

MARGARET OLIPHANT

HESTER.

VOLUME 3 OF

3

Маргарет Олифант
Hester. Volume 3 of 3

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Margaret Oliphant Hester, Volume 3 (of 3) A Story of Contemporary Life

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.

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.

"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."

"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.

"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."

"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."

"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.

"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.

"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."

"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."

"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.

"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."

"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 Vernonry, 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.

"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.

"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."

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.

"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.

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.

"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."

"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."

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.

CHAPTER II. 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 Vernony. 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.

"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.

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."

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.

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.

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 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.

"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 – "

"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.

"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.

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.

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.

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 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.

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.

"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."

"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.

"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?"

"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. 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.

"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.

"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 – "

"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.

"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.

"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 – "

"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.

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 —

"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."

"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."

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.

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.

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.

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.

CHAPTER IV. 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 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*

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