHAPTER VIII.

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THE CRISIS.

Hester sat still after Harry had left her as if she had been frozen to stone. But stone was no fit emblem of a frame which was tingling in every nerve, or of a heart which was on fire with horror and anguish and black bewilderment. The look which Harry could not understand, which stopped him in what he was saying, and which even now he could not forget—was still upon her face. She was contemplating something terrible enough to bring a soul to pause, a strange and awful solution of her mystery; and the first glance at it had stunned her. When she had assured him that Edward was coming back that night, a hurried note which she had received that morning seemed to unfold itself in the air before her, where she could read it in letters as of fire. It was written on a scrap of paper blurred, as if folded while the ink was still wet:—

"The moment has come that I have so long foreseen. I am coming home to-morrow for a few hours. Meet me at dusk under the holly at the Grange gate. The most dangerous place is the safest; it must be for ever or no more at all. Be ready, be calm, we shall be together, my only love.—E. V."

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This was how she knew that he was coming back. God help her! She looked in Harry's face, with an instantaneous realisation of the horror of it, of the falsehood that was implied, of her own sudden complicity in some monstrous wrong. "I know he is coming home to-night." What was it that turned Medusa into that mask of horror and gave her head its fatal force? Was it the appalling vision of some unsuspected abyss of falsehood and treachery suddenly opening at her feet, over which she stood arrested, turned into an image of death, blinding and slaying every spectator who could look and see? Hester did not know anything about classic story, but she remembered vaguely about a face with snaky locks that turned men to stone. She told Harry the truth, yet it was a cruel lie. She herself, though she knew nothing and was tortured with terror and questionings, seemed to become at once an active agent in the dark mystery, a liar, a traitor, a false friend. Harry looked at her with concern and wonder, seeing no doubt that she was pale, that she looked ill, perhaps that she was unhappy, but never divining that she was helping in a fatal deceit against her will, contrary to her every desire. He did not doubt for a moment what she said, or put any meaning to it that was not simply in the words. He never dreamt that Edward's return was not real, or that it did not at once satisfy every question and set things if not right, yet in the way of being right. He drew a long breath of relief. That was all he wanted to know. Edward once back again at the head of affairs, everything would resume its usual course. To hear him say "Then that's all right!" and never to say a word, to feel herself gazing in his eyes—was it with the intention of blinding those eyes and preventing them from divining the truth? or was it in mere horror of herself as the instrument of a lie, of him, him whom she would fain have thought perfect, as falsehood incarnate? There was a moment when Hester knew nothing more, when, though she was on fire and her thoughts like flame, lighting up a wild world of dismay about her, she yet felt as if turned into stone.

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The note itself when she received it, in the quiet freshness of the morning, all ordinary and calm, her mother scarcely awake as yet, the little household affairs just beginning, those daily

processes of cleaning and providing without which no existence can be—had been agitation enough. It had come to her like a sudden sharp stroke, cutting her loose from everything, like the cutting of a rope which holds a boat, or the stroke that severs a branch. In a moment she was separated from all that soft established order, from the life that had clasped her all round as if it would hold her fast for ever. Her eyes had scarcely run over those hurried lines before she felt a wild sensation of freedom, the wind in her face, the gurgle of the water, the sense of flight. She put out her hands to screen herself, not to be carried off by the mere breeze, the strong-blowing gale of revolution. A thrill of strange delight, yet of fright and alarm, ran through her veins—the flood of her sensations overwhelmed her. Its suddenness, its nearness, its certainty, brought an intoxication of feeling. All this monotony to be over; a new world of adventure, of novelty, of love, and daring and movement, and all to begin to-night. These thoughts mounted to her head in waves. And as the minutes hurried along and the world grew more and more awake, and Mrs. John came down stairs to breakfast, the fire in Hester's veins grew hotter and hotter. To-night, in the darkness—for ever or no more at all. It seemed incredible that she could contain it all, and keep her secret and make no sign. All this time no question of it as of a matter on which she must make up her mind, and in which there was choice, had come into her thoughts. She was not usually passive, but for the moment she received these words as simple directions which there could be no doubt of her carrying out. His passion and certainty took possession of her: everything seemed distinct and necessary—the meeting in the dusk, the hurried journey, the flight through the darkness. For great excitement stops as much as it accelerates the action of the mind. Her thoughts flew out upon the wind, into the unknown, but they did not pause to discuss the first steps. Had he directed her to do all this at once, in the morning instead of in the dusk, she would have obeyed his instructions instinctively like a child, without stopping to inquire why.

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But this mood was changed by the simplest of domestic arguments. Mrs. John, fresh and smiling in her black gown and her white cap, came down to breakfast. Not a suspicion of anything out of the ordinary routine was in Mrs. John's mind. It was a lovely morning; the sunshine pleased her as it did the flowers who hold up their heads to it and open out and feel themselves alive. Her chair was on the sunny side of the table, as it always was. She liked to sit in it and be warmed by it. She began to talk of all the little household things as she took her tea; of how the strawberries would soon be cheap enough for jam. That was the one thing that remained in Hester's mind years after. In a moment, while her thoughts were full of a final and sudden flight, that little speech about the jam and the strawberries brought her to herself. She felt herself to come back with a sudden harsh jarring and stumbling to solid ground. "The strawberries!" she said, looking at her mother with wild eyes of dismay as if there had been something tragic in them. "In about a fortnight, my dear, they will be quite cheap enough," Mrs. John said, with a contented nod of her head. In a fortnight! a fortnight!—a century would not mean so much. A fortnight hence what would the mother be thinking, where would the daughter be? Then there came to Hester another revelation as sudden, as all-potent as the first—that it was Impossible—that she must be mad or dreaming. What! fly, go away, disappear, whatever might be the word? She suddenly laughed out, her mother could not tell why, dropping a china cup, over which Mrs. John made many lamentations. It broke a set, it was old Worcester, worth a great deal of money. It had been her grandmother's. "Oh, my dear, I wish you would not be so careless!" But of anything else that was broken, or of the mystery of that sudden laugh which corresponded with no expression of mirth on Hester's face, Mrs. John knew nothing. Impossible! Why there was not a word to be said, not a moment's hesitation. It could not be—how could it be? Edward, a young man full of engagements, caught by a hundred bonds of duty, of work, of affection—why, if nothing else, of business—to whom it was difficult to be absent for a week, who had sometimes to run up and down to town in twenty-four hours—that he should be able to go away! He must mean something else by it, she said to herself; the words must bear a second signification. And she herself, who had no business, or duty, or tie of any sort except one, but that one enough to move heaven and earth, her mother—who in a fortnight would be making the jam if the strawberries were cheap enough. The thought moved her to laughter again, a laugh out of a strangely solemn, excited countenance. But this sudden revulsion of feeling had given the whole matter a certain grotesque mixture of the ludicrous: it demonstrated the impossibility of any such overturn with such a sarcastic touch. Hester said to herself that she must have been nearly making some tragical mistake, and compromising her character for good sense for ever. Of course it was impossible. Whatever he meant by the words he did not mean that.

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After breakfast, when she was alone and had read the note over again, and could find no interpretation of it but the first one, and had begun to enter into the agonies of a mental struggle, Hester relieved the conflict by putting it down on paper—writing to Edward, to herself, in the first instance, through him. She asked him what he meant, what other sense there was in his words which she had not grasped? He go away! how could he, with Catherine trusting in him, with Vernon's depending upon him, with his work and his reputation, and so much at stake; and she with her mother? Did not he see that it was impossible? Impossible! He might say that she should have pointed this out before, but she had never realised it; it had been words to her, no more; and it was words now, was it not? words that meant something beyond her understanding—a test of her understanding; but she had no understanding it appeared. Hester thought that she would send this letter to await him when he reached the Grange, and then she would keep his appointment and find him—ready to laugh at her, as she had laughed at herself. She put it hurriedly into her desk when Harry appeared, with a guilty sense that Harry, if he saw it, would not only divine whom it was addressed to, but even what it said. But Harry was no warlock, and though he saw the hurried movement and the withdrawal of the papers, never asked himself what it was.

But after Harry was gone, she wrote no more. She gave one glance at the pages full of anxious pleading, of tender remonstrances, of love and perplexity; then closed the lid upon them, as if it had been the lid of a coffin, and locked it securely. They were obsolete, and out of date, as if her grandmother had written them. They had nothing to do with the real question; they were as fictitious as if they had been taken out of a novel. All that she had said was foolishness, like the drivelling of an idiot. Duty! she had asked triumphantly, how could he disengage himself from that? how could she leave her mother behind?—when, great heaven! all that he wanted was to shake duty off, and get rid of every tie. Harry's revelation brought such a contrast before her, that Hester could but stare at the two pictures with dumb consternation. On one side the bank in gloomy disarray, its ordinary course of action stopped, the business "all wrong," poor people besieging its doors for their money, the clerks bewildered, and not knowing what to do; and poor Harry faithful, but incapable, knowing no better than they. On the other, Edward, in all a bridegroom's excitement, with the woman he loved beside him, travelling far away into the night, flushed with pleasure, with novelty, with the success of his actions whatever they were, and with the world before him. It seemed to Hester that she saw the two scenes, although she herself would have to be an actor in one of them if it ever came to pass. She saw them to the most insignificant details. The bank (Vernon's—that sheet-anchor of the race, for which she herself felt a hot partisanship, a desire to build it up with the prop of her own life if that would do it), full of angry and miserable people cursing its very name—while the fugitives, with every comfort about them, were fast getting out of sight and hearing of everything that could recall what they had left. Deserter! traitor! Were these the words that would be used? and was he going to fly from the ruin he had made? That last most terrible question of all began to force itself to her lips, and all the air seemed to grow alive and be filled with darting tongues and voices and hissings of reply. And then it was that Hester felt as if her very hair began to writhe and twist in living horror about her shoulders, and that her eyes, wide with fright and terror, were becoming like Medusa's, things that might turn all that was living to stone.

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But to think through a long summer day is a terrible ordeal, and many changes and turns of the mind are inevitable. It was a pitiless long day, imagine it! in June, when not a moment is spared you. It was very bright, all nature enjoying the light. The sun seemed to stand still in the sky, as on that day when he stopped to watch the slaughter in Ajalon; and even when he disappeared at last, the twilight lasted and lingered as if it would never be done.

Hester had put away her long letter of appeal, but she wrote a brief, almost stern note, which she sent to the Grange in the early evening. It ran thus:—

"Harry has told us that all is going wrong at the bank, that you are wanted urgently there, that only you can set things right. You cannot have known this when you wrote to me. I take it for granted this changes everything, but I will come to-night to the place you name."

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She sent her note in the afternoon, and then waited, like a condemned criminal, faintly hoping still for a reprieve; for perhaps to know this would stop him still; perhaps he had not known it. She went out just after sunset, escaping not without difficulty from her mother's care.

"It is too late for you to go out by yourself," Mrs. John said. "I do not like it. You girls are so independent. I never went beyond the garden by myself at your age."

"I am only going to the Common," Hester said, with a quiver in her voice. She kissed her mother very tenderly. She was not in the habit of bestowing caresses, so that this a little startled Mrs. John; but she returned it warmly, and bade her child take a shawl.

Did Hester think she might yet be carried away by the flood of the other's will, against her own, that she took her leave so solemnly? It was rather a sort of imaginative reflection of what she might have been doing if— She had gone but a little way when she met Captain Morgan.

"Why did not you tell me you were going out?" he said. "I have tired myself now; I can't go with you. I have been inquiring about the midnight train for Emma, who did not get off this morning after all."

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"Is she going by the midnight train?" Hester asked, with a sense of inconvenience in it that she could hardly explain.

"Yes, if it is possible to get her off," said the captain; "but, my dear, it is too late for you to walk alone."

"No, oh no. It is only for this once," Hester cried, with involuntary passion unawares.

"My dear child!" said the old man. He was disturbed by her looks. "I will go in and get an overcoat, and join you directly, Hester; for though I am tired I would rather be over-tired than that you should walk alone."

The only way that Hester could defend herself was to hurry away out of sight before he came out again. She had a dark dress, a veil over her face. Her springy step indeed was not easy to be mistaken, nor the outline of her alert and vigorous figure, which was so much unlike loitering. She got away into the fields by a lonely path, where she could be safe she thought till the time of her appointment came. What was to happen at that appointment she could not tell. Excitement was so high in her veins that she had no time to ask herself what she would answer him if he kept to his intention, or what she should do. Was it on the cards still that she might follow him to the end of the world?

Edward had arrived late, only in time for dinner. He got Hester's note and read it with an

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impatient exclamation.

"The little fool," he said to himself, "as if that was not the very—" and tore it in a thousand pieces. He dressed for dinner very carefully, as was his wont, and was very pleasant at table, telling Catherine various incidents of his journey. "You must make the most of me while you have me," he said, "for I have a pile of letters in my room that would make any one ill to look at. I must get through them to-night—there may be something important. It is a pity Harry doesn't take more of a share."

"I think for my part it is one of the best things about him," said Catherine, "that he always acknowledges your superiority. He knows he will never set the Thames on fire."

"And why should he?" said Edward: "a man may be a very good man of business without that. I wish he would go into things more; then he would always be ready in case of an emergency."

"What emergency?" said Catherine, almost sharply. "You are too far-seeing, I think."

"Oh, I might die, you know," said Edward, with an abrupt laugh.

"Anything might happen," she said; "but there are many more likely contingencies to be provided for. What is that?" she added quickly.

The butler had brought in and presented to Edward upon a large silver salver which called attention to it, a small, white, square object.

"Return tickets, ma'am," said the butler solemnly, "as dropped out of Mr. Edward's overcoat." [Pg 166]

"Return tickets! you are not going back again, Edward?"

"I am always running up and down, Aunt Catherine. I constantly take return tickets," he said quietly, pocketing the tickets and giving the butler a look which he did not soon forget. For there were two of them, which Marshall could not understand. As for Catherine, this gave her a little pang, she could not tell why. But Edward had never found so much to tell her before. He kept her amused during the whole time of dinner. Afterwards he took her up stairs into the drawing-room and put her into her favourite chair, and did everything that a tender son could have done for her comfort. It was growing dusk by this time, and he had not been able to keep himself from giving a glance now and then at the sky.

"Do you think we are going to have a storm, Edward?" Catherine asked.

"I think it looks a little like it. You had better have your window shut," he said.

He had never been more kind. He kissed her hand and her cheek when he went away, saying it was possible if his letters were very tough that he might not come up stairs again before she went to bed.

"Your hand is hot," she said, "my dear boy. I am afraid you are a little feverish."

"It has been very warm in town, and I am always best, you know, in country air," was what he said. [Pg 167]

She sat very quietly for some time after he had left her, then seeing no appearance of any storm, rose and opened her window again. He was almost too careful of her. As she did so she heard a faint sound below as of some one softly closing the door. Was it Edward going out notwithstanding his letters? She put herself very close to the window to watch. He had a small bag in his hand, and stood for a moment at the gate looking up and down; then he made a quick step beyond it as if to meet some one. Catherine watched, straining her eyes through the gloom. She was not angry. It brought all her fears, her watchfulness, back in a moment. But if it was true that he loved Hester, of course he must wish to see her—if she was so unmaidenly, so unwomanly as to consent to come out like this to meet him. And was it at her own very door that the tryst was? This roused Catherine. She heard a murmur of voices on the other side of the great holly. The summer night was so soft, every sound was carried by the air. Here was her opportunity to discover who it was. She did not pause to think, but taking up her shawl in her hand threw it over her head as she stole down stairs. It was black and made her almost invisible, her dress being black too. She came out at a side door, narrowly escaping the curiosity of Marshall. The bright day had fallen into a very dim evening. There was neither moon nor stars. She stole out by the side door, avoiding the path. Her footsteps made no sound on the grass. She crossed the gravel on tiptoe, and wound her way among the shrubberies till she stood exactly under the holly-tree. The wall there was about up to a man's shoulders; and it was surmounted by a railing. She stood securely under the shadow of it, with her heart beating very loudly, and listened to their voices. Ah, there could be no doubt about it. She said to herself that she never had any doubt. It was the voice of *that girl* which answered Edward's low, passionate appeals. There are some cases in which honour demands a sacrifice scarcely possible. She had it in her power to satisfy herself at once as to the terms upon which they were, and what they expected and wished for. She had no intention of eavesdropping. It was one of the sins to which Catherine was least disposed; but to turn back without satisfying herself seemed impossible now. [Pg 168]

CHAPTER IX.

UNDER THE HOLLY.

It seemed to Hester that she had been for hours out of doors, and that the lingering June evening would never end. Now and then she met in the fields a party of Redborough people taking a walk—a mother with a little group of children, a father with a taller girl or boy, a pair of lovers. They all looked after her, wondering a little that a young lady, and one who belonged to the Vernons (for everybody knew her), should be out so late alone. "But why should she not have a young man too?" the lovers thought, and felt a great interest in the question whether they should meet her again, and who *he* might be. But still it could not be said to be dark—the wild roses were still quite pink upon the hedges. The moments lingered along, the clocks kept chiming by intervals. Hester, by dint of long thinking, felt that she had become incapable of all thought. She no longer remembered what she had intended to say to him, nor could divine what he would say. If it were but over, if the moment would but come! She felt capable of nothing but that wish; her mind seemed to be running by her like a stream, with a strange velocity which came to nothing. Then she woke up suddenly to feel that the time had come. The summer fields all golden with buttercups had stolen away into the grey, the hedgerows only betrayed themselves by a vague darkness. She could not see the faces, or anything but ghostlike outlines of those she met. The time had come when one looks like another, and identity is taken away.

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There was nobody upon the Grange road. She went along as swift as a shadow, like a ghost, her veil over her face. The holly-tree stood black like a pillar of cloud at the gate, and some one stood close by waiting—not a creature to see them far or near. They clasped hands and stood together enveloped by the greyness, the confused atmosphere of evening, which seemed to hide them even from each other.

"Thank Heaven I have you at last. I thought you were never coming," Edward said.

"It was not dark enough till now. Oh, Edward! that we should meet like thieves, like——"

"Lovers, darling. The most innocent of lovers come together so—especially when the fates are against them; they are against us no more, Hester. Take my arm, and let us go. We have nothing to wait for. I think I have thought of everything. Good-bye to the old life—the dreary, the vain. My only love! Come, there is nothing to detain us——"

It was at this moment that the secret listener—who came without any intention of listening, who wanted only to see who it was and what it meant—losing her shoe in the heavy ground of the shrubbery, stole into that corner behind the wall.

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"Oh, Edward, wait—there is everything to detain us. Did you not get my note? They say things are going wrong with Vernons—that the bank—I can't tell what it is, but you will understand. Harry said nothing could be done till you came."

"Harry is a fool!" he said, bitterly. "Why didn't he take his share of the work and understand matters? Is it my fault if it was all thrown into my hands? Hester, you are my own love, but you are a fool too! Don't you see? Can't you understand that this is the very reason? But why should I try to explain at such a moment—or you ask me? Come, my darling! Safety and happiness and everything we can wish lie beyond yon railway. Let us get away."

"I am not going, Edward. Oh, how could you think it! I never meant to go."

"Not going!" he laughed, and took her hands into his, with an impatience, however, which made him restless, which might have made him violent, "that is a pretty thing to tell me just when you have met me for the purpose. I know you want to be persuaded. But come, come; I will persuade you as much as you can desire when I get you safe into the train."

"It is not persuasion I want. If it was right I would go if all the world were against it. Edward, do you know what it looks like? It looks like treachery—like deserting your post—like leading them into danger, then leaving them in their ignorance to stumble out as they can."

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"Well?" he said. "Is that all? If we get off with that we shall do very well, Hester. I shouldn't wonder if they said harder things still."

"If the bank should—come to harm. I am a Vernon too. I can't bear it should come to harm. If anything was to happen——"

"If it will abridge this discussion—which surely is ill-timed, Hester, to say the least—I may admit at once that it is likely to come to harm. I don't know how things are to be tided over this time. The bank's on its last legs. We needn't make any mystery on the subject. What's that?"

It was a sound—of intolerable woe, indignation, and wrath from behind the wall. Catherine was listening, with her hands clasped hard to keep herself up. It was not a cry which would have betrayed her, but an involuntary rustle or movement, a gasp, indistinguishable from so many other utterances of the night.

"I suppose it was nothing," he added. "Hester, come; we can't stand here like two—thieves, as you say, to be found out by anybody. There's that villain Marshall, Catherine's spy, always on the outlook. He tells his mistress everything. However, that does not matter much now. By tomorrow, dear, neither you nor I need mind what they say. There will be plenty said—we must make up our minds to that. I suppose you gave your mother a hint——"

"My mother, a hint? Edward! how could I dare to say to her—What would she think? but oh, that comes so long a way after! The first thing is, you cannot go; Edward, you must not go, a man cannot be a traitor. It is just the one thing—If all was plain sailing, well; but when things are going badly— Oh no, no, I will not hear you say so. You cannot desert your post."

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He took hold of her arm in the intensity of his vexation and rage.

"You are a fool," he said, hoarsely. "Hester! I love you all the same, but you are a fool! Didn't I tell you at first I was risking everything. Heavens, can't you understand! Desert my post! I have no post. It will be better for them that I should be out of the way. I—must go—confound it! Hester, for God's sake, haven't you made up your mind! Do you know that every moment I stand here I am in danger? Come! come! I will tell you everything on the way."

She gave a cry as if his pressure, the almost force he used to draw her with him, had hurt her. She drew her hand out of his.

"I never thought it possible," she said, "I never thought it possible! Oh, Edward! danger, what is danger? There's no danger but going wrong. Stop: my love—yes, you are my love—there has never been any one between us. If you have been foolish in your speculations, or whatever they are, or even wrong—stay, Edward, stay, and put it right. Oh, stay, and put it right! There can be no danger if you will stand up and say 'I did it, I will put it right;' and I—if you care for me—I will stand by you through everything. I will be your clerk; I will work for you night and day. There is no trouble I will not save you, Edward. Oh, Edward, for God's sake, think of Catherine, how good she has been to you; and it will break her heart. Think of Vernon's, which we have all been so proud of, which gives us our place in the country. Edward, think of—Won't you listen to me? You will be a man dishonoured, they will call you—they will think you—Edward!"

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"All this comes finely from you," he cried, "beautifully from you! You have a right to set up on the heights of honour, and as the champion of Vernon's. You, John Vernon's daughter, the man that ruined the bank."

"The man that— Oh, my God! Edward, what are you saying—my father! the man——"

He laughed out—laughed aloud, forgetting precautions.

"Do you mean to say you did not know—the man that was such a fool, that left it a ruin on Catherine's hands? You did not know why she hated you? You are the only one in the place that does not. I have taken the disease from him, through you; it must run in the blood. Come, come, you drive me into heroics too. There is enough of this; but you've no honour to stand upon, Hester; we are in the same box. Come along with me now."

Hester felt that she had been stricken to the heart. She drew away from him till she got to the rough support of the wall, and leant upon it, hiding her face, pressing her soft cheek against the roughness of the brick. He drew her other arm into his, trying to lead her away; but she resisted, putting her hand on him, and pushing him from her with all her force.

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"There is not another word to be said," she cried. "Go away, if you will go; go away. I will never go with you! All that is over now."

"This is folly," he said. "Why did you come here if you had not made up your mind? And if I tell you a piece of old news, a thing that everybody knows, is that to make a breach between us? Hester! where are you going? the other way—the other way!"

She was feeling her way along the wall to the gate. It was very dark, and they were like shadows, small, vague, under the black canopy of the tree. She kept him away with her outstretched arm which he felt rather than saw.

"I never knew it—I never knew it," she said, with sobs. "I am going to Catherine to ask her pardon on my knees."

"Hester, for God's sake don't be a fool— To Catherine! You mean to send out after me, to stop me, to betray me! but by——"

The oath never got uttered, whatever it was. Another figure, tall and shadowy, appeared behind them in the opening of the gate. Edward gave one startled look, then flung from him the hand of Hester which he had grasped unawares, and hurried away towards the town, with the speed of a ghost. He flung it with such force that the girl's relaxed and drooping figure followed, and she fell before the third person, the new comer, and lay across the gateway of the Grange, half stunned, not knowing at whose feet she lay.

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Edward hastened onward like a ghost speeding along the dark road. He was miserable, but the greatest misery of all was to think that even now at the last moment he might be brought back—he might be stopped upon the edge of this freedom for which he longed. He wanted Hester, he wanted happiness, and he had lost them—but there was still freedom. Had there been only the risks of the crisis, the meeting of alarmed and anxious creditors, the chance even of criminal prosecution, he might have faced it; but to return again to that old routine, to take up his former life, was impossible. He flew along like the wind. There was still an hour or more before the train would start. Would the women gather themselves together, he wondered, soon enough to send after him, to prevent his journey? As much to avoid that risk as to occupy the time, which he did not know what else to do with, he resolved to walk to the junction, which was at a distance of two or three miles. So strange is the human constitution, that even at this tragic and sombre moment he almost enjoyed the dark night walk, though it was that of a fugitive; the present is always so near us, so palpable, so much more apparent than either the future or the past. He arrived at the junction just in time, and jumped into the first carriage he could find in his hurry. He had no luggage, having left everything in town—nothing but the small bag in his hand, in which there were various things which he had meant to show to Hester, to amuse her, distract her thoughts

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on the night journey, and keep her from too many questions. Among these things was a special licence, which he had procured that morning in town. He jumped into the carriage without perceiving there was any one in it; and it annoyed him to see, when he settled in the furthest corner, that there was a woman in the other. But the light was low, and it could not be helped. Thus shut up in close and silent company, two strangers, each wrapped in a world of their own, they went swinging through the night, the lights of the stations on the road gleaming past, while with a roar and rush they ran through covering sheds and by empty platforms. After a while Edward's attention was caught, in spite of himself, by a little measured sob and sigh, which came at intervals from the other corner. The lady was very quiet, but very methodical. She put back her veil; she took out her handkerchief; she proceeded to dry her eyes in a serious matter-of-fact way. Edward could not help watching these little proceedings. A few minutes after, with a start, he perceived who his companion was. Emma, going home at last, just as she came, no one having spoken, nor any event occurred to change the current of her life. Her little sniff, her carefully-wiped-off tears were for her failure, and for the dulness of Kilburn, which she was about to return to. A sudden idea struck Edward's mind. He changed his seat, came nearer to her, and at last spoke.

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"I am afraid, Miss Ashton, you don't like travelling by night," he said.

She gave a little start and cry. "Oh, is it you, Mr. Edward? I thought when you came in, it must be somebody I knew. Oh, I am afraid you must have seen me crying. I am very sorry to go away; everybody in Redborough has been so kind to me, and there is always so much going on."

"But in London——" Edward began.

"Oh, that is what everybody says. There is always so much going on in London. That just shows how little they know. Perhaps among the fashionable sets. I don't know anything about that; but not in Kilburn. It's partly like a little village, and partly like a great huge town. You're not supposed to know the people next door; and then they are all just nobody. The men come home to their dinner or their tea, and then there is an end of them. When you are in the best set in a place it makes such a difference. Roland is very kind, and I have nothing to complain of, but I can't bear going back. That's what I was crying for: not so much for having to leave, but for having to go back."

"You are tired of your life too, I suppose?"

"Oh, so I am! but it can't be helped. I must just go back to it, whether I like it or not."

"Would you be glad of an alternative?" asked Edward. He spoke with a sort of wanton recklessness, not caring what became of him.

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"Oh!" said Emma, waiting upon providence, "that is a different thing; perhaps it would be better not: I can't tell. Yes, I think I should, if you ask me. Anything new would be a blessing; but where am I to look for anything new? You see, Roland has his own engagements; you never can interfere with a brother."

It took away her breath when Edward rose from the opposite side where he was and came and sat beside her. "I am going away too," he said; "I want change too. I can't bear the quiet any longer. I want to travel. Will you come with me? We could be married to-morrow morning and start immediately after——"

"Mr. Edward! good gracious!" cried Emma. It took away her breath. This was coming to the point indeed. "Was this what you were thinking of when you asked me to dance the Thursday before last? I never thought of such a thing. I thought it was Hester. Goodness me, what would they all say? Did you know I was coming to-night? Were you only pretending about Hester? Were you struck with me from the beginning, or only just at the last? I am sure I don't know what to say."

"Come with me, that is the best thing to do," Edward said.

CHAPTER X.

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THE HOUR OF NEED.

Catherine stood upon the threshold of her own gate: her house still and vacant behind, the lamps just carried into the vacant place up stairs, the windows beginning to show lights. She stood, herself a shadow, for the moment regardless of the shadow at her feet, looking out into the dim world after the other shadow which went along swift and silent into the darkness. "Edward!" she cried; but he did not hear. He had disappeared before she turned her eyes to the other, who, by this time, had raised herself to her knees, and remained there looking up, her face a paleness in the dim air, nothing more. Catherine Vernon looked at her in silence. She had heard all that had been said. She had heard the girl plead for herself, and it had not touched her heart. She had heard Hester beaten down to the ground by the reproach of her father's shame, and a certain pity had moved her. But a heart, like any other vessel, can contain only what it can contain. What time had she to think of Hester? what room? Edward had been her son, her creed; whoso proved that he was not worthy of faith even in Catherine's interest was her enemy; everything else came in a second place. He had stabbed and stabbed her, till the blood of those wounds seemed to fill up every crevice in her being. How could she think of a second? She looked after him with a cry of sorrow and anger and love that would not die. "Edward!" No doubt he could explain everything

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—he could tell her how it was, what had happened, what was the meaning of it all. Only when he was gone, and it was certain that he meant to explain nothing, did she turn to the other. They looked at each other, though neither could see anything but that paleness of a face. Then Catherine said—

"If you are not hurt, get up and come in. I have to ask you—there are things to explain——"

"I am not hurt: he did not throw me down," said Hester, "it was an accident."

Catherine made an impatient gesture. She did not even help the girl to get up; the dislike of so many years, raised to the tragic point by this association with the most terrible moment of her life, was not likely to yield in a moment, to give way to any sense of justice or pity. She motioned to her to follow, and led the way quickly into the house. The great door was ajar, the stairs and passages still dark. They went up, one shadow following another, without a word. In the drawing-room Marshall had just placed the two shaded lamps, and was closing the windows. His mistress called to him to leave them as they were, and sat without speaking until, after various flittings about the room, he went away. Then she hastily raised the shade from the lamp upon her own table, throwing the light upon her own face and the other. They were both very pale, with eyes that shone with excitement and passion. The likeness between them came out in the strangest way as they stood thus, intent upon each other. They were like mother and daughter standing opposed in civil war. Then Catherine sat down and pointed Hester to another chair.

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"We are not friends," she said, "and I don't think I can ever forgive you; but you are young, and perhaps you are strained beyond your strength. I would not be cruel. Will you let me give you something to restore you, or will you not, before you speak? for speak you must, and tell me what this means."

"I want nothing," said Hester. "If I should be killed, what would it matter? I recognise now that I have no right to your kindness—if that was true——"

"It was true."

"Then I ask your pardon," said the girl, folding her hands. "I would do it on my knees, but you would think that was—for effect. I should think so myself in your place. You do right to despise us: only this—oh, God help us, God help us—I never knew——"

"Girl," cried Catherine roughly, "the man you love (I suppose) has just fled away, so far as I can see, dishonoured and disgraced, and leaving you for ever! And yet you can stop to think about effect. I do not think you can have any heart."

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Hester made no reply. She had reached that point which is beyond the heights of sensation. She had felt everything that heart could feel. There were no more tears in her, nor anger nor passion of any kind. She stood speechless, let any one say what they would to her. It might all be true.

"I do not think you can have any heart," cried her passionate opponent. "If it had been me at your age, and I had loved him, when he threw me from him so, I should have died."

There came a ghost of an awakening on Hester's face, a sort of pitiful smile of acquiescence. Perhaps it might be so. Another, more finely tempered, more impassioned, more high and noble than she, might have done that: but for her, poor soul, she had not died. She could not help it.

Catherine sat in her seat as in a throne, with a white face and gleaming eyes, and poured forth her accusations.

"I am glad of it," she said, "for my part! for now you will be queen's evidence, which it is fit and right your father's daughter should be. Do not stand there as if I had put you on your trial. What is it to me if you have any heart or not? I want information from you. Sit down there and husband your strength. How long has this been going on? It was not the first time he had talked to you of flying, oh no. Tell me honestly: that will be making some amends. How long has this been going on?"

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Hester looked at her with great liquid eyes, dewy in their youthfulness and life, though worn with fatigue and pain. She asked in a low, wondering voice, "Did you hear all we said?"

"I heard—all, or almost all. Oh, you look at me so to accuse me, a listener that has heard no good of herself! I am not sorry I did it. It was without intention, but it was well. I can answer for myself. Do you answer for yourself. How long has it been going on?"

Hester stood still, clasping and unclasping her hands. She had nobody to appeal to, to stand by her: this was a kind of effort to get strength from herself. And her spirit began to come back. The shock had been terrible, but she had not been killed. "What can I say to you beyond what I have said," she cried, "if you heard what we said? There was no more. His life has been intolerable to him for a long time; the monotony, the bondage of it, has been more than he could bear. He has wanted change and freedom——"

Hester thought she was making excuses for Edward. She said all this quickly, meaning to show that these were innocent causes for his flight, motives which brought no guilt with them. She was brought to a sudden pause. Catherine, who had been gazing at her when she began with harsh, intent earnestness, suddenly threw up her hands with a low cry of anguish. She sank back into her chair and covered her face. The girl stood silenced, overawed, her lips apart, her eyes wide staring. The elder woman had shown no pity for her anguish. Hester, on her side, had no understanding of this. She did not know that this was the one delusion of Catherine's soul. Miss Vernon had believed in no one else. She had laughed and seen through every pretence—except Edward. Edward had been the sole faith of her later life. He had loved her, she believed; and she

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had been able to give him a life worthy of him. Heaven and earth! She had heard him raving, as she said to herself, outside. The boy had gone wrong, as, alas, so many have gone: out of a wicked, foolish love, out of a desire to be rich, perhaps. But this was different. A momentary temptation, even a quick recurring error, that can be understood. But that his life should have been intolerable, a monotony, a bondage, that change had been what he longed for—change from her house, her presence, her confidence! She gave vent to a cry like that of a wild animal, full of horror and misery and pain. The girl did not mean to hurt her. There was sincerity in every tone of her voice. She thought she was making his sins venial and defending him. Oh, it was true, true! Through Catherine's mind at that moment there ran the whole story of her later days, how she had used herself to the pretences of all about her, how every one around had taken from her, and snarled at her, eaten of her bread, and drunk of her cup, and hated her—except Edward. He alone had been her prop, her religion of the affections. The others had sneered at her weakness for him, and she had held her head high. She had prided herself on expecting no gratitude, on being prepared, with a laugh, to receive evil for good—except from him. Even now that she should be forced to acknowledge him ungrateful, that even would have been nothing, that would have done her no hurt. But to hear that his past life had been a burden, a bondage, a monotony, that freedom was what he longed for—freedom from her! The whole fabric of her life crushed together and rocked to its foundations. She cried out to Heaven and earth that she could not bear it—she could not bear it! Other miseries might be possible, but this she could not endure.

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Hester stood motionless, arrested in what she had to say. She did not understand the sudden effect of her words; they seemed to her very common words, nothing particular in them: certainly no harm. She herself had experienced the monotony of life, the narrowness and bondage. But as she stood silenced, gazing, there came over her by degrees a faint comprehension; and along with this a sudden consciousness how strange it was that they should be both heartbroken on one subject and yet stand aloof from each other like enemies. It was not possible to mistake that cry—that sudden gesture, the hiding of Catherine's face. Whatever was the cause of it, it was anguish. And was there not cause enough? For a moment or two, Hester's pride kept her back—she had been already repulsed. But her heart was rent by trouble of her own. She made a step or two forward, and then dropped upon her knees, and touched Catherine's arm softly with a deprecating, half-caressing touch.

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"Oh, Catherine Vernon!" she cried, "we are both in great trouble. We have not been fond of each other; but I am sorry, sorry, for you—sorry to the bottom of my heart."

Catherine made no reply. The shock was too great, too terrible and overwhelming. She could not answer nor show that she heard even, although she did hear in the extraordinary tension of her faculties. But Hester continued to kneel beside her. Youth is more simple than age even when it is most self-willed. The girl could not look on and refuse to be touched, and she herself wanted fellowship, human help or even human opposition, something different from the loneliness in which she was left. She touched Catherine's arm with her hand softly two or three times, then after a while in utter downfall and weakness drooped her forehead upon it, clasping it with both her hands, and sobbed there as upon her mother's breast. The room was perfectly still, stretching round them, large and dim: in this one corner the little steadfast light upon the group, the mother (you would have said) hiding her face from the light, hiding her anguish from both earth and Heaven, the daughter with that clinging which is the best support, giving to their mutual misery the pathetic broken utterance of tears.

Catherine was the first to rouse herself. The spasm was like death, but it came to an end. She tried to rise with a little wondering impatience at the obstacle. It was with the strangest sensation that she turned her eyes upon the hidden head lying so near her own, and felt, with an extraordinary thrill, the arms clasped round her arm, as if they never would detach themselves. What new thing was this? Hester had lost all her spirit and power. She had got within the sphere of a stronger than she. She was desolate, and she clung to the only arm that could sustain her. Catherine's first impulse was to snatch her arm away. What was this creature to her—this girl who one way or other had to do with everything that had happened to her, and was the cause of the last blow? She could have flung her away from her as Edward had done. But the second glance moved her more and more strangely. The helplessness had an appeal in it, which would not be resisted. It even did her the good office of withdrawing her thoughts for a moment from the emergency which claimed them all. She half rose, then fell back again and was silent, not knowing what to do. What appeal could be more strong than that of those arms so tightly holding her own? She tried to speak harshly, but could not. Then an impulse she could not resist, led her to lay her other hand upon the drooping head.

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"Hester," she said, gravely, "I understand that you are very unhappy. So am I. I thank you for being sorry for me. I will try, in the future, to be sorry for you. But just now, understand, there is a great deal to do. We must stand between—him," her voice faltered for a moment, then went on clear as before, "between him and punishment. If he can be saved he must be saved; if not, we must save what we can. You have overcome me, I cannot put you from me. Free me now, for I have a great deal to do."

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She had felt, by the closer straining of the clasping arms, that Hester heard every word. Now the girl raised her face, pale, with a look of terror.

"What can you do? Are you able to do it?" she said.

"Able!" said Catherine, raising herself upright with a sort of smile. "I am able for everything that has to be done. Child, get up and help me! Don't cry there and break my heart."

Hester stumbled to her feet in a moment. She could scarcely stand, but her heart sprang up like a

giant—

"I will do—whatever you tell me," she said.

Catherine rose too. She put away her emotion from her as a workman clears away all encumbering surroundings. She made the girl sit down, and went out of the room and brought her some wine.

"Perhaps," she said, "we may help each other; at all events we have a common interest, and we have no time to give to lamentations to-night. The first thing is—but your mother will be unhappy about you. What shall I do? Shall I send her word that you are here and staying with me all night? Your mother is a happier woman than you or I. She will accept the reason that is given her without questioning. Probably she will be pleased. Be calm and rest yourself. I will do all that is needful."

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She went to her writing-table and began to write, while Hester, shattered and broken, looked on. Catherine showed no signs of disablement. The butler came in in his stealthy way while she was writing, and asked if he must "shut up." She said—"No," going on with her writing. "You will go, or send some one, at once to the Heronry with this note. And afterwards you can go to bed. I wish no one to sit up. I expect news, for which I must wait myself. Let all go to bed as usual. No, stop. Go to the White House also and tell Mr. Harry—What do you think, Hester? is it worth while to call Harry?"

She turned round with the clear eyes and self-controlled aspect of use and wont. Even Marshall, who had the skill of a well-trained domestic in spying out internal commotion, was puzzled. She seemed to be asking a question on a matter of business in which the feelings were no ways involved. Hester was not equal to the call upon her, but she made a great effort to respond.

"He is very—anxious."

Catherine made a movement with her footstool which partly drowned the last word.

"You can wait a little, Marshall. I will write a note to Mr. Harry too."

The two letters were written at full speed, and given with a hand as steady as usual into the man's keeping. "Let them be taken at once," Catherine said. Then she began to walk up and down the room talking in her usual tones. "Don't mind me pacing about—it is a habit I have. I can talk best so. It is my way of taking exercise now." She went on until Marshall was out of hearing, then turned upon Hester with a changed tone. "He meant to take you away by the midnight train," she said. "That was so? He cannot leave Redborough till then. I am going to meet him there, and endeavour to persuade him to return. Quiet, child! This is not the moment for feeling. I—feel nothing," she said, putting her hand as nature bids with a hard pressure upon her heart. "We have got to do now. Are you strong enough to come with me, or must I go alone?"

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Hester rose up too, quickly, with a start of new energy. "I can do anything that you will let me do," she said.

"Come, then." But after a moment Catherine put her hands on the girl's shoulders, and drew her into the light. "You are very young," she said, "not twenty yet, are you? Poor little thing! I was full grown before I was brought to this. But show what metal is in you now. Come with me and bathe your face and put yourself in order. We must have no look of excitement or trouble to bring suspicion. Everything is safe as yet. What? Do you know anything more?"

"I know only—what I said," said Hester. "Harry is very anxious. He came to ask if I knew where —*he* was. I did not. He said all was wrong, that no one could put things right but he, that—"

"Yes, yes," Catherine said, with a little impatience; she could not bear any repetitions. "I have told Harry to come here at half-past twelve. If we find *him*, if *he* comes back with us—here is your work, Hester, to see Harry and dismiss him. If Edward is with us, all will be well. If he comes, if he only comes! Oh God! I will deny nothing. I will oppose nothing, let but honour be saved and his good name! And in that case you will see Harry and send him away. But if he does not come ___"

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"He will, he will!—for you."

Catherine shook her head; but a faint smile came over her face, a kindling of hope. Surely, surely the old love—the old long-enduring bond, would tell for something. It could not be possible that he would throw everything—love and duty, and honour, and even well-being—all away—when there was still a place of repentance held out to him. She took Hester to her room, where she dressed herself carefully, tying on her bonnet, and drawing out the bows with an elaboration at which the girl looked on wondering. Then they went down stairs where all was now in half light, one lamp burning dimly in the hall. As Catherine drew the heavy door behind her it sent a muffled echo into the air. It was after eleven o'clock. The world was wrapped in a soft darkness more confusing than blacker night: there was not a creature visible on the road. She had not walked, save for her pleasure, in the sunshine just so far as was agreeable, for years, and it was far to go. To Hester this strange walk through the dark was at once novel and terrible. She did not know what interruptions they might meet. She kept close by her companion, who went along with a free and rapid step, as if she had shaken off half her weight of years. Deep down in the recollection of many a woman of whom the world knows no such history will lurk the recollection of such a walk taken in terror and sorrow, to call back some wanderer, to stop some shame. The actors in such scenes never speak of them, though they may be the noblest in their lives. Catherine said something not uncheerful from time to time, keeping up her own courage as well as her companion's. Nobody noticed them as they came within the lighted streets, which were

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deserted at this late hour, except round the railway station, where Catherine sped along without a pause. The train had not arrived; there were a number of people about upon the platform waiting for it, among them a little group composed of Emma and her trunks, with old Captain Morgan standing like a pillar in the midst of the confused heap. "Wait here and watch," Catherine said, putting Hester into a quiet corner, where the girl stood trembling, gazing at the shifting groups, hardly able to sustain her fatigued and tottering limbs, but following with a kind of fascination the movements of her companion, who seemed to penetrate every knot, to scan every countenance, not a creature there escaping her inspection.

If he had been there, would all this page of history have been changed, and wrong become right again? These strange turns for good or evil, that seem to hang upon the quiver of a balance, are too bewildering for mortal senses. Catherine by that time had no doubt. Had she but found him, quivering with love and strength and passion as she was, she would have saved him still. But he was not there. She made no affectation of secrecy. She called the guard to her, and gave him a succinct reason for wishing to find her nephew. "Some news have come for him since he left the house. Find him for me," she said, with a smile, and a half-crown ready. But by and by she came back to the girl in the corner, reproving her with an impatient touch on her shoulder. "Don't look so scared," she said. "What is there to be frightened for?" She took hold of Hester by the arm. She was trembling from head to foot: for by this time she knew that he was not there.

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There was still the chance left that he might dart in at the last moment, and it was for this reason that she placed herself by the doorway, her face full in the lamplight, with a smile upon it, her look of expectation frank and cheerful. Then came the deafening clang of the arrival, the confusion and bustle and leave-takings, the little pause full of voices and noises, and then the clang of the train getting under way, the sweep and wind of its going, the emptiness and blackness left behind: all so vulgar and ordinary, yet all tragic sometimes as the most terrible of accessories. She drew Hester aside almost violently, and let the other spectators stream away. Among the first old Captain Morgan stalked forth, tired but contented, noticing nobody. Of all people in the world he would least have recognised these two standing in agitation inconceivable, subduing as they could the heart-throbs that took away their breath. When he had got well on his way the two women came out into the light. They were holding by each other, Hester clasping her companion's arm, and guiding her as she had once guided her mother. A sombre cloud had come over Catherine's face. She had allowed herself to hope, and the second disappointment was almost worse than the first revelation. It was all her self-command could do to prevent her from flinging off from her the girl whose share in all this—what was it? perhaps the whole was her doing, perhaps the suggestion of everything, perhaps, God knows, craft enough to make this final effort to recover the boy a failure. Who could say if Hester had not known from the beginning that the attempt would be fruitless? And the other, too, Harry, whom she had called to her by an impulse which seemed now to have been put into her head by some one, and not to be her own. Harry, too. He would be brought into the secret! Her humiliation would be complete. The boy she had scoffed at, the girl she had disliked, turned into her confidants, and Edward, her own, her heir, her son, the successor she had chosen!—Catherine's heart cried out within her with a mother's passion. In the quiet of the country road she could hold her peace no longer. She drew her arm out of Hester's abruptly.

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"No doubt," she said, "no doubt! he was to carry you away, a fine lady like you, with posthorses in a romantic way—not by the vulgar method of a train; and you have deceived me, and lost me my last chance. Edward! Edward! Oh where are you, my boy, my boy?"

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Here, had she but known it, poor Catherine's comedy of human nature was complete. Edward, upon whom she called with tragic passion as great as that of a Constance, was just then approaching Emma, in a fierce farce of self-compensation, determined to make the adventure complete, to cut every tie and tear every remnant of the past to pieces. Her laugh of contempt at the poor farce-tragedy would have been supreme had it been any case but her own.

CHAPTER XI.

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A NIGHT'S VIGIL.

They had been sitting through all the night, examining everything. Catherine was not a woman to be the slave of passion, even when that was the one delusion of her life. She got over it with a stern and fierce struggle before they reached the gate of the Grange, whither Hester followed her, trembling and half stupefied, unable either to resist or to think of any course of action for herself. Catherine paused at the gate, and looked round her with a curious quivering smile. "Here is where I saw him going away," she said; "here is where I heard the last words from him." She laughed; her heart was throbbing with the wildest suffering. She dashed her hands together with a violence of which she was unaware. "Such words!" she cried. It was scarcely one o'clock, but in summer there is little night, and already the air had begun to whiten with some premonition of day. She held up her face to the sky—an old face, with so many lines in it, suddenly smitten as with a death-blow. Her eyes, under the curve of pain, which makes the eyelids quiver, looked up to the pale skies with what is the last appeal of humanity. For why?—for why?—an honest life, an honourable career, a soul that had shrunk from no labour or pain, a hand that never had been closed to human distress—and repaid with misery at the end! Is there no reason in it when God's creature lifts a face of anguish to His throne, and asks why? She paused on the threshold of her

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house, which was desolate, and made that mute appeal. It was beyond all words or crying, as it was beyond all reply. The other, who was the companion of her misfortune, stood beside her, looking, not at heaven, but at her. Hester had got far beyond thinking of her own share in it. Fatigue and excitement had brought sensation almost to an end. She was not angry with Catherine, who had thrown her off. Everything was blurred to her in a sense of calamity common and universal, of which Catherine seemed the sign and emblem. She made no interruption in the silence. And it was only when Catherine turned to go in that she was recalled to a recollection of Hester by her side.

"I think—I had better go home—to my mother," the girl said, looking along the road with a dreamy terror. She was afraid of the dark, the solitude, the distance—and yet what was there left to her but to go home, which she seemed to have quitted, to have fled from, with the idea of never returning, years ago. Catherine put out her hand and grasped her. She was far the more vigorous of the two. She could have carried the girl into the house, where she now half led, half dragged her. They found Harry already waiting for them in great bewilderment and distress. He could not account for the entrance of these two together, or for their apparent union—but Catherine gave him no explanation. She made him sit down and tell her at once everything he knew of the state of affairs: and when this was made plain to her, she flew out upon him with a wrath that made Harry shrink.

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"Why did you leave everything in one person's hands? Is it not a partner's business to look after his own interests? You have piled all upon one man's shoulders. He has had everything to do. It has been too much for his mind—it has turned his head. If it had been yours, what would have happened to you?"

"I have been saying all that to myself, Aunt Catherine," Harry said, humbly; "but you know I am not clever, and poor Ned——"

She stamped her foot on the floor. "Let me have none of your commiserations," she cried. "There is nothing poor about it at least."

She put Hester down at the table with pen and ink to write for her. She had not said a word of compassion to her; this had been the way she had chosen to express her feeling, whatever it was. When Harry had interposed, begging to be allowed to do it, she had stopped him summarily; and had gone on thus, collecting information, dictating to Hester, examining papers with Harry, asking a hundred questions, till morning was blue in the skies. When she saw by that strange light stealing in, how wan and wretched her two companions looked, Catherine rose from her chair. She was not tired—her colour was as fresh and her eyes as bright as ever, her mind full of impatient energy; but the powers of the others had flagged.

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"Go home and rest," she said to Harry. "Have old Rule there to-morrow morning to meet me. I will come to the bank to-morrow—I mean to-day—at eight, before you open. Go home and go to bed."

"Not if I can be of any use to you, Aunt Catherine—or to poor Ned."

Her foot made the same impatient movement upon the carpet. "You can be of no use," she said, "dropping asleep as you are: go and rest; at your age few can do without sleep. And Hester, go too, you can do no more." It was not without a half contempt that she saw the overpowering of their young faculties by that which to her was nothing. There are so many things in which youth has the best of it, that age has a right to its dolorous triumph when that comes. She went down with Harry to the door to let him out, glad of the movement, and stood in the early light for a moment breathing in the fresh air. The birds were all twittering, making their morning thanksgiving, expressing their joy in the new day. Catherine looked out sternly upon the light and gladness in which she had no share. She thought again—should she ever think of anything else?—of the last words she had heard, and of his figure hurrying away in the darkness, deaf to her cry.

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It was a relief to go in again, even to see the poor little lamp flickering, and the light bursting in at every crevice of the ineffectual shutters. When she reached the room in which they had been at work, Hester, who had answered as far as her faculties could to every call upon her, had dropped back into the great chair in which she had been sitting, and had fallen asleep in utter exhaustion. It was a curious scene. The windows were all closed, and candles upon the table still burning: but the light swept in from above, over the top of the shutters, which were not so high as the glass, and lighted up the room in a strange abstract way like a studio or a prison. In the midst of this pale and colourless illumination Hester's white face, with the blue veins showing in it, in an attitude of utter abandonment and exhaustion, pillowed upon the dark cushions of the chair, was the central point; her hand with the pen in it was still on the table, the candles flickering with a yellow uncertain blaze. Catherine went and stood by her for a moment and looked at her. Tears were upon the girl's long eyelashes, her mouth seemed still quivering, the faint sound of a sob came out of her sleep. She looked younger even than she was, like a child that had cried itself asleep. Catherine looked at her with many a thought. John Vernon's daughter, who had all but ruined her father's house, and had wounded her own pride, if not her heart, in the way women feel most—and bitterer still, Edward's love, she, for whom he had planned to betray her own better claims, for whom he would have deserted her, for whom he had ruined her, this time perhaps without remedy. With a strange bitterness she looked at the young creature thus fatally connected with all the miseries of her life. It was not Hester's fault. The table was covered with proofs of her submission and obedience. If it was true that but for her perhaps Catherine's power would never have been disturbed, it was also true that but for her Catherine might have been ruined irretrievably, she and all she prized most. But this argument did not tell in the mind of the woman who stood gazing at her, so much as the look of utter

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infantile weariness, the broken sound of the sleeping sob, the glitter upon her eyelashes. She stood for a long time, and Hester never moved. Then she took a shawl and covered the sleeper as tenderly as her mother could have done it, and began to pace softly up and down in that weird clearness. She did not even extinguish the candles, but left them there amid all the disarray of the table, the scattered papers, covered with notes and figures. The young can sleep, but not the old. The romantic interest would be with Hester worn out with wretchedness and weariness; but the heavier burden was her own.

Perhaps had the truth been pursued to its depths it gave a certain satisfaction to Catherine to find herself at last left to contemplate alone that uttermost and profoundest loss which was hers. The girl slept though her heart might be broken; the woman whose last hope he was, whose faith in human nature was wound up in him, who believed in Edward, but on earth in no one else, slept not, rested not, could not forget. She walked from end to end of the room, her hands clasped, her face in all its comely age paled in a moment to the pallor of an old woman. People had said that her colour was like a girl's still: her eye was not dim nor her natural force abated. But over her there had come this chill in a moment. And where was he, the cause of it all? Flying fast across the country somewhere, directing his way, no doubt, to some port where he could get out of England. For what, oh Heaven, for what? Was there any sacrifice she would not have made for him? He might have had his Hester, his own house like the others, if that was what he wanted. There was nothing, nothing she would have grudged him! She would have asked no gratitude, made no conditions. He should have had his freedom, and his love—whatever he wanted. All this swept through her mind as she went to and fro in that blue clearness of the morning which swept down upon her from the skies over all the weariness and disarray of the night. Catherine did not ask herself what she would have said, all things being well, if she had been asked to consent to the effacing of herself, which now it seemed would have been so easy a solution of the problem. It seemed to her now that in love she would have granted all he could ask for, and in pride she certainly would have done it, scorning to ask how he could resign her so easily. Love and pride combined wrung her heart between them now. Up and down, up and down with a soft monotonous motion she walked unsubdued while the others sank. Her old frame felt no weariness, her old heart was yet high. She could no more sink down and acknowledge herself beaten, than she could drop her head and sleep like Hester. With impatience and an energy unbroken she waited for the day.

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Catherine's carriage stood outside the bank at eight o'clock in the morning, to the wonder yet admiration of the town. "Old as she is, she's an example to the young ones," the people said: though there were darker rumours, too, that one of the young men had gone wrong, and that it was a sharp and speedy inquiry into this that had brought Catherine into the town without delay. The still closed door was opened to her by Harry, who was pale with his sleepless night and with the anxiety from which he could now find no escape. Behind Harry was old Rule, who came forward with a face like a mute at a funeral, his hands held up, his countenance distorted with grief and sympathy. "Oh, my dear lady!" he cried; "oh, Miss Catherine, has it come to this? Who could suppose that you and I should meet together a second time in this way?"

Catherine made a sudden gesture of impatience. "How do you know what the way is until you hear?" she said. She sat down at the table where she had sat so often. Her old look of command, the energy and life of old, seemed in her face; if it was paled and jaded, the others, who were more shaken still than she, had no eyes to see it. The three were deep in their work before the clerks appeared, one by one, all those who were of any weight in the place, or cared for Vernon's, asking anxiously if anything was known of Mr. Edward. When they were met by the astonishing statement "Miss Vernon is here," the announcement was received in different ways, but with great excitement. "Then all is right," said one; but another shook his head. "All must be very wrong," he said, "or Catherine Vernon would not be here." It was the cashier who uttered these words. He was an old servant of the bank, and had been a junior at the time when old Rule was head clerk and Catherine the soul of everything. After a while he was sent for into the mysterious room towards which the attention of every one was now directed. There old Mr. Merridew was shown in with solemnity on his brows, and various others of the fathers of the town. Even outside there seemed a little excitement about to the anxious spectators within. If it had been market-day there might have been a run on the bank. As it was, there were one or two little groups about, anxiously noting the grave faces of the visitors. All day long they came and went; the great books were all spread about upon the table within, and when the door opened sometimes one anxious face would be seen, sometimes another. One of the younger men passing the door saw Catherine herself explaining and urging something upon the chief of the Bank of England in Redborough, who had joined the conclave. It was clearly then, they all felt, a matter of life and death. Some wine and biscuits were taken in in the middle of the day, but no one went away for luncheon, no one had time or leisure for any such thought. Mr. Pounceby, who was Catherine's solicitor, stayed by her all day long, while the others went and came. The clerks, when their day's work was done, left this secret conclave still sitting. The cashier and the head clerk were detained after the others. The younger men went away with an alarmed sense that Vernon's might never open again.

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And this impression was so far justified that the councillors, almost without exception, thought so too. There had been found in Edward's room at the Grange a bundle of papers, securities taken by him from the safe at the bank. The greater part had been abstracted, but the few that were left showed too clearly what methods he had adopted. The bank itself was worth aiding. Its prestige as yet was scarcely touched; but how were these deficiencies to be made up, how was it to be worked without money, and how was its credit to be restored? Catherine had not now the independent fortune which on the former occasion she had thrown into the common stock with

proud confidence in Vernon's. It had all been repaid her, but it had remained in the business, and if Vernon's now were to be made an end of, was gone. That did not affect the mind of the proud old woman. She thought nothing of herself or her fortune. She sat unwearied, meeting one man after another, who a week or two ago had been obsequious to her, without wincing, ready to hear all their doubts, to bear the shakings of their heads, their blame of the culpable negligence that had left everything in one man's hand—their denunciations of Edward, the eager advantage they took of that right to find fault and reproach which is put into the hands of every man who is asked to help. Catherine faltered at first, when she found that to save Edward's character, to smooth away his guilt, and make excuses for him was impossible. These angry men would not hear a word of apology. He was a swindler to them and nothing more. "Pardon me, my dear Miss Vernon, but I always thought the confidence you showed in that young fellow excessive." "He should not have been permitted a tithe of the power he had. It was not just to others who were far more deserving." "If you mean me, I was no more to be matched with Edward than a tortoise is with a hare," said Harry. Catherine put out her hand to him under the table and gave his hand such a pressure, delicate as hers was, as almost made the strong young fellow cry out; but at the same time she silenced him with a look, and bore it all. She bore everything—the long hours of contention, of explanation, of censure, of excuse, of anxious pointing out again and again of the strong points in her case. She argued it all out with every individual, and again with every combination of them, when two or three together would return to the old objections, the difficulties they had originally started, and which again and again had been argued away, with no doubt the natural special pleading of all who speak in their own defence. During this continually repeated process Harry would stand behind her with his face of trouble, watching the countenances of the speakers, now and then blurting out something (the reverse of judicious in most cases), shuffling with uneasy feet upon the floor; sometimes, poor fellow, there being nothing else in his power, holding her elbow with the idea of supporting her, kneeling down to put her footstool straight; while old Mr. Rule, sitting at a little distance, equally anxious, equally eager, not of importance enough to speak, would come in with a quavering "Miss Vernon explained all that, sir—" "As Miss Vernon has already said, sir——"

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She alone showed little anxiety and no distress. She was as dignified as if she had been entertaining them at her table, as she had done so often. She bore those repetitions of the old objections with composure. She did not get impatient, twisting and turning in her chair like Mr. Rule, or crushing her impatience under foot like Harry. She was like an Indian at the stake: or rather like a prime minister in his place in Parliament. The hundred times repeated argument, the old doubt brought up again, all afresh with shakings of the head, the stolid little compliments to her as a woman so much superior to her sex, her masculine understanding (good lack! wonderful, though not equal to those whom she had convinced over and over again, yet who began again next moment where they had left off), all this she put up with without shrinking. Oh, the dulness of them, the unconvincedness, the opaque vision, the impotent hearts! But she made no sign that she perceived. She sat still and held her own. She had the best of the argument in logic, but not, alas, in power. Ten mortal hours had struck by the time the last of her visitors hastened away to his dinner, promising to think of it, yet shaking his head. Catherine leant her head upon the back of her high chair and closed her eyes; the tears came to them in the relief of having no more to say. She was so pallid and so worn now that they both rushed to her in silent terror. She opened her eyes with an astonished look. "I hope you do not think I am going to faint; I never faint," she said.

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Ten hours! She walked to her carriage with a foot lighter and firmer than that of Harry, upon whose fine physique and troubled soul this day had wrought more havoc than the severest football. She would not allow her old friend and servant to come to the door with her.

"Don't tire yourself," she said. "You have so much to do for us yet. I think we shall pull through."

"God bless you, Miss Catherine," said the old man; "if we pull through it will be your doing."

"What merit is that?" she said quickly. "Why should God bless me for that? It is for myself."

"Oh, my dear lady," cried the old clerk. "I know you better than you do yourself. It is for Vernon's and not for you. And Vernon's means the honest living of many a family. It means——"

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"Don't tell me what it means," she cried, putting up her hands. "It means downfall and shame now. It means a broken heart, Mr. Rule."

"No, no," he cried. "No, no, we'll get through. I'll come back if you'll let me, and Mr. Harry will work like a hero."

She gave Harry a strange glance. There was in it a gleam of repugnance, an air of asking pardon. She could not endure the contrast which it was not possible to refrain from making. He, standing by her, so dutiful, so kind, while the other who had ruined her, fled away. She could have struck him with her nervous hand, which now was trembling; she could have made a humble confession to him of the injuries she had done him in her heart. She could bear the old town dignitaries, the men of money, better than this.

"May I go with you?" he said, supporting her with his arm, bending over her with his fair countenance full of trouble and sympathy.

She could have struck him for being so good and true. Why was he true, and the other— Better, better if they had both been alike, both traitors, and left her to bear it by herself.

"No, Harry," she said; "no, Harry, let me be alone."

He kissed her hand, poor boy, with a piteous look, and she felt it wet with a tear. Nor did she

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misunderstand him. She knew it was for her he was sorry. She knew even that he was the one alone who would stand up for the absent, and excuse him and pity him. All this she knew, and it was intolerable to her, and yet the best and sweetest thing that was in her lot.

CHAPTER XII.

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AFTERWARDS.

Hester woke next morning in an unfamiliar room with a consciousness of something strange and terrible that had happened, she could not tell what, that first sensation before memory awakens which is one of the most bitter indications of having entered upon the world of evil. So the guilty pair in Paradise, in the morning of the world, must have woken out of their sleep, and felt, before remembrance came, the sense of ill. She scarcely remembered how she had been transported to that bed. She had slept for sorrow, calamity crushing all her unused faculties, and her first waking sensation was one of trouble and wonder what it was. She had not long to wait before the whole came rushing back upon her mind. She gave a low cry, and all her wounds began to bleed anew—nay, she felt them as for the first time, for last night's terror and commotion and misery were like a dream to her. When she uttered that cry, there was a soft stir in the room, and a little, noiseless figure, and anxious face appeared at her bedside.

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"Mother!" Hester cried, with a voice of dismay.

"Yes, my darling, I am here. Catherine was so good as to send for me. She said you had received a great shock. She went out herself very early, so that you need not be afraid of being disturbed, Hester. And what is it, my dear? She would not give me any satisfaction. She said you had behaved very well, and had been the means of giving her valuable information. I am very glad of that anyhow, Hester. I always told you she was kind in the main. If you and she should be better friends after this it would be a great pleasure to me."

There was anxiety in Mrs. John's plaintive face, but it was confined to the fear lest her daughter's health should be affected, and to a little uncertainty whether the relations with Catherine might be improved or injured by this mysterious event, whatever it was.

"She has been very kind, mamma."

"I was sure of it, my dear. Catherine has a way with her that is not very—*nice*—sometimes. But then we all have some fault. I was to ring for tea as soon as you were awake. That maid, after all, though I have always had a prejudice against her, is kind too, in her way. She has made me most comfortable. I have always observed in my life, Hester, that when you get to know people you so often think better of them than when— That has been my experience. Do you feel able to take some breakfast, dear? or will you get up first? You are to do exactly as you please."

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Hester lay still with a little moan, and made no reply. She would have liked to turn her face to the wall, to beg that the light of day might be shut out, that she might be left to make acquaintance with her trouble. But none of these things were possible. Her mother's gentle face shining upon her with so much easy anxiety, and so little conception of anything under the surface, brought her to herself as nothing else could have done. Why should she be troubled with these anguishes that were beyond her? The girl raised herself with that heroism of necessity which is more effectual than mere will. Mrs. John would weep with her, and make up to her with a thousand caresses for the loss of her lover, when she came to understand it; but she would never understand the burden that was on Hester's soul. The girl said to herself that it must be borne silently, that there must be no further betrayal. She begged her mother to leave her a little, while she got up.

"I have had a long sleep. I am quite myself again," she said.

"You look pale," said Mrs. John, kissing her. "You have had a shock, and you have never told me yet what it was. But perhaps, on the whole, the best thing you can do is to get up; breakfast in bed is not very comfortable. I will go and have a good look at Catherine's pretty things in the drawing-room—she has some nice china—and come back in half an hour or so. Don't hurry, my darling, but it is such a lovely morning; it will do you good to have some fresh air."

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When Hester was left alone she tried to think, but could not. Scenes came back to her as in a theatre—the meeting at the gate, and all that passed there; Catherine's appearance, and the force with which Edward flung her away from him, and set out into the dark, into the unknown. Why—why had he done it? Was it in a sudden fit of passion, which he had repented of? Was it in the terror of being discovered—and out of that suspicion and opposition, and gloomy distrust which had always been in his mind towards Catherine? And then the railway would rise before her mind—the crowd and noise, and wild unnaturalness of everything, the disappointment which to her at heart was a relief. Had he not gone after all? What if a better thought had struck him? What if, when they all went to the bank, thinking him a traitor, they should find him there, throwing light on everything, putting the wrong right? Hester raised her head again when this thought came into her mind. Was it not after all the most likely, the most natural thought? A man does wrong by temptation, by evil companions, by the leading on of one wrong thing after another; but when he is brought to a pause, when there is a distinct call upon him, when he is made to see beyond dispute what his duty is, is it not natural, certain, that he must do it? So she

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said to herself. For a moment all the clouds flew away, a warm exhilaration took possession of her. Then there floated up before her eyes another scene—the table round which they had sat in the dead of night; Harry with his troubled face opposite to her; Catherine paramount in her energy and rapidity; she herself putting down upon paper, so quickly that her fingers alone moved and her mind had no share but the most broken and imperfect one, what she was told to write. If he had come back, if he was working now at the re-establishment of everything, could Edward ever forgive them? What matter, what matter, she cried, so long as he set himself right, so long as Vernon's stood by his help and did not fall? From all this it will be seen that nothing of the despair which in reality and in reflection had overwhelmed all the other chief actors in the drama, had touched Hester. To her everything was still possible, and Edward's vindication, Edward's repentance, the chief, the most natural event of all.

"Well, my dear, are you ready?" said Mrs. John. "There is quite a nice breakfast waiting for you down stairs. Catherine's maid (whom I really was unjust to, Hester, for she is a very nice woman when you come to know her) insisted upon making you some chocolate instead of tea: for it would be more sustaining, she said, in case you should not be disposed to eat. I don't know why she should think you would not be disposed to eat. I told her you always liked your breakfast. But come, my dear, come, I am sure you must want something. Did you find the clean things I brought you? Oh I thought you would be better in a nice clean print, instead of that dark thing; but you have put on the old one all the same."

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"It is best for me to-day," Hester said.

She thought to herself if it all turned out as she hoped, with what joy she would return to her summer garments in the evening, even if it might be that Edward had broken with her for ever. She thought this almost certain, for had she not turned against him? but this was not the question paramount in her mind. There was but one thing all important, that he should have returned to his post. Mrs. John was greatly surprised at the wisdom of that prevision on the part of Catherine's maid. How could she have foreseen that Hester, a healthy girl, with generally a healthy appetite, would turn away almost with loathing from the dainty food, the pretty tray, the careful provision made for her? She swallowed the chocolate hastily at her mother's entreaty: the very air of the house, those stairs and passages, all flooded with light, which had painted themselves on her recollection in the darkness, filled Hester with a sense of the intolerable. She made haste to get out, to get away, to take her mother home.

"Don't you think it will only be polite to wait till Catherine comes back?" Mrs. John said. "You must remember, dear, that she has been very kind to you; and nothing could be kinder than her note, and sending the carriage for me this morning, and all. I think we ought to wait and thank her for her kindness. She will think it strange that we should go away without a word. Well, if you think it really will be better to come back in the afternoon, Hester—Has Catherine gone out to spend the day? That is quite unusual, surely for her—but however, of course it is not our business. Lean on my arm, my dear. I am sure, as you say, the air will do you good."

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The air did not do Hester good: the shade of the holly-tree lying motionless upon the road, the half open gate at which Catherine had appeared in the darkness, the strange intelligence that seemed to be in every bush, as if these inanimate things knew and remembered what had been done and said in secret, seemed to bring conviction, and force back upon her all the scenes she had gone through of which her innocent mother knew nothing. And every inch of the way recalled her own proud, eager thoughts of the night before, the desperation with which she had gone to that meeting, determined upon her protest and refusal, yet never sure that she would ever retrace these steps again. To retrace them now as she was doing, with her mother's gentle talk in her ears, the occasional mild question which it was so easy to elude, the praises of Catherine which her supposed kindness called forth so easily, seemed an incredible thing. Mrs. John enjoyed the walk. It was seldom she went out in the morning, and the excitement of her daughter's absence all night, of Catherine's explanations, of the drawing together of some new and closer bond between Hester and the head of the Vernon society—the most important person of all the kindred—gave her a secret exhilaration. There had not been such a sensation in the Vernonry for months as that which had been caused that morning by the sight of Catherine's well-known brougham, sent for Mrs. John! It might be that in future this would be no rare sight: it might be—but the poor lady scarcely knew how to contain the satisfaction with which she saw the vista opening up before her of Hester's promotion and favour with Catherine. Valuable information! She was proud of what seemed to her like the highest praise. She always knew that her Hester, so much superior as she was to other girls—if Catherine but knew her as she deserved to be known. And then she asked with pleasant expectation—

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"What was the information, Hester, that you gave Catherine? I am so glad that you were able to tell her something she didn't know. I was quite in a flutter when I got her note last night; but of course it was perfectly right for you to stay when she wished it. I shall tell her I am so much obliged to her for having taken such good care of you. It gave me quite a fright for the moment, but I soon got over it. And Emma, you know, went away at last by the night train."

Thus Mrs. John diverted her own attention and never pressed a question. But it is impossible to tell how deserted, how silent, how far out of the world and life the little rooms at the Vernonry looked after the agitation of the night. Hester could not rest in them: the summer forenoon seemed a twelve-month long. She could not take up any of her usual occupations. She was afraid to meet any one, to be questioned perhaps more closely than her mother had questioned her. Her heart was away, it was not in this place. In the pauses of Mrs. John's gentle talk she felt her own thoughts thronging upon her almost audibly. It seemed impossible that other people, that even her mother, unsuspecting as she was, should not find her out. And how slow, how slow were those

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sunshiny minutes, sixty of them in an hour! The time of the early dinner came, and again Hester turned from the food. Mrs. John began to be alarmed. "If it goes on like this I shall have to send for the doctor," she said.

Hester hastened out as soon as the meal was over to escape from her mother's comments. It seemed to her that she recognised some new knowledge in the keen glances of the sisters, and in Mr. Mildmay Vernon's grin as he sat over his newspaper in the summer-house. And she was afraid of the old Morgans, who had more insight. The surroundings of the house altogether were odious to her—unnecessary things that had nothing to do with those real affairs and mysteries of living which were being solved elsewhere. She asked herself wistfully, whether it was not time for her to go back: though if Catherine had not returned, what could she do but cause suspicion if she went to the empty house? To be even in the empty house would be something—it would be so much nearer the scene in which everything was going on. While she stood with her hand curved over her forehead looking out upon the road, with her eyes "busy in the distance shaping things that made her heart beat quick," the old captain came up to her. She thought he was paler than usual, and his eyes were troubled. He had laid his hand on her shoulder before she heard his approach, so absorbed was she in her own thoughts. He took her by the arm in his fatherly way—

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"Come with me, Hester, and talk to my old woman," he said.

It was with a great start that she turned to him, trembling with nervousness all unknown to the Hester of yesterday.

"Is she ill?" she cried, scarcely knowing what she said; and then with a vague smile, "I forgot. Emma is gone, and she is missing—"

"It is not Emma we are thinking of. Hester, tell me," said the old man, leading her away with her arm in his, "what is this about Catherine? What has happened? Your mother told us you were there all night, and now to-day—"

"What do they say has happened?" cried Hester with a gasp of suspense.

"I cannot make head nor tail of it. I hear that one of the young men has gone wrong; that Catherine is at the bank; that there are great defalcations; that he went off last night—I can testify," cried Captain Morgan, querulously, "that he did not go away last night, for I was there."

Hester looked up at him with a face from which all colour had fled.

"Is it known who it is? are you sure he has not come back? Oh, I have a feeling," she cried, "a feeling in my heart that he has come back!"

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"My child," said the old captain, "you may trust her and me. Whatever it is, it is safe with her and me."

Mrs. Morgan was sitting at the window in her summer place; her placid brow had a cloud upon it, but was not agitated like her husband's.

"Have you come back to us, Hester?" she said. "We thought we had lost you. If you can satisfy his mind with anything you can say, do it, my dear."

"What can I say?" Hester cried. "We are all in great trouble. I don't know which is the greatest, but I cannot tell you secrets that are not mine. Dear Mrs. Morgan, tell the captain so. Whatever I know it is by accident. I think I shall die with anxiety and suspense, but there is nothing I can say."

"My dear, you will not die, you will live to be anxious many another day. Rowley, my old man, you hear the child. We must not ask her another question. Wait, as you have waited many a time before. It is all in the Lord's hands."

The old man was wiping the moisture from his forehead: he had seated himself as soon as he came in, his old limbs were shaking under him. His large, colourless hands shook, holding his handkerchief.

"Mary," he said, "if it is my flesh and blood that has brought this disturbance into the place, that has seduced her boy, and brought down ruin on her house, how am I ever to lift my head again?"

The old lady looked at him with pathetic eyes, in which there was a suffering as acute as his own, softened and made almost bright by the patience and calm that were habitual to her.

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"Rowley, we are not thinking of Catherine, we are thinking of ourselves," she said.

And then there was a pause. It seemed to Hester that her own brokenheartedness was a sort of child's passion in comparison. She said humbly—

"Will you tell me what you are afraid of? There is nobody blamed but one. There is not a name spoken of but one. I don't know if that is any comfort to you, Captain Morgan."

"And the one is her boy, the apple of her eye, the only one that she has trusted, her choice out of all the world," the old lady said. "Oh be silent, be silent, my old man! What is your pride to that? I would rather I had a share of the burden—I would like to be suffering with her." The tears stood in the deep wells of those old eyes, which had wept so much. She was past weeping now. "The Lord forgive him and bring him back," she said.

"You mean punish him, you mean give him over to the powers of darkness that he belongs to! What does he deserve, a man that has used a woman like that?"

"I am not asking what he deserves. I will tell you what he would get if he would come back. Pardon!" said the old woman with a sob, instinctively putting out her old soft hands.

"I am not for pardon," said the captain vehemently, his head moving in his agitation, his hands shaking. "I am for every soul bearing its own burden. Here is a woman that has spread prosperity around her. She has been kind, even when she has not been merciful. The grateful and the ungrateful, she has been good to them all. She has been like the sun shining and the rain raining upon both just and unjust. And here is the end of her, stung to her heart by the child of her bosom. For it will be the end of her. She is a grand woman. She won't bear being deceived."

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"Do not say that," said Hester; "she is so strong, stronger than any of us—if you had seen her last night!"

"Where could I have seen her last night?" he said quickly; then, with a smile, "that is all you know, you children. Yes, stronger than any one of you, able to do everything. Do you remember the French boy in Browning's ballad, Hester, that could not bear it when his Emperor asked if he were wounded? 'I'm killed, sire!' That is like Catherine. She stands like a tower. I can see her in my mind's eye. She needs no sleep, no rest: but she is killed for all that."

Hester rose to her feet as he spoke in an excitement she could not control.

"I must go," she said. "I must go—I might be wanted."

The old man rose and hobbled out after her. He followed her to the gate.

"I will wait while you get your hat. I am coming with you," he said. "We cannot rest, Hester, neither you nor I."

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Mrs. John was dozing in her chair as she generally did in the afternoon. She opened her eyes and said, "Are you going for a walk, dear?" then closed them tranquilly again. The very atmosphere in the brown wainscotted parlour breathed of peace and quiet uncongenial with any such throbbings as those in Hester's heart. She joined the old man, who was waiting for her at the door, and they went on together, saying little. The great window in the Grange where Catherine usually sat commanding the road was vacant. There was a certain deserted air about the place. They knew without a word that Catherine was still out of it.

"It is too far for you to go," Hester said.

Though they had not spoken for a long time they understood each other *à demi-mot*.

"It is too far for me," said he, "but what does that matter? everything will soon be too far for me. Let me go on while I can."

They walked as far as the bank, where their anxious eyes made out the people lingering about, the air of curiosity and excitement. Old Captain Morgan hobbled up to Mr. Merridew, who was making his way out with a serious face. "You will excuse me for my anxiety, sir," he said, "but will you tell me if Miss Vernon is there, and what is going on?"

"That is an easy question you are asking me," said Mr. Merridew, eyeing him closely; "certainly Miss Vernon is there."

"I am her near relation," said the old man, "and you are connected with her by marriage."

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"I know very well who you are, Captain Morgan: a distinguished officer, though people have not found it out here. If you can lend Miss Vernon substantial help I advise you to do it at once."

Captain Morgan drew back a little: he gave Hester a pathetic glance. They retired slowly with lingering steps from the vicinity of Vernon's. They understood all without knowing anything.

"There is the bitterness of having nothing," said the old captain, "and that man knew it, Hester. I would coin myself if I could, for her, and yet I cannot help her." Neither of them knew about business, nor how men like Mr. Merridew, who had been listening all day long to Catherine's explanations and arguments without being moved, could save the bank still if they would. But they felt in their hearts the dull opposition of his face, the shake of his head, the nature of his advice to one whom he knew to be a poor man, to help her now. "Money is a wonderful thing," said Captain Morgan; "it can do so much and yet so little. If you or I were rich as we are poor, we could make Catherine think for half an hour that she had surmounted everything."

"Why for half an hour, Captain Morgan?" said Hester.

"Because, my dear, at the end of that time Vernon's being safe, there would come back upon her that from which neither heaven nor earth can deliver her."

"Oh, Captain Morgan, do not say so. Cannot Heaven, cannot God, deliver from everything?" cried Hester, with a sense of horror.

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"Ay, in a way that He uses always at the end—by death. At least we think death will do that for us; but it is only a guess even then. How otherwise?" said the old man, raising his dim old eyes beneath their heavy lids. "What is done cannot be undone. If the boy were to be touched with compunction too late and come back, even that would not restore the past."

"Why not?" she said, "why not? We could forgive him." It was the first acknowledgment she had made of any share in the catastrophe.

"Forgive him! You speak as if that could change anything! What is your forgiveness? You seem to think it is a thing, not so many words." Then after they had gone a little while in silence the old man burst forth again. "You could forgive him! A man wants not forgiveness, but to make up for his sins. You think it is like giving him a fortune to give him your pardon, as if he could set up again, and make a new beginning upon that. Forgiveness may save a man's soul, but it does not save his honour or his life. You could have him back and let him live upon you, and eat out your

hearts with his baseness trying to make it show like virtue. But Catherine is too noble a creature for that," cried the old captain. "Thank God she has never been broken down to that."

This torrent of words overwhelmed Hester; they had turned into the quiet road again, and the girl fell into a low sobbing and weeping as she went. She was too much overstrained to be able to control herself. Yet her heart struggled against this sentence.

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"If you love any one is it only while he is good?" she said. "Is it noble to cast him from you because he has gone wrong? Then what is love or faithfulness? Are they nothing—nothing?"

She knew now that he had not come back. Honour had not moved him, nor love, nor any nobler impulse. She could have flung herself upon the earth in her misery. She felt that a touch now would be too much—that she could bear nothing further. And her companion saw that she was beyond the reach of any argument. He was silent, and they moved slowly along together, he tottering on his aged limbs, scarcely able to get along.

"Soon everything will be too far for me," he said with a half-pleased, almost satisfied nodding of his head. It took them a long time to get home, and the old captain was so worn out that he could not rise from his chair again that evening. He and his old wife sat sadly, saying something to each other once in half an hour. They could think of nothing but Catherine. They kept up their broken musing discussion upon her and her fate as the slow summer evening again crept silently by.

But Hester could not rest. She satisfied her mother easily that it was right she should go back to the Grange and find out if she could be of use.

"It is what I was going to suggest, my dear," said Mrs. John. "If Edward Vernon is away, as you say, and nobody with her, she must be lonely. And if there is any trouble besides—though you have never rightly explained to me what it was. No no, dear, I don't mean to say it is your fault. No doubt you have told me, and I have not taken it up. To be sure, Hester, you must go; and though I cannot bear to be without you, yet if Catherine wants you, and she is in trouble, stay. I am sure she would do as much for me," said the simple soul, without any cold breathings of doubt. She went to the gate with Hester, and when she came back could not help giving her neighbours a little sketch of the state of affairs. "My Hester has gone back to the Grange," she said, "she will probably stay there all night. Catherine Vernon wrote me the nicest note to tell me my child had been of so much use to her; that is always gratifying to a mother."

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"Of use!" cried the ladies both together. "Gracious goodness, what can be going to happen? Hester of use!" cried one sister. "And to Catherine!" said the other. "Dear Catherine, she tells you so to please you—when probably she is thinking you the greatest bore—"

"She likes something new to experiment upon," said Mr. Mildmay Vernon with a snarl. Mrs. John was much discouraged by this reception of her news. She said—

"You little know my child if you think she will be experimented upon," holding her head high; but when she got indoors she cried a little over their ill-nature. If it had been one of them who had been chosen how different would have been their tone. Had the brougham been sent express for Miss Matilda or Miss Martha, what airs they would have given themselves! and Mrs. John knew that she had given herself no airs: she had not said a word. But she could not be silent about the promotion of her child.

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CHAPTER XIII.

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AN INTERRUPTION.

Catherine was in her usual chair in the familiar room where she had lived for so many years. These walls had witnessed most of the pleasantnesses and disappointments of her life; within them she had grown into that amused spectatorship of all the pranks of human creatures which it had pleased her to think was her characteristic attitude, indulgent to everybody, seeing through everybody. They had never seen her in the aspect which she bore now, beaten down under the stroke of fate. She was too far gone even to be conscious of the extraordinary irony of life which had made of the one only creature to whom she had been consciously unjust, whom she had considered from her childhood as an enemy, her sole ministrant and sympathiser now. But she was not conscious even of Hester's presence, who, overpowered by a great awe of the suffering which she shared, kept herself in the background, recognising, as so few watchers do, that she was there for the sake of the sorrowful woman whom she watched, and not at all for her own. Catherine lay back in her chair, her head thrown back, her eyelids half closed. She did not move, except now and then to put up her hand and dry the moisture which collected slowly under her eyelids. It could not be called tears. It was that extorted dew of pain which comes when the heart seems pressed and crushed in some giant grasp. She was not thinking, any more than it is inevitable to think as long as life remains. She was only suffering, nothing more. She could not make any head against it. Her last stronghold had fallen. This it is which makes calamity so terrible to the old. She could not get beyond it. There was nothing, nothing in her path but this, blocking it across with a darkness that would never be dispersed. If he had died she would have known she could not remain long behind him, and the gloom would have been but a mist between; but he had not died. The thought of searching for him through the world, of holding out succour to him when he came to need, of forgiving, that last prerogative of love, was scarcely in

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her nature. It was hers rather to feel that deep impossibility of re-beginning, the misery and pain of any struggle to make the base seem noble, which is as true a sentiment as the other. She could not have done it. To many women it is the highest form of self-abnegation as it is the bitterest lot that can be borne on earth; but to Catherine it would not have been possible. The blow to her was final. There was but one thing—to fight for Vernon's to the last gasp, to ward off disgrace and failure from the name, to keep the ground it had occupied so long, against possibility, against hope; but after that no more—no more. She had borne herself bravely as long as any eye was upon her, betraying nothing; and had sat down to table and tried to eat, with that utter self-mastery which will sustain the life it loathes with sedulous care so long as it is necessary—talking to Hester at intervals, giving Marshall directions as if nothing had happened. She had been first impatient, then satisfied to find the girl there. Her presence was a help in that needful struggle.

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Catherine went up stairs after dinner as usual. Nothing was changed; but when she had attained to that shelter, she could do no more. She put back her head and closed her eyes, and gave herself up to the endurance of her death-blow. At the other end of the room Hester sat motionless. A keen-sighted spectator would have seen the outline of her figure in her dark dress, but nothing more. She was watching, forgetting her own share, intent upon the other. Her mind was full of what the old captain had said, "I'm killed, sire." Hester watched with a great awe, wondering if even thus, in the silence, without any more demonstration, a woman might die. She thought in her heart it would be well; but being so young she was afraid. And the silence was so deep, more deep than life could tolerate. She watched eagerly for that sole movement, the lifting of Catherine's hand to dry away the moisture from her eyes.

This stillness was broken suddenly by a loud knocking at the door—a continued volley of knocks, accompanied by the sound of voices outside. Then this sound surged inwards, and hasty steps were heard rushing up stairs. Hester's heart leaped to her mouth. It could not be that *he* would come back with such a noise and outcry; but yet a sort of frantic hope took possession of her as she rose to her feet. Catherine had raised herself too, and sat with her eyes widely open fixed upon the door. They had not long to wait. The door was flung open, dashing against a cabinet which stood near, with a superfluity of noise and emphasis; and, sweeping away the silence before her, and every possibility of calm, Ellen Merridew burst into the room, her eyes inflamed with crying, her fair countenance streaked with red, her light locks standing up round her face. She was followed by her husband, trying to hold her back, and by Marshall in the rear, eager—under a respectable semblance of attending the hasty visitors—to give accuracy to the floating suspicions of the servants' hall, and find out what it was all about. Ellen rushed in, and gazed about her wildly.

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"Where is he?" she cried. "Oh, Aunt Catherine, where is he? You are hiding him, I said you would hide him, whatever he did. Oh, is it nothing to you if he goes and ruins people that never did him any harm?—young people like us that have all our life before us, and a dear baby to be turned out upon the world. Oh, Aunt Catherine, if you have any heart at all, where is he, where is he? I'll have him to justice!" cried Ellen. "I'll not sit under it. I won't—not if he should kill me! I want Edward. Where is Edward? I sha'n't go out of this till you give him up to me. He has ruined us, he has ruined us!" cried the excited creature, bursting into a transport of passionate tears.

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There had been a moment of bewildered struggle in Catherine's face; then she rose up with what seemed to the excited newcomers her usual composure.

"What does all this mean?" she said, in her quiet voice.

Hester had shut the door upon the servant's curiosity; Ellen crying violently, and poor Algernon, endeavouring vainly to console her, stood between the two, in the centre of the room. It was all that poor young Merridew could do not to weep too.

"I am sure you will forgive her, Miss Vernon," he said, in faltering tones. "We are nearly out of our senses. Oh, don't cry, my dearest; whatever they do they can't part us, and I'll work for you and baby. I'll work till I drop. Miss Vernon, if Edward's here—she doesn't mean any harm. She is just off her head, poor girl! and baby not a month old yet. If you will only let us see him, I'll pledge my word—"

"Algy, hold your tongue!" cried Ellen amidst her sobs, stamping her foot. "Hold your tongue, I tell you. She'll never, never give him up—never till she's forced, I know that. She has always liked that fellow better than the whole of us put together. And we've every one kotowed to him for her sake. He's been the head of everything, though he was nothing but a poor— And as frightened of her as a dog, and hated her all the time. Oh yes, Aunt Catherine, you may believe me or not, but whenever there was a word about you, Edward was always the worst. Of course we all had our remarks to make, I don't say anything different; but he was always the worst. And now he's gone, and led Algy to his ruin," she cried, with another wild outburst. "We have lost every penny. Do you hear me, Aunt Catherine, do you hear me? We're ruined, with a dear baby not a month old, and I that have never got up my strength. Oh yes, Algy, yes, dear. I know you'll work till you drop. But what good will that do to me, to have you work yourself to death, and to be left a widow at my age, with a baby to support? And, Aunt Catherine, it will all be your fault," cried Ellen. "Yes, it will be your fault. If you hadn't made such a fuss about him, who would have ever trusted him? It was because of you I gave my consent. I said Aunt Catherine will never let him come to harm. And now here it has all come to smash, and me and Algy are ruined. Oh, how can you have the heart? and a dear innocent baby without a word to say for himself! And me at my age—and poor Algy that thought he was making so good a marriage when he got one of the Vernons—"

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"Nelly, Nelly, darling!" cried the poor young fellow, "I married you because I loved you, not because you were one of the Vernons."

"And he had a good right to think so," said Ellen pushing away his caressing arm. "And they all thought so—every one; and now they've turned against me, and say I'm extravagant, and that I've ruined him. Oh! me to have ruined him that thought I was making a man of him! Aunt Catherine! Will you let us all be sacrificed, every one, only to keep Edward from harm?"

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Catherine Vernon had sunk into her chair, but there was something of the old look of the spectator at a comedy again upon her face. The evening was beginning to fall, and they did not see the almost ghastly colour which had replaced the wonderful complexion of which everybody once spoke.

"Make her sit down, Algernon, and stop this raving," she said. "What has happened? I know nothing of it. If you have any claims upon Vernon's you will be paid with the rest—if we stand, till the last penny, if we fall, to the utmost that can be paid. I cannot say any more."

They both sat down and gazed at her with consternation on their faces; even Ellen's tears dried up as by magic. After she had stopped, they sat staring as if stupefied. Then Ellen got up, and threw herself at Catherine's feet with a cry of wild dismay.

"Aunt Catherine! you don't mean to say that you cannot help us, that you cannot save us? Oh, Aunt Catherine! don't be angry with me. I did not mean to make you angry. I was always silly, you know. You will help us, you will save Algy, you will pay the money, won't you?" She crept close to Catherine, and took her hand and kissed it, looking up piteously, with tears streaming down her face. "You'll do it for me, Aunt Catherine? Oh, though I am silly I am fond of my husband. And he's so good; he's never said it was my fault. And I always knew you would put it right. Aunt Catherine! you will put it right?"

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Her voice rose into a shrill, despairing cry; then she dropped down helpless, sobbing and moaning, but still holding by Catherine's hand and her dress, whatever she could grasp at, in a passion of incredulity and despair.

Then Catherine, who had been so stately, sank back into her chair.

"I can't bear any more," she said, "I can't bear any more. For the love of God take her away!"

But it was only the sudden appearance of Harry which put an end to this painful scene. He gathered his sister up in his arms, while her husband was ineffectually intreating and reasoning with her, and carried her out of the room, with a severity and sternness which silenced the young pair.

"Look here," he said, taking them into the deserted library which had been Edward's room, "we are all in the same box. He has ruined her and us all. You, out of your own confounded folly, the rest of us—I can't tell you how. He has ruined *her*. God—forgive him!" cried Harry, with a long pause, bringing out the last words with a violent effort. "But, look here! The only hope we have of pulling through is in her. They can't let Catherine Vernon be ruined in Redborough. I don't think it's in the heart of man to do it; but if we drive her into her grave, as you've been trying to do——"

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"Oh, Harry, how dare you say so! I only went to her—where should I go?—and I thought it would be all right. I thought it was dreadful, but I never believed it, for I know Aunt Catherine——"

"Ellen, hold your tongue, for God's sake! If we kill her, it's all up with us. Hasn't she got enough to bear? I brought a cab when I knew you were here. Take her home, Algy, and keep her quiet, and let's meet and talk over it like men," Harry said, severely.

He had never so asserted himself in all his life before. They hurried her out between them to the cab, much against Ellen's will, who wanted explanations, and to know if it was true that Aunt Catherine couldn't, couldn't if she would; and then told them, sobbing, that if it was so, none of them could afford to pay for a cab, and why, why should ruined people spend a shilling when they had not got it? The cabman heard part of these protestations, and Marshall another part. But on the whole both Algernon and Harry were more occupied with her in her transport, more anxious for its consequences, more tender of her, than if she had been the most self-commanded and heroic woman in the world.

When this tempest of interruption swept away, Catherine was still for a few minutes more. Then she called Hester to her in a voice of exhaustion.

"I think," she said, "it has done me no harm. Anything is better than that which—is always behind. And I must do nothing to hurt myself before to-morrow. Was not Harry there? He may have something to tell me. Let him come and say it to you. You are quick witted, and you will understand; and if it is worth writing, write it down. I will not take any part. I will keep still here. If it rouses me, so much the better. If not, you will listen for me with your young ears, and forget nothing. I must save myself, you see, for to-morrow."

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"I will forget nothing," Hester said.

Catherine smiled faintly, with her eyes closed.

"I had thought of making you bring me some wine. There is some Tokay in the cellar; but one always pays for a strong stimulant, and this is the better way. You are young, and you are a Vernon too. Bend your mind to it. Think of nothing but the business in hand."

"I will," said Hester, with solemnity, as if she were pronouncing the words before a judge.

Catherine took hold of her dress when she was going away.

"One thing," she said. "I think you and I have hated each other because we were meant to love each other, child."

"I think I have always done both," said Hester.

The faint sound that broke through the stillness was not like Catherine's laugh. She patted the girl's arm softly with her hand. Their amity was too new to bear caresses.

"Now go and do your work, for your honour and mine," she said.

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It appeared that Harry had much to say. It was strange to have to say it all to the young and eager listener, her eyes glowing with interest and anxiety, who was not content with any one statement, but questioned and investigated till she had brought out every point of meaning, while the real authority sat by silent, her eyes closed, her hands clasped, like an image of repose. Both the young people kept their eyes upon her. There was not a movement which Hester did not watch, while she exerted her faculties to comprehend everything that Harry told her, and put down everything that seemed at all important. The impulse carried her over her own share of the individual misery. Everything else disappeared before the paramount importance of this. When all that Harry had to say was said, there arose a silence between them which had the effect which nothing before had of rousing Catherine. She opened her eyes and looked at them kindly.

"Everything has been done as I wished," she said. "I have gleaned something, and the rest you will tell me, Hester, to-morrow. It has been a rest to me to hear your voices. You can expect me, Harry, at the same hour."

"Is it not too much for you, Aunt Catherine? It is everything for us that you should come."

"I will come," she said. "It is easier than staying at home. Fatigue is salvation. Now I am going to bed, to sleep. Oh, I mean it. I cannot do my work without it. You will come too in the morning, Hester, when I send for you? Then, good-night."

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They watched her go away with her step still stately. Her faithful maid, whom Mrs. John had found so kind, but who had not always been kind, was waiting for her. The two young people stood and looked after her with eyes of tender respect and awe.

"I thought once," said Hester, in a hush of subdued feeling, "that she might have died sitting in her chair."

"Ah," said Harry, who had a little more experience, "it is seldom that people get out of it so easily as that. I want to tell you something more if it will not—upset you more."

Hester smiled.

"Is there anything that can upset me more?" she said.

He looked at her wistfully. He did not know what her individual part in this trouble had been; whether Edward was more to her than another, or what the position was in which they stood to each other.

"I don't know how to take it," he said, "or how to understand it. There are news of—Edward."

The last gleam of hope shot across Hester's mind.

"He is coming back?" she said, clasping her hands.

Harry shook his head.

"Will you come with me to the door? It is such a lovely night."

She had not the courage or the presence of mind to say no. She went down stairs with him, where the lamps were lighted again, and out to the gate—the same hour, the same atmosphere as last night. Was it only last night that all had happened? She could have turned and fled in the tremor, the horror of the recollection. Just there she lay at Catherine's feet. Just there Catherine had stood and listened.

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Hester stood her ground like a martyr. She knew she must learn to do so, and that it would not be possible to avoid the place made so bitter by recollection. Harry did not know how to speak. He shifted uneasily from one foot to another. "He has been traced to town; he got in at the junction, not here. He reached London this morning, very early—with a lady."

"With a lady!"

Hester had expected a great shock, but the astonishment of this took its sting away.

"They left this afternoon, it is supposed to go abroad," Harry said.

"Still with the lady? That is very strange," said Hester, with a little quiver in her lips.

"There is reason now to suppose that he—married her in the meantime."

Hester had grasped by accident the post of the gate. She was glad she had done so. It was a support to her, at least. Married her! It gave her no immediate pain in her astonishment, which was unspeakable. In the dusk Harry did not see her face. He had no conception of the real state of the case. The fact that Edward had been discovered with another woman had confused Harry and diverted the natural suspicions which had risen in his mind when he had found Hester so linked with Catherine after the discovery of Edward's flight. He watched her with a little alarm, wondering and anxious. But the only sign of any emotion was the tightening of her hand upon the iron gate.

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"You will know," he said, "whether it will be best to say anything of this. If it will hurt her more, let it alone till the crisis is past."

"If it will hurt her—more? I do not think anything—can hurt her more."

"And you are nearly over-worn," he said, with a tender and pitying cadence in his voice. "I can't say spare yourself, Hester. You are the only one she deserves nothing from. She ought to feel that: if he is gone who owes her everything, yet you are standing by her, who never owed her anything."

Hester could not bear it any longer. She waved her hand to him and went in—into the house that was not hers, where there was no one who had a thought to bestow upon her. Where was there any one? Her mother loved her with all her heart, but had nothing to say to her in this rending asunder of her being. She thought she was glad that it was all happening in a house which was not her home, which after, as Harry said, the crisis was past, she might never need to enter again. She went up stairs, to the unfamiliar room in which she had spent the previous night. There she sat down in the dark on the bed, and looked at it all, passing before her eyes, like a panorama. For this was the only description that could be given. The conversation just recorded occurred over again, as if it had been in a book. "With a lady!" "They left this afternoon." "Reason to suppose that in the meantime—" And then this talk, suspended in the air as it seemed, came to a pause. And Hester, through the interval, saw all her own long stormy wooing, its sudden climax with so much that was taken for granted—"My only love!—and I am your only love." That was all true. Those agitated scenes, the dances that were nothing but a love duel from beginning to end, the snatches of talk in the midst of the music and tumult, the one strange blessed moment in the verandah at home, the meeting so tragical and terrible of last night. That was a sort of interlude that faded again, giving place to Harry's steady subdued voice—

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"Married her in the meantime! Married her!"

Hester said these words aloud, with a laugh of incredulous dismay and mockery. The sound terrified herself when she heard it. It was Catherine's laugh made terrible with a sort of tragic wonder. Married her! Had there been no place for Hester at all, nothing but delusion from beginning to end?

CHAPTER XIV.

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THE SETTLEMENT.

The records of the next few days were agitated and full of excitement. Day after day Catherine spent at the bank, immersed in calculations and consultations with every one who could throw the slightest light upon the matter. Everything oozed out by degrees, and it was said now that Edward was being hunted down by detectives, now that he had escaped altogether, now that his defalcations were so tremendous that nothing but absolute ruin was possible for Vernon's, now that there was enough left to make a fight upon if only the creditors would be merciful, and give time, and have patience. The usual panic with which such news is received was somehow tempered in this case. It was thought in the district that Catherine Vernon was enormously rich, and independent of the bank, and when it was known that she had not abandoned it, but in her old age had come back, and was in the office every day, struggling to retrieve affairs, there was nobody short of the financial authorities of the place who did not believe that all was safe. Catherine Vernon would not see any harm come to the bank; Catherine Vernon would see everybody paid. This popular faith held up with a certainty of obstinate prepossession which was worth so much solid capital to the tottering house. Catherine herself placed everything she had in the world in the common stock. She it was who took the lead in all the discussions. She rejected the provisions for her own comfort which everybody concerned was anxious to make. The prevailing feeling among all who had any power was at first that the re-establishment of the whole concern was hopeless, but that enough might be saved out of the wreck to enable Catherine to end her days in peace. To this she opposed a determined negative. She would have no arrangement made on her behalf. "Do you think I want," she cried, "to end my days in peace? I am ready to die fighting, on the contrary, rather than sacrifice the place my father lived and died in and his father before him. Don't speak of peace to me." It was when they perceived that she was immovable in this point and was determined to denude herself of everything, that the old contemporaries who had stood by her before in her gallant struggle, and had been her competitors, and had lived to see themselves distanced by Catherine, had felt it impossible to persevere in their refusal to help. She would have no charity, she declared with a flushed cheek. Help for Vernon's, yes, to set them on their feet again, with a certainty that nobody should lose a penny in the long run—for that she would thank them with a full heart; but help for herself, to keep her in a show of comfort when the reality was gone, no! "not a farthing," she said. "I am not afraid of the workhouse," said Catherine, with proud calm, "and I have a right to a Vernon almshouse, the first that is vacant. Nobody will deny that I am Redborough born, and of good reputation. I will not take a penny. Do you think I could not live in a single room and eat my rations like another? It is because you don't know Catherine Vernon yet."

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The old men who had known Catherine Vernon all her life could not withstand this. "We must manage it for her, we must do it somehow," they said. "Vernon's is an old name among us. There is no name in all the district that the people have such confidence in. We must try, sir, we must try," they began to say to each other, "to help her through." The young men, many of them, were impatient, and would have refused to consider the question at all. What had an old woman to do with business? She ought to be thankful if she was allowed a maintenance, and to terminate her days in comfort. But on this point there was not another word to be said. The Grange and

everything in it was to be sold, the White House and the old furniture, part of which Mrs. John still remembered so fondly. There was no question as to that. "We are prepared to sacrifice everything," Catherine said. "What we desire is not to keep up any false pretence, but to carry on our business and recover ourselves by your help. Dismiss me from your mind. I will take my chance; but think of Vernon's, which is not hopeless, which has life in it yet." Old Mr. Rule on his side had pages upon pages of statements to put before the gentlemen. The week was one of terrible suspense and misery, but at the end, though with conditions that were very hard upon the pride of the family, it was decided at last in favour of the bank. Certain great capitalists came forward to prop it up, "new blood" was put into it in the shape of an enterprising manager, who was to guide Harry's steps. There were bitternesses, as there is in every cup that is administered by strangers. But Catherine had gained her object, and she made no complaint. Vernon's would continue, and Harry might have it in his power still to retrieve the family fortunes. As for all the rest, what did it matter? She was a woman who was, or thought herself, very independent of material conditions. Whether she lived in the Grange or one of the Vernon almshouses, what did it matter to her? She did not care for fine eating or fine clothing. "Besides, my clothes will last out my time," she said with a smile. The week's struggle had been good for her. She had not forgotten the great and enduring grief which lay behind all this. But she had not had time to think of it. She had put it away out of her mind as a strong nature can, till her work was done. It was waiting for her to overwhelm her: but in the meantime she was strong.

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Roland Ashton hurried down as soon as the terrible news reached him. He was eager to tell her his own connection with it, to prove to her that it was not he who had led Edward into speculation, that he had done his utmost to restrain him, and had even in his anxiety been willing to embark in what he felt to be a hazardous course in order to save Edward from the rashness he feared. He came down with all his details ready and a burning anxiety to set himself right. But when he reached the scene of all their troubles, Roland never said a word to Catherine on the subject. Such details were beyond the case. She had never willingly spoken of Edward; when it was possible she ignored him altogether; the investigations which had been set on foot, and which had revealed the greater part of his secrets, she had been compelled to know of, but had spoken to no one about them. Since the first day his name had scarcely passed her lips. Harry only had been allowed to tell her that he had baffled all the attempts made to find him, and had escaped. The search after him had been indeed made rather to satisfy anxiety than with any design of punishment, for the other partners in the bank were responsible for everything, and it was on their shoulders that the burden had to fall. He disappeared as if he had fallen into the sea or been lost in a railway accident. The most wonderful complication of all, the companionship in which he had left England, was not told to her then. It threw to all the others a horrible mockery upon the whole story. There was a bitter sort of smile upon Roland's face when he sat with the old people, and told them all the investigations he had made, the incredulous indignation with which he had received the first idea that Emma's disappearance could be connected with that of Edward, the growing certainty that it was so, and finally the receipt of her letter which he brought them to read. The old people were very sad for their beloved Catherine and little inclined to laugh, but the old captain indulged in a tremulous roar which was half a groan, and the old lady, who allowed that her sense of humour was small, gave a grieved smile when it was read to her. This is what Emma said:—

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"DEAR ROLAND,—I think it my duty to let you know, as it was, so to speak, in your house I was living at the time, how it is that I had to make up my mind at a very short notice, and couldn't even go through the form of referring Edward to you. I met him in the train, as you will probably have heard. I was rather sorry about leaving Redborough, and so was he too till he saw me beside him. And then it turned out that he had been very much struck with me at Ellen Merridew's parties, and would have spoken then but for some entanglements that were of old standing, and that he could not shake off. I need not mention any names, but if I say it was some one that was quite out of the question, some one that was detested at the Grange, you will know. He told me he was leaving England for ever, and would I come with him? You know I have always thought it my first duty to get settled, being the youngest and without any fixed home. So after thinking it over for an hour or two, and him being so anxious to come to the point, which is generally just where gentlemen are so slow, I thought it best to consent. We were married before a registrar, but he says that is just as legal as in church. It was at the registrar's in Holywood Street, Trentham Square. We are going to travel, and may be moving about for a good while; but when we settle I shall let you know. I am glad to tell you that we shall be quite well off, and have everything very handsome; and Edward never grudges me anything I fancy. Give my love to them all, and let them know I am as happy as possible, and that I am Mrs. Edward Vernon now, which is one of the prettiest names I know.

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Your affectionate sister,
"EMMA."

This was the last that was heard of this strange pair for a number of years. They discovered that Edward, after many losses, had made a sudden successful venture which had brought him a sum so large as to turn his head. He had been utterly demoralised by all the excitements he had passed through, and the sense of a reckoning which he could never meet, and he had not given himself time to think. He disappeared into the unknown with his ill-gotten gains and the wife he had picked up in the midnight train, and was seen no more. As for poor Algernon Merridew, who was his victim, although only as his own eagerness and that of his wife to get money anyhow,

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made him so, he had to descend, like all the rest, from his temporary grandeur and gaiety. Old Merridew was as stern now as he had been indulgent before, and Ellen, who had been almost worshipped as one of the Vernons when she glorified the family by entering it, was now the object of everybody's scoffs and accusations. But Ellen was a girl of spirit, and equal to the circumstances. Algernon got a humble place in the bank, and the little family lived with Harry, putting their small means together until better days came; but adversity and a determination at least not to let herself be insignificant had so inspiring an effect upon Ellen, that she kept the impoverished household as gay as the extravagant one had been, by cheaper and better means. The Merridew girls, once so subservient, learned what she called "their place" when she was poor more effectually than they had done when she was rich. And her brother, always by her, who, though he had losses, was still the chief partner in the bank, Catherine Vernon's nephew, and the bearer of a name which commanded respect in all the district, kept the balance even. When Vernon's flourished again Algernon became a partner, and all the past grandeurs of the beginning were more than realised.

In the meantime, however, when it had just been decided that Vernon's, bolstered up by a great deal of supplementary aid, was to go on again, there was much commotion among all the dependents of the house. For one thing it was decided that as the Grange was to be sold, the most natural refuge for Catherine was at the Vernonry, her own house, from which some of her dependents must go to make room for her. This was the one point upon which she had made no personal decision, for it hurt her pride to be obliged to dismiss one of those for whom she had provided shelter so long. There had been a great effort made to make her retain the Grange, and continue her life in its usual course, a little retrenched and pared away, yet without any great disturbance of the habitual use and wont. This she would not consent to, making the protest we have seen, that external circumstances were nothing to her, that one of the Vernon almshouses would be as good a shelter as any other for an old woman. But she shrank from bidding any one of her pensioners to make room for her in the Vernonry. It raised a wonderful commotion, as may be supposed, in the house itself. All the dwellers on the garden side were disposed to think that Mrs. Reginald, whose boys were now growing up, and two of them in what their mother called "positions," was the right person to go. But Mrs. Reginald herself was of opinion that her house, a good deal battered and knocked about by the boys in the course of their bringing up, was not in a fit state to receive Catherine Vernon, and that the other side, which was the best, was the natural place for her. The Miss Vernon-Ridgways could think or speak of nothing else.

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"Our little place," they said, "is far too small for Catherine. She could not turn round in it. Of course we would turn out in a moment; it would be our duty. But dear Catherine, used to such large rooms, what could she do in ours, which is the size of a pocket-handkerchief? And if Mrs. Reginald will not budge, why there is Mrs. John. She is so intimate with Catherine nowadays. Hester, that used to be such a rebel, and whom Catherine, we all know, could not endure, is always there. Dear me, of course there cannot be a doubt about it. Mrs. John's house is the right thing; she must have that," which was a great relief to their minds.

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Mr. Mildmay Vernon made a great many faces over his newspaper as he sat in the summer-house. He reflected that the hot water-pipes would be sure to get out of order in winter, and who would now repair them? He did not commit himself by any remark, but he thought the more. When Mrs. John told him of the opinion of the sisters, and consulted him with a troubled countenance, he only shook his head.

"I am sure I would do anything for Catherine," Mrs. John said, "especially now when she is in trouble; but we cannot go far from here, for Hester is so much with her; and where are we to get a house? There is nothing within reach but that little cottage on the road. I am sure, if I were Mrs. Reginald, with no particular tie, and her boys in town, such a long way to come, I don't think I should have any doubt as to what my duty was."

It was a question which Hester at last solved in her hasty way, declaring that wherever they lived Catherine must have the best place in her own house—a principle to which her mother was obliged to make a faltering adhesion. But while every one was thus resisting, Mr. Mildmay Vernon was carrying on his reflections about the hot water-pipes.

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"She put me next the trees on account of my rheumatism," he said to himself. "I know she did, and I shall never live through a winter if the apparatus gets out of gear. And I can't afford to pay for the fire, that's clear." The result of which reflection was that Mr. Mildmay Vernon made it known that he had received a legacy which would make a little addition to his income, and he could not think any longer of taking up room which he believed was wanted. "Besides, one may accept a favour from one's cousin," he said, "especially when it is not much of a favour, being the damp part of the house which few people would have taken had they been paid for doing so—but to be indebted to a firm of bankrupts is impossible," Mr. Mildmay Vernon said.

He took his departure in the beginning of the winter, just when the want of the hot water-pipes would be beginning to make itself felt. And it was almost without consulting her mother that Hester made arrangements for removing their few household goods into his house, to leave their own free for the mistress of all. Mrs. John consented to the arrangement, but not without a few tears.

"It is not that I mind the difference," she said, "in the size of the rooms, or anything of that sort. But it feels like coming down in the world."

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"We have all come down in the world," said Hester; "and Catherine most of all."

And then Mrs. John cried for Catherine, as she had first done for herself, and resisted no more.

CHAPTER XV.

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THE END.

It was early in November when the time came for Catherine to leave the Grange. She had made a selection of a very few things to go with her, and all the others had been valued for the sale. She spoke quite cheerfully about the sale. She had gathered a great many valuable things about her, and it was thought they would sell very well. She had some pictures which had been in the house for generations, and some things which her great-uncle had picked up when he made the *grand tour*. And there was a great deal of valuable china and quantities of old silver, the accumulations of a family that had not been disturbed for generations. She showed no feeling about it, people said; and indeed Catherine felt that neither about this nor any other external thing was she capable of showing much feeling. She cared nothing about leaving the Grange. Had she been actually brought down as far as the almshouse, in all likelihood she would have taken it with the proudest placidity. What was there in that to move a soul? One room was very much like another if you went to general principles, though it might be larger or smaller. Were these matters to make one's self unhappy about? So she said, fully meaning it, and with a smile. She was at the office every day. It seemed a matter almost of economy to keep for the present the brougham with its one horse which took her there; but of everything else she divested herself with the frankest good will. To the outer world she kept her good looks, though she was thinner, and her complexion paled; but those who watched her more closely found that there were many changes in Catherine. "I'm killed, sire," old Captain Morgan still said. He himself had given them a great alarm; he had had "a stroke" in the beginning of the winter, but it had passed away, though he still said everything was too far for him, and found his evening hobble to the Grange too much. He went as often as he could, sometimes to bring Hester home, who was always there to receive Catherine at her return, sometimes only to sit and talk for an hour in the evening. With other people when they came, Catherine employed the same plan which she had first set on foot with Harry. She made Hester her representative in the conversation. She said it did her good, while she rested, to hear the voices and to take into her mind now and then a scrap of the conversation. But it seemed to Hester that she paid less and less attention to what people said. She was very cheerful in her time of business, but when she lay back in her chair in the evenings, she was so still sometimes that but for her hand now and then stealing to her eyes, her anxious companion would scarcely have known that she lived. She thought nothing of her health for her own part, and constantly said that she was quite well and that her work agreed with her. There had been a little excitement in her appearance when she came home in the evening of the last day she was to spend at the Grange. Hester thought it was the coming change that occasioned this, though Catherine declared her indifference to it. She talked with a little haste and excitement during dinner, and when they were alone afterwards did not flag as was her wont, but continued the talk. "It is a great pity," she said, "a girl like you, that instead of teaching or doing needlework, you should not go to Vernon's, as you have a right to do, and work there."

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"I wish I could," Hester said, with eager eyes.

"They tell me you wanted to do something like what I had done. Ah! you did not know it was all to be done over again. This life is full of repetitions. People think the same thing does not happen to you twice over, but it does in my experience. You would soon learn. A few years' work, and you would be an excellent man of business; but it can't be."

"Why cannot it be? You did it. I should not be afraid——"

"I was old. I was past my youth. All that sort of thing was over for me. It could be in one way—if you could make up your mind to marry Harry——"

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"I could not—I could not! I will never marry."

"It is a great pity you cannot—I think it is a mistake. I have done him a great deal of injustice in my time; but one finds out sooner or later that brains are not everything. There is another man, and he has brains, who would marry you if you would have him, Hester—Roland Ashton. Take him—it is better in the end."

"Oh, do not ask me! I will never marry," Hester cried.

Then Catherine suddenly sat upright in her chair, and clasped her hands together with almost wild emphasis. "I would marry," she cried, "if I were you! I would wipe out every recollection. Did they tell you the pitiful story of a meeting in the train, a marriage suddenly made up—and who it was that went away into the darkness in what was to have been your place?"

"Yes, they have told me," said Hester, in a low voice.

"Lord in Heaven!" cried Catherine, "what a world, what a world this is!—all mockery and delusion, all farce except when it is tragic. And after that you will not marry—for the sake of——"

"How can I help it?" cried the girl, with wistful eyes. "You do the same yourself."

"Myself? that is different. Your heart will not be empty for ever, Hester. It cannot close itself up for ever. With me that was the last;—this is one thing that makes a mother like no one else. Hold the last fast, they say. It was everything one had to look to. I am very cheerful, and I shall live for years—many people do. But I have got my death blow," Catherine said. Then the silence dropped again between them. It was before a cheerful fire, with a lamp burning—altogether a more

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cheerful scene than in those sad summer days.

"There are some people who would not take much interest in it," Catherine continued, "but you do. I think you are like me, Hester. We were kept apart by circumstances; perhaps it is possible we might have been kept apart on purpose. "He"—Catherine made a pause before and after, and said the word with a sob—"never understood me. They say he was—afraid of me, never could trust me with what he really wished. Alas, alas! It must have been my fault——"

"Oh no, no!"

"Ah, yes, yes. I had rather think that; and there is a great deal that is base in me. I could not but laugh even at that story of Emma—even now. Human nature is so strange—it is a farce. I am not angry though, not at all: all things seem floating off from me. I could think we were floating away altogether, you and I——"

"You are not well. You are doing too much. I should like to send for the doctor."

"I believe in no doctors. No, no; I am quite well, only tired with the day's work and ready for rest."

And the silence resumed its sway. She laid herself back as before—her pale head against the dark curtains stood out like ivory. Some time afterwards she sighed two or three times heavily, then there was no sound at all. The fire burned cheerfully, the lamp shed its steady glow upon Hester's book, to which after this talk she did not, as may be supposed, pay very much attention. But Catherine did not like a vacant watcher, and the book was a kind of safeguard, protecting her from the sense of an eye upon her. Perhaps an hour passed so. A chill crept into the room like nothing Hester had ever felt before, though all was still, serenely warm and bright to outward appearance. She rose softly at last and touched Catherine's hands, that were folded in her lap, to wake her. It was from them the cold had come that had crept to her heart.

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There was, then, no need that Catherine Vernon should ever live in cramped rooms, in another house from that in which she had been born. When they carried her out from it a week after, the whole population came out to meet the procession, and followed her weeping, lining the path, filling the streets. Her misfortunes, and the noble courage with which she had stood up against them at the end, brought back all the fulness of the love and honour with which she had been regarded when she first became supreme in the place, and all bounty flowed from her. There was not any one connected with her, high or low, not only the poor Vernons who had snarled and scoffed while they accepted her favours, but the very men of money who had of late taken upon themselves the air of patronising Catherine, but was proud to be able to repeat now, on the day of her burying, what she had said to them, and how they had come in contact with her. The doctors were not clear as to how she died. She had never been suspected of heart disease, or any other disease. But it was her heart somehow, with or without a medical reason for it, that had failed her. The last touch, those who loved her thought, had been too much. Derision such as she had delighted in in other circumstances, had overtaken the last tragic occurrence of her life. Catherine had not been able to bear the grim mockery, the light of a farce upon that tragedy of her own.

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And as for Hester, all that can be said for her is that there are two men whom she may choose between, and marry either if she pleases—good men both, who will never wring her heart. Old Mrs. Morgan desires one match, Mrs. John another. What can a young woman desire more than to have such a possibility of choice?

FINIS.

LONDON

R. CLAY, SONS, AND TAYLOR,

BREAD STREET HILL.

Transcriber's Notes:

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