

Oliphant Margaret

Hester. Volume 2 of 3



Маргарет Олифант

Hester. Volume 2 of 3

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Margaret Oliphant

Hester, Volume 2 (of 3) / A Story of Contemporary Life

*"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. THE YOUNG AND THE OLD

"I like your Roland," said Miss Vernon. She had come to pay one of her usual visits to her old relations. The grandson whom Hester had made acquaintance with without seeing his face, had now been nearly a week at the Vernonry and was known to everybody about. The captain's precautions had, of course, come to nothing. He had gone, as in duty bound, to pay his respects to the great lady who was his relation too, though in a far-off degree, and he had pleased her. Catherine thought of nothing less than of giving a great pleasure to her old friends by her praise. "He is full of news and information, which is a godsend to us country folks, and he is very good-looking, *qui ne gâte rien*."

Mrs. Morgan looked up from her place by the fireside with a smile of pleasure. She sat folding her peaceful old hands with an air of beatitude, which, notwithstanding her content, had not been upon her countenance before the young man's arrival.

"That is a great pleasure to me, Catherine – to know that you like him," said the old lady. "He seems to me all that, and kind besides."

"What I should have expected your grandson to be," said Catherine. "I want him to see the people here, and make a few acquaintances. I don't suppose that our little people at Redborough can be of much importance to a young man in town; still it is a pity to neglect an opportunity. He is coming to dine with me to-morrow – as I suppose he told you?"

The old lady nodded her head several times with the same soft smile of happiness.

"You are always good," she said; "you have done everything, Catherine, for me and my old man. But if you want to go straight to my heart you know the way lies through the children – my poor Katie's boys."

"I am glad that the direct route is so easy," Miss Vernon said in her fine, large, beneficent way; "at least in this case. The others I don't know."

Captain Morgan came and stood between his wife and the visitor. To be sure it was to the fire he went, by which he posted himself with his back to it, as is the right of every Englishman. His countenance wore a troubled look, very different from the happiness of his wife's. He stood like a barrier between them, a non-conductor intercepting the passage of genial sentiment.

"My dear Catherine," he said, with a little formality, "I don't wish to be unkind, nor to check your kindness; but you must recollect that though he is poor Katie's boy, she, poor soul, had nothing to do with the up-bringing of him, and that, in short, we know nothing about him. It has been my principle, as you know, of late years, to insist upon living my own life."

"All that, my kind old uncle, is understood," said Catherine. "There are a great many people, I believe, who are better than their principles, and you are one of them – that is all. I understand that you know nothing about him. You are only a man, which is a great drawback, but it is not to be helped: *we* know, though we have seen no more of him than you have. Isn't it so?"

She leaned forward a little, and looked across at the old lady, who smiled and nodded in return. Old Mrs. Morgan was not disturbed by her husband's disagreement. It did not even make her angry. She took it with perfect composure, beaming over her own discovery of her grandson, and the additional happiness it had brought.

"My old man," she said, "Catherine, has his own ways of thinking, we all know that; and sometimes he will act upon them, but most commonly not. One thing I know, he will never shut his doors on his own flesh and blood, nor deny his old wife what is her greatest pleasure – the thing that has been wanting to me all the time – all the time! I scarcely knew what it was. And if the boy had been distant or strange, or showed that he knew nothing about us, still I should have been content. I would have said, 'Let him go; you were right, Rowley, and not I.' But it is not so," the old lady went

on after a pause, "there's love in him. I remember when the girls were married there was something I always seemed to want, I found out what it was when the first grandchild was born. It was to feel a baby in my arms again – that was what I wanted. I don't know, Catherine," she added with humility, "if you will think that foolish?"

"If I will understand – that is what you are doubtful of – for I am an old maid, and never had, so to speak, a baby in my arms; but I do understand," said Catherine, with a little moisture in her eyes. "Well, and this great handsome fellow, a man of the world, is he your baby that you wanted so much?"

"Pooh!" said the old captain. "The great advantage of being an old maid, as you say, is that you are above the prejudices of parentage. It is possible to get you to hear reason. Why should my life be overshadowed permanently by the action of another? That is what I ask. Why should I be responsible for one who is not me, nor of my mind?"

"Listen to him! You would think that was all he knows," said Mrs. Morgan; "there is no fathoming that old man, my dear."

"What I have to say is, that we know nothing of this young man," said the captain, shaking his shaggy head as if to shake off his wife's comments. "You will exercise your own judgment – but don't take him on mine, for I don't know him. He is well enough to look at; he has plenty to say for himself; I dare say he is clever enough. Form your own judgment and act upon that, but don't come and say it's our fault if he disappoints you – that is all I have to say. Excuse me, Catherine, if I take a walk even while you are here, for this puts me out – I allow it puts me out," Captain Morgan said.

"What has made him take this idea?" said Miss Vernon, when Captain Morgan had hobbled out.

"Oh, my dear, he has his fancies like another. We have had many things to put up with, and he thinks when it comes to the second generation – he thinks we have a right to peace and quiet in our old age."

"And so you have," said Catherine gravely, "so you have."

She did not ask any questions. Neither she nor any one knew what it was with which, in the other part of their lives, these old people had been compelled to "put up." Nor did the old lady say. She answered softly, "Yes, I think so too. Peace is sweet, but it is not life."

"Some people would say it was better."

"They never knew, those people, what life was. I like to see the children come and go – one here, one there. One in need of your sympathy, another of your help, another, oh Catherine, even that – of your pardon, my dear!" This made her pause, and brought, what was so unusual, a little glistening moisture to the old lady's eyes. She was silent for a moment, and smiled, perhaps to efface the impression she had made. "If you can do nothing else for them you can always do that," she said.

Catherine Vernon, who was sixty-five, and knew herself to be an old woman, looked at the other, who was over eighty, as a girl looks at her mother – wondering at her strange experiences, feeling herself a child in presence of a knowledge which is not hers. She had not experience enough to understand this philosophy. She looked for a little at her companion, wondering, and then she said, soothingly —

"We must not dwell upon painful subjects. This young fellow will not appeal to you so. What I like in him is his independence. He has his own opinion, and he expresses it freely. His society will be very good for my nephew Edward. If he has a fault – and, indeed, I don't think that boy has many – it is that he is diffident about his own opinion. Roland, if he stays long enough, will help to cure him of that. And how does the other affair go on?" she added, with a perceptible pause, and in a voice which was a little constrained. "No doubt there is great triumph next door."

Old Mrs. Morgan shook her head.

"It is curious what mistakes we all make," she said.

"Mistakes? Do you mean that I am mistaken about the triumph? Well, they have very good reason. I should triumph too, if having been turned out of a great house, like Mrs. John, I managed to get back again, and recover all that I had lost by means of a thing so entirely my own creation as

a daughter. Even a son would have been different – I suppose. You know I am not a judge on that point," Catherine said with a laugh.

The old lady continued to shake her head slowly.

"The only one that has not made a mistake is Harry. If he could have got what he wanted, it would have been the best thing that could have happened. There is no complication about that. For him it would have been the best."

"Do you mean to say," said Catherine, her eyes lighting up with that fire of curiosity and interest which overcomes even the languor of age. "Do you mean to say that – he is not to get what he wishes? Oh, this is too much! That girl is eaten up with pride. What is she saving herself for, I wonder? What can she expect?"

Again old Mrs. Morgan shook her head, smiling softly as at blunders upon which she could not be too severe.

"I have said already what mistakes we make, Catherine! often in our own career, always about other people, my dear."

Upon this Catherine laughed, not having, though she esteemed her old relation greatly, as much respect for her judgment as probably it deserved. Miss Vernon was too sensible a woman either to feel or express any contempt for her own sex, as clever women who were not sensible used to do in those days; but there was an undertone in her mind of indifference, to say the least, of another woman's opinion. She had a feeling that it could not be any better, and most likely was not so good, as her own, for she had held a position not usual among women, and knew that not many would have proved equal to the emergency as she did. What the old captain said would have impressed her more than what his wife said, and this although she was perfectly aware that the old lady in many cases was considered the most judicious of the two.

"I know you are both fanatics for Hester," she said, "who is not my favourite as she is yours. You must take care that Roland does not fall a victim to her. There are few girls about, and in that case, when young men have a mind to make fools of themselves, there is no choice. Do not shake your kind head off; you know this is a thing in which we have agreed we shall never think alike."

"Never is a long day," said the old lady, tranquilly. She was well used to waiting. In her experience, so many things had come to pass which no one expected. Even now, she said to herself, if any one had told her that Roland Ashton would one day be under her roof – She added quietly, "You are too much alike to do each other justice."

At this Catherine grew red. It had been intimated to her before, and she had scarcely been able to support the imputation. But she mastered herself with an effort. Nowhere perhaps but in this house would she have done so; but these old people had an ascendancy over her which she could not explain.

"We will say nothing on that point," she said, quickly. "Your news has taken me so completely by surprise. Are you sure of it? Why should Mrs. John's daughter have rejected so excellent a settlement? She is looking for something better, I suppose?"

"I think that was a mistake too," said the old lady. "She says herself that Harry, though he is not clever, is good and true. Ah! it is you who shake your head now. In some things even our Catherine fails; he is not the equal of Hester; but it is not my opinion that a man need be always superior to his wife. Where there is love, it does not matter. I should have been pleased to see it; but she is young; she thinks differently. She is looking for nothing consciously; but in her heart for love, which is the visitor one is always looking for when one is young."

"Pshaw!" said Catherine; "it is the old people that are romantic, not the young. It is the settlements that are the things to be considered; or perhaps she is thinking of a title? Her mother is capable of any nonsense," she said with a scornful laugh.

Mrs. Morgan made no reply. Her peaceful aspect with her folded hands, the soft little smile on her old mouth, the slight shake of the head, was perhaps a trial of patience for the other, who felt herself thrown back into the category of the young and superficial by this calm expectation and

quietness. Catherine Vernon was still in the region of prejudice and dislike. She had not lived into that superior sphere of toleration and calm. Impatience filled her veins. But she mastered herself, the atmosphere subduing her. And Captain Morgan came hobbling back, having calmed himself down too.

"Ellen has come back," said Miss Vernon, to change the subject, "from Paris, with clothes enough for all the neighbourhood. It amuses me to think of her among the bonnet-shops. What true enjoyment! and scarcely less now to show them to all her friends. Now there is a pleasure you cannot enjoy, uncle. A man could not call his friends together to look at his new hats."

"There is no telling what a young man can do in the way of folly till he is put to it," said the captain. "I am loth to recognise any inferiority. What do you think about all these failures, Catherine? or rather, if you have withdrawn from it, what do the boys think?"

"I hope I am still capable of giving an opinion," said Miss Vernon. "None of them touch us, which is the chief thing. For my part, speculation in this wild way is my horror. If you could see the proposals that used to be put before me! Not an undertaking that was not the safest and the surest in the world! The boys are well indoctrinated in my opinions on that subject. They know better, I hope, than to snatch at a high percentage; and love the substance, the good honest capital, which I love. I think," she continued, "there is a little of a miser in me, or perhaps you will say in all women. I love to see my money – to count it over like the – By the way, it was the king that did that while the queen was eating her bread and honey. That goes against my theory."

"A good many things go against your theory. They say that there are no such wild speculators as women. It seems easy to them that a sort of miracle should happen; that something should come out of nothing."

"They have not had my experience," said Catherine. "But Edward and Harry are as steady as two churches; that is," she added with a complacency which they all recollected afterwards, "Edward is the head; the other fortunately has the good sense not to attempt to think for himself."

"Hester would have done that for him," said Mrs. Morgan, in an undertone; but Catherine caught it and went on with heightened colour, for the idea that Hester —*that* girl! – might have had something to say in the government of the bank, struck her as if some one had given her a blow.

"Edward is the heart and soul of everything," she said. "How fortunate it was for me that my choice fell upon that boy. I should say he had an old head on young shoulders, but that I don't like the conjunction. He is young enough. He has always been accustomed to family life, and loves his home."

"It is, no doubt," said Captain Morgan, kindly, "that he has had the advantage of your own experience and teaching more than the other, Catherine."

"That would be a delightful thought for me," Miss Vernon said with a suffusion of pleasure in her eyes. "Perhaps there is some truth in it. I have done my best to share my lights, such as they are, with him; but he goes beyond me. And to think that I hesitated between Edward and Harry! I hope I am grateful to Providence that turned me to the best. The other family are following out their lot quite characteristically. Ellen's husband has a good deal of worldly sense, which is wanting to that bit of a butterfly. He is trying hard to get her to make up to me. She has come to see me twice, full of pretty speeches about Algy's great respect for me. Human nature," said Catherine with a laugh, "is as good, nay, far better, than a play. How cunning it thinks it is, but in reality how very easy to see through."

Here old Mrs. Morgan began to shake her head again, smiling always, but with an indulgent, gentle contradictoriness which was more near making Miss Vernon angry than anything she had encountered in this house before.

"What does she sit there for, like a Chinese idol?" said the captain. "She has a wonderful opinion of herself, that old woman. Human nature may be easy to see through, but it is very hard to understand, Catherine. What is that the Bible says about 'deceitful above all things'? When you try to get hold of yourself, did you ever find a more slippery customer? There's a kind of amusement in it, when you are up to all your own dodges."

"Rowley, my dear!" said the old lady, surprised.

"It is true I am too old for slang; but one picks it up, and sometimes it is happy enough. I say when you are up to your own dodges; but that is difficult, and takes a great deal of time. To find yourself trotting forth the same old pretences that you did at twenty, attempting to throw the same sort of dust in your own eyes, is wonderful. There is a sort of artlessness in the artifice that is amusing, as you say; but it is only amusing when you are strong enough to get the upper hand."

"When which of you gets the upper hand? for there seem to be two of you," said Catherine, not so much amused in her own person as she made a pretence of being – for this was certainly not her view.

"To be sure," said the old captain, "there are two of you, we all know that; and in most cases one of you a very silly fellow, taken in on every hand, while the other man sniggers in his sleeve. Of course I am speaking from my own side – ladies may be different from anything I know. But after all," he went on, "I don't think so; for I've been a woman myself, so to speak, through *her*, for sixty years – that is a long spell. I don't see much difference, though in some things she has got to the last word sooner than I."

"I think we mean different things," said Catherine, rising; "that was not the view I was taking. Yours is better in the moral aspect, for I suppose it is more profitable to judge ourselves than others; but one cannot always be studying one's self."

There was a half-apology in her tone, and at the same time a half-impatience. She did not desire to be turned from the comedy which she had in her way enjoyed for years, seeing through, as she said, all the little world of dependents that hung about her, drawing out their weaknesses, perceiving the bitter grudge that lay under their exterior of smiles, and the thousand ways in which they made up to themselves for the humiliation of being in her debt – in order to turn to what might prove the less amusing contemplation of her own weaknesses, or recognise the element of evil in that which was certainly not amusing. Her carriage was standing at the gate which admitted to the garden front of the Vernonry, and it was with a sense of comfort that she got rid of the old captain at his door, and threw a keen, half-laughing glance at the windows on the other side. Mr. Mildmay Vernon was making himself very uncomfortable at the only angle of his room which permitted him to see the gate, watching for her exit. He kissed his hand to her as she paused and looked round before getting into the carriage, and Catherine realised as if she had seen it, the snarl of mockery with which this salutation was accompanied. In the intervening space were the two sisters keeping the most vigilant watch for her reappearance, counting the minutes which she spent on the other side of the house, and saying ill-natured things to each other as they nodded and waved their hands. She was aware of the very tone in which these speeches would be made, as well as if she had heard them, and it gave her a great sense of enjoyment to reflect that they were all sitting in rooms well warmed and carefully kept, and full of benevolent prevision of all their wants, while they thus permitted themselves to sneer and snarl at the bestower. Just as she drove away, Hester by chance opened the verandah door, and came out to gather some of the leaves of the Virginia creeper which were dropping with every blast. Hester's serious eyes met hers with scarcely any greeting at all on either side. Catherine did not know very well how it was that this girl came into the comedy. Had she been Harry's betrothed, Miss Vernon could have understood it, and though she could not but have felt the triumph of her old rival, yet it would have added delightfully to the commonplace drama in which everybody pursued their own mean ends under high-sounding pretences. She would have been able to smile at the commonplace young fellow taken in by the delusion that he was loved for himself, and laugh in the conviction that Harry's was no deep affection to be wounded, but that he could quite well take care of himself, and that between these two it would be diamond cutting diamond. But the present state of affairs she did not understand. All that was amusing in it was the doubtless unbounded disappointment of the scheming little mother, who thus must find all her fine schemes collapsing in her hands. She could not refrain from mentioning the matter at dinner that evening, though Edward had a little failed on the

former occasion, in that backing up of all her opinions and feelings which she had been accustomed to expect from him.

"I find there is to be no match such as that we were speaking of," she said. "Harry has either drawn back or he is refused. Perhaps it may be that he has thought better of it," she added suddenly, without premeditation, grudging, as perhaps was natural, to let her young antagonist carry off the honours of the day.

"I thought it was not quite so certain as people seemed to believe."

"Do you mean that Harry would persevere?"

"I mean that she would accept him, Aunt Catherine. She is not a girl, so far as I can judge, of whom one could ever be so sure."

"In the name of wonder," cried out Miss Vernon, "what does she expect? Good heavens! where is she to get another such chance again? To refuse Harry, for a girl in her position, is madness. Where does she think she will get another such offer? Upon my word," said Catherine, with a little laugh, "I can scarcely help being sorry for her poor little mother. Such a disappointment for Mrs. John – her White House and her recovered 'position' that she loves so dearly, and all her comforts – I could find it in my heart to be very sorry for her," she said, with another little laugh.

Edward gave a glance up at her from his plate, on which he had the air of being intent. The young man thought he saw through Catherine, as she thought she saw through all the other inmates of her little world. What he did see through was the superficial badness which her position had made, but he had not so much as a glimmering of the other Catherine, the nobler creature who stood behind; and though he smiled and assented, a sensation of disgust came into his heart. He, too, had his comedy of human nature, which secretly, under cover of his complacency and agreement with Catherine's opinion, he regarded with the bitterest and angriest scorn. What an extraordinary shock would it have been for his companion, who felt herself to sit in the place of the audience, seeing the puppets play their pranks upon the stage and exhibit all their fooleries, to know that she herself was the actor, turned outside in and seen through in all her devices, to this boy whom she loved!

CHAPTER II. A FAMILY PARTY

"A grandson of Captain Morgan! Well, that is not much to meet us at our wedding dinner – at least, if it is not our wedding dinner – Oh, I know there was our state one, and we met all the old fogies whom I detest!" cried Mrs. Algernon Merridew, born Ellen Vernon; "but this is only the second, and the second is quite as important as the first. She should have asked the county first, to introduce us properly – and then the town; but Aunt Catherine is one of the people who never do what's expected of them. Besides, I don't want to meet her relations on the other side. They're nobodies. She spends quantities of money upon them which she has no business to do, seeing it's the Vernons' money and not hers at all, if you come to that."

"Come, Nell," said her husband with a laugh. He was a dark young man, as was to be expected – seeing that she was so fair a young woman – good-looking, with whiskers, which were the fashion in those days, of a bushy blackness, and hair which suggested pomade. "Come, Nell," he said, "strike fair. Catherine Vernon does a great deal of good with her money, and doesn't spare upon the Vernons – all the town knows that."

"Oh no, she doesn't spare upon the Vernons – all those useless old creatures that she has up there in that horrid old-fashioned house! I think if she did a little more for real relations, and left those old fogies alone, it would be more like – Expecting one to call upon them, and take all sorts of trouble! And look at poor old Harry kept with his nose at his desk for ever."

"Poor old Harry is very lucky, I think. Fair play is a jewel. If she doesn't do all you want, who do you expect would?"

"You, of course!" cried Ellen, as was natural: and they were so newly married that he thought it very pretty; "that is the good of you; and if you go in for Aunt Catherine too, when you know I can't endure her – "

"Of course the good of me is to do whatever you want," he said, with various honeymoon demonstrations; "but as for going in for Aunt Catherine – you must know this, Nelly, that I'm very proud of being connected with Catherine Vernon. I have heard of her all my life as a sort of goddess, you know. You must not put me off it all at once – I couldn't be put off it. There now, there's nothing to look sulky about."

"You are such an old Redborough person," Ellen said, with a little pout: which was very true. He was not, indeed, at all a good match for a Vernon; but his whiskers – things much admired in those days – and her self-will had worsted all opposition. He was no more than the son of the perfectly respectable and very well-to-do solicitor, who was universally respected in Redborough, and though Algernon had been in town and sown his wild oats, he had never entirely got out of his mind the instinctive conviction that Redborough was the centre of the world; and to feel himself within the charmed circle in which Catherine Vernon moved was a promotion which was intoxicating to the young man. Not even his devotion to his pretty wife, which was great, could bring him to disown that allegiance to Catherine Vernon which every Redborough man was born with. It was a sort of still more intoxicating proof of the dignity he had come to, that the pretty wife herself turned up her little nose at Catherine. That Mrs. Algernon should be so familiar with the highest excellence known to them, as to venture to do this, was to the whole family of the Merridews an admiration – just as a family entirely loyal might be flattered by having a princess among them who should permit herself to laugh at the majesty of the king; but this did not shake their own fidelity. And Algernon, though he ventured with bated breath to say "Aunt Catherine" when he spoke of her in his own family, had not got over his veneration for Miss Vernon. He had taken her in to dinner on the occasion of the great banquet, which Ellen described so lightly, with a sensation bordering upon the hysterical. Rapture,

and pride, and panic were in it. He did not know, according to the vulgar description, whether he were on his head or his heels, and his voice made a buzzing in his own ears as he talked. The second time was to be in the intimacy of the domestic circle – if it had been to meet a crossing-sweeper it would still have been a bewildering gratification; but all the more, his wife's criticism and her indifference, and even discontent with the notice which to him seemed so overpowering an honour, pleased the young man. She felt herself every bit as good as Catherine, and yet she was his – Mrs. Algernon Merridew! The thought was one adapted to make his head swim with pride and delight.

It was entirely a family party, as Catherine had said, and a very small one. The Miss Vernon-Ridgways had been invited, to make the number even, and their preparations for the unusual honour had taken up four days at least. When they sailed into the drawing-room at the Grange, having spent ten minutes in shaking out the flounces and arranging the flowers and ribbons with which they were ornamented, it would be impossible to attempt to describe the disgust of the bride. She turned her eyes upon her husband, who for his part was in a state of beatitude not to be disturbed by trifles, with a look of indignant rage which he did not understand. "To think she should ask those old things to meet *us*! I declare I have a great mind to go right away," she whispered to Harry, who was more sympathetic. Harry allowed that it was almost beyond bearing. "But I wouldn't make a quarrel if I were you," he said. In the meantime the sisters went up beaming to their dear Catherine, whom they kissed with devotion. How well she was looking! how becoming her dress was! but that lovely lace would be becoming to any one! they cried. Catherine received all these compliments with a smile, and she took great pleasure in Ellen's disgust, and the way in which she turned her ear instead of her cheek to the salutations of the cousins, who were rapturous in their admiration of her in all her bridal finery. The entry of the stranger, who was unknown to any of them, made a diversion. Roland Ashton, when he was visible in the full light of Miss Vernon's drawing-room, turned out, in appearance at least, a very valuable addition to the society. Ellen, who was critical, and inclined by nature to a poor opinion of old Captain Morgan's grandson, looked at him with astonished, and indeed reluctant, approval. His whiskers were not so thick or so black as Algernon's; but he had a fine mass of dark hair, wavy, and rather longer than is now permitted by fashion, fine features and dark eyes, with a paleness which was considered very interesting in those days. He was much taller and of more imposing aspect than Edward, whose stature was not great; he was far more intellectual than Harry; altogether of the four young men present, his was no doubt the most noticeable figure. They all appraised him mentally as he came in – Catherine first of all, with a sensation of pride that the one individual who was her relation, without being the relation of her family, was a creditable novelty to introduce among them; the others, with various degrees of quickened curiosity and grudging. The grudge was intensified in the persons of the sisters, who could not endure this interloper. They had felt it their duty to draw the line at the Morgans long ago, and it was all they could do to behave with propriety at Catherine's table when they were seated beside the descendant of the old people on whom Catherine spent her money in what they felt to be an entirely unjustifiable way. They were the only persons present who kept up their grudge to the end. In Ellen's case it disappeared with the clear perception of his good looks. But when Mr. Ashton offered his arm to Miss Matilda Vernon-Ridgway, the look with which she received the offered courtesy was enough to freeze any adventurous young man into stone. It did not, however. It made him all but laugh as he glanced at Catherine, who for her part contemplated her cousins with much gratification. Miss Matilda placed the end of her finger upon the young man's arm. She kept at as great a distance as possible as she crossed the hall by his side. To the little speech about the weather, which he thought it his duty to make her, she returned a sort of inarticulate reply – a monosyllable, but conveying no meaning. When she was seated at table she flung herself, so to speak, upon her neighbour at the other side, who, as it happened, was Harry Vernon, and who was not prepared for the honour. All this was to Catherine as good as a play.

"What a climate, and what a poky old place this Redborough is," said Ellen, preparing to lead the conversation, as she finished her soup. She spoke apparently to Edward, but in reality to the

company, which was not too large for general conversation. "It is dreadful to come back here in the beginning of winter from Abroad. I declare I quite envy you, you people who have never been Abroad; you don't know the difference. Bright sunshine all day long, and bands playing, and the best of music, and all your friends to talk to, sitting out under the trees. Compare that with Redborough, where, beyond a few tiresome little dinner parties, and perhaps three dances at Christmas – "

"The White House used to be a great addition to the cheerfulness of the place," said Edward. "Harry will have no heart to keep it up by himself now you have left him."

"Oh, Harry shall marry," said Ellen, "I have made up my mind to that; and as soon as we have got quite settled, I mean to set things a-going. I mean to have a Thursday, Aunt Catherine. We shall be glad if you'll come. It is to be a *Thé Dansante*, which is quite a novelty here. You learn so much better about all these things Abroad."

"Where is Abroad?" said Roland, in an undertone which was so confidential and intimate, that had he been anybody else, Miss Matilda must have yielded to its seduction. As it was, she only gave him a look of surprise at his ignorance, and cleared her throat and shook her bracelets in order to be able to strike in.

"A *Thé Dansante* is exactly the kind of entertainment that suits me," Catherine said.

"Yes, won't it be nice?" said Ellen, unconscious. "I learnt all the figures of the *cotillion*, which is the most amusing thing to end up with, and I made Algy learn it. As soon as ever our house is ready we shall start. It will be a new feature in society. As for Harry, till he's married he'll have to be content with bachelor's dinners, for I can't always be leaving Algy to look after him."

Here Harry murmured something, stammering, and with a blush, to the intent that the bachelor's dinners would last a long time.

"We don't see you so often at our place as we used to do, Mr. Harry," said Miss Matilda, sweetly. "It used to be quite a pleasure to watch for you; and the summer evenings were so tempting, weren't they? Oh, fie! it is very naughty to love and to ride away. We always said that was what was likely to happen, didn't we?" she said to her sister, on the other side of the table.

Miss Martha nodded and smiled in return, and cried —

"Oh, always," in a shriller tone.

"What's that you thought likely to happen? Then it didn't happen if it was Harry," cried Ellen, instinctively, ranging herself on her brother's side.

"But about this *cotillion*?" said Edward. "What is it? I thought it had something to say to a lady's dress. I am sure it had in the eighteenth century. We shall have to go to school to learn what your novelty means."

"She put me to school, I can tell you," cried Algernon, from the other end of the table. "I had to work! She is the most dreadful little tyrant, though she looks so soft."

"Dancing is neglected shamefully nowadays," said Miss Matilda; "shamefully! We were taught very differently. Don't you remember, dear, Mousheer D'Egmont and his little violin, Martha? we were taught the minuet first on account of our curtses — "

"Oh, the funny, old-fashioned thing! You *never* curtsey nowadays; even in the Lancers it is only a bob," said Ellen, "or a bend mostly with your head. You never see such a thing nowadays."

"My dear! In the presence of your sovereign," said Miss Matilda, with dignity, "it *always* continues necessary. There is no change in that respect so far as I am aware, Martha, is there? You were in the habit of attending Drawing-rooms longer than I."

"Oh, never any change in that!" cried Miss Martha, rising upon herself, so to speak, and erecting her head as she looked from one end of the table to another. It was not often that they had such a triumph. They had been Presented. They had made their curtses to their Sovereign, as Miss Matilda said.

Silence fell upon the table, only broken by the jingle of Ellen's bracelets, which she pushed up her arm in her mortification; and there were so many of them that they made a considerable noise.

Even she was cowed for the moment; and what was worse was, that her husband being simple-minded, and getting a little familiar with Catherine, now turned his looks of awe and veneration upon the Miss Vernon-Ridgways, who were so well acquainted with the court and its ways.

And Catherine laughed.

"We are all behind in that respect," she said. "I am fond of pomp and ceremonial for my part. It is a pretty thing, but I like it best at a distance. It is my fault, I have no doubt, that your wife is ignorant of Drawing-rooms, Mr. Merridew."

"I always said so, Aunt Catherine," cried Ellen, who was ready to cry, in the midst of her triumph. "It is horrid for girls to have relations with those out-of-the-way notions."

Catherine only laughed; it was her habitual comment. She turned smiling to young Ashton by her side.

"You ought not to dislike state," he said, in an undertone; "you who are a kind of queen yourself – or, shall I say, grand duchess – in your own town?"

"A queen without any subjects," said Catherine, shaking her head. This time she did not laugh, and there was even a little glimmer of sadness in her eyes.

"Not so. I am a stranger, you know. When I go about the town, I hear of nothing but Catherine Vernon. They call you so, do you know —*tout court*, without miss or madam – that has a great effect upon one's imagination."

Young Merridew had thrust forward his head, and was listening, which perhaps was not very good manners.

"It is quite true," he said eagerly. "Ellen says I am a very Redborough person. I have been born and bred here. I can't remember the time when I didn't look up to – her, as if she was something above the human –"

"And yet you have married a Vernon!" said Catherine; but she was pleased. "It is not an uncommon thing in this world," she said. "People at a distance think more kindly of one than those who are near; but this is not talk for a dinner-table. Not to interfere with Ellen's *cotillion*" she said, in a louder tone, "I am thinking of a party for Christmas, young people. As it is for you, you must lay your heads together, and decide what it is to be."

Then there arose a flutter of talk, chiefly maintained by the ladies, but in which young Merridew was appealed to by his wife; and Harry, stimulated by the same hand, and Edward, mindful of his duties, took part.

Catherine and her young relative were left, as it were, alone, amid the babble of tongues.

"I cannot allow myself to look at it gravely," she said. "I laugh; it is the best way. They all take what they can get, but their opinions, if they were individually weighed, of Catherine Vernon, would surprise you. They don't think much of me. I dare say I quite deserve it," she said, after a pause, with another laugh. "Don't you think that in most cases enthusiasm is confined to those people who personally know the least of the object of it? That's an awkward sentence, but never mind."

"Isn't it the same thing as to say that a great man is never a hero to his valet, or that a prophet has no honour in his own country?"

"Not the last, at least," said Catherine; "for being no prophet, you yourself say I have got some honour in my country. As for the valet, I don't know," she continued, "but a maid, though she appraises you at your true value, and is convinced you are a fool in many things, still is not without a prejudice in your favour. She would like, though she maintains her erect position, to see the rest of the world bow down before you. That is amusing too."

"You are a philosopher," said the stranger, looking at her with a tender regard in his eyes, which made a great impression generally upon younger women, and moved even Catherine as with a sense of kindness – of kindness disproportioned to their actual knowledge of each other, which is a thing which conciliates everybody, looking as if it implied a particular attraction.

"Your grandfather thinks me a cynic," she said. She liked these few words of quiet talk in the midst of the mingled voices of the others, and was grateful to the young man who looked so sympathetic. "I don't know that I am a cynic, but rather than cry, I prefer to laugh. Is that cynicism?" He gave her a look which would have no doubt had a great effect upon the heart of a younger woman, and which pleased Catherine, old as she was.

"I think it is true philosophy; but some of us have feelings that will not be laughed at," said Roland. He was accustomed to make great use of his fine eyes, and on this occasion he did so with the greatest effect. There could not have been more tender sympathy than was in them. Could he be really so much impressed by her character and position, and the failure of true gratitude and kindness? Catherine Vernon would probably have laughed at any one else of her own age who had been so easily persuaded; but it is always so much more easy to believe in the sincerity of affection which is called forth by one's self! Her eyes softened as she looked at him.

"I think you and I, Roland, are going to be great friends," she said, and then turned with a slight little sigh, so small as to be almost imperceptible, to the louder voices appealing to her. "You must settle it among you," she said. "I give Edward *carte blanche*. The only thing is that it must take in everybody, all the Vernons and our neighbours as well – a real Christmas party."

"Oh, don't you think, Aunt Catherine, Christmas is such a bore!" said Ellen, "and family parties! Let us have strangers. Let us have people we never set eyes on before. Christmas is so vulgar! Look at all the newspapers with their little stories; the snow on the ground and the wanderer coming home, and so forth. I am so glad we haven't got a wanderer to come home."

"Christmas brings a great many duties I am sure," said Miss Matilda. "Have you seen the charity flannel at Roby's, Catherine? It is so good, almost good enough to wear one's self; and the blankets really look like blankets, not horse-cloths. Do you think that is good or bad? What you give in charity ought to be different, don't you think? not to let them suppose they have a right –"

"You forget," said her sister, eager to get in a word, "that dear Catherine always gives the best."

"Ah! it is well to be Catherine," said Miss Matilda, "but many people think there should be a difference. What do you think, Mr. Harry? Catherine may consider poor people's feelings; but there are some who think it is wrong to do so – for who is like Catherine? She is always giving. She is always so considerate. Whatever she does is sure to be the best way."

"I am certain," said Algernon Merridew beaming with honest loyalty from where he sat by Miss Vernon's side, "that all Redborough is of that opinion; and Redborough ought to know."

"You mean all but the people to whom I give," said Catherine, "there are not so many of them: but they are the best judges of all, and I don't think they approve."

"There's nobody so unreasonable as the poor," said Ellen, "they are never satisfied. You should just see them turning over the pieces from my kitchen. Of course all the pieces are quite nice; everything is, I hope, where I am housekeeper. Oh, I know I am extravagant, I like the best of everything; but nothing satisfies the poor. Cold potatoes now with mayonnaise sauce are what I adore, but *they* throw them away."

"Perhaps they don't have the mayonnaise sauce?" suggested Edward.

"Oh, goodness! I hope not; that would be simply immoral," cried Miss Matilda. "But, Mr. Harry, you don't give your opinion, none of the gentlemen give their opinion. Perhaps that is because money is what they give, and one shilling is just like another. You can't have charity shillings. Oh, but I approve of charity flannel; and some people always like to make a difference in what they give to the poor. Poor ladies and gentlemen soon find that out, I assure you. People give you useful presents. If they want to invite you, they invite you when there's nobody there. They think a family dinner or high tea quite treat enough for you. And quite right, don't you think, when one is in the position of a dependent? It keeps people in their proper places. Dear Catherine buys the best flannel, better than I can afford, for her Christmas gifts. She is never like other people, always more liberal; but I should buy the whitey-brown, that is, if I could afford any at all you know."

"Don't attack me, Matilda," said Catherine, with a laugh, "all along the line."

"Oh, attack! *you*, dear Catherine? not for the world. We all know what a friend you are. What should we do without you? Whether we are in Paris fashions or our old silks, don't we owe it all to you?"

There was a little pause round the table which was somewhat awkward; for what could anybody say? The clever ones were all non-plussed, but Harry, who was the stolid one, suddenly became audible with his round rolling bass voice. "Whoever says that, and whether it was well meant or not, I say the same. It's all quite true. We owe everything to Aunt Catherine. I am always ready to say so, wherever I go."

"Have we come to Christmas toasts already?" said Edward intervening. "We had better not start that sort of thing before the time. We all know what we owe to Aunt Catherine."

"Hush, hush," she cried, waving her hand to him as she rose. "Now we shall release your noble intellects from the necessity of coming down to our level," Catherine said as she followed carefully Miss Matilda's long train. It was very long, though it was rather flimsy, and the progress of the ladies was impeded by it. Ellen swept out lightly in advance with a perfect command of hers. It was the first time she had preceded the old cousins in her dignity as a married woman, and the ring of her bracelets sounded like a little trumpet-note. As she followed them out Catherine Vernon returned to her habitual mood of amused indulgence. She had been almost sentimental for a moment, she said to herself, beguiled by that boy's sympathetic eyes, which no doubt he must make great use of among the young ones. She laughed at herself not unpleasantly, to think of the confidences she had almost been beguiled into. But it pleased her to think that it was her mother's blood which had exercised this influence upon her. After all, it might be the Vernons only who were sordid and ungrateful. The old captain and his wife had always been exceptions to her sweeping judgment of human nature. And now it was their descendant who had touched her heart. Perhaps it was only the Vernonry after all. But she was fully restored to her usual kind of amusement as she watched the progress of her three companions into a temporary but eager intimacy on the score of Ellen's Paris fashions which they were eager to examine. The bride was as eager to exhibit as they were to see, and was so well pleased with herself as to be impervious to the little covert blows which Miss Matilda gave under the shield of her flatteries. Catherine Vernon established herself in her own chair, and gathered her costly silken skirts about her, and took up the newspaper, which people in the country have to read in the evening instead of the morning; but she did not read much. She was diverted by the talk. "Crinoline is certainly going out," said Ellen. "I heard it from the very best shops. Look at mine, it is quite small, hardly to be called crinoline at all. This is the very newest, from the Grand Magaseens du Louvre. You see yours are twice as big," Ellen added, making a little pirouette to exhibit the diminished proportions of her hoops. The Miss Vernon-Ridgways looked down upon their own skirts with unquiet eyes.

"The French are always so exaggerated," said Miss Matilda. "Ignorant persons have such strange ideas. They think really nice people in England take their fashions straight out of Paris, but that is quite a mistake. It has always to be modified by English good taste –"

Ellen interrupted with a little shriek. "Oh, good taste! You should just hear how they speak of that Abroad. Sometimes I could have cried. They say no woman knows how to dress herself in England. And when I come back and see the dreadful things that are worn here – This is pretty," Ellen continued, drawing attention to a portion of her dress. "The Empress wore one just the same at a ball."

"Dear Ellen," said Miss Matilda, "and you wear it at a little family party! that shows the difference. I am sure it was done just to please us, to let us see what the new fashions are, in your unselfish way, dear!"

And Catherine laughed behind the newspaper. The honours of the occasion were to the old sisters after all.

In the meantime conversation of much more serious import, though scarcely more elevated, was going on round the table in the dining-room, where young Ashton had got the lead, though none

of the others looked upon him with over-favourable eyes. There was no doubt that he was a very handsome fellow, and both Harry and Edward had that instinctive sense that he was a competitor likely to put them on their mettle, which is supposed to influence the bosoms of women alone. They thought (instinctively, and each in their different ways,) that he must be a coxcomb. They divined that he was the sort of fellow whom women admired, and scorned him for it – as women perhaps now and then indulge in a little sneer at a gentleman's beauty. But by and by he touched a chord which vibrated more or less in all their bosoms. He began to talk of the city, for which country men of business have a natural reverence. He revealed to them that he himself was on the Stock Exchange, and incidentally let fall an anecdote here and there, of the marvellous incidents, the fairy tales of commerce, that were taking place in those magic regions every day: of men who woke in the morning with the most moderate means at their command, and before night were millionaires. They gathered close about him as he added anecdote to anecdote. Edward Vernon was like tinder, prepared for the fire; for all his thoughts for some time past had been directed in that way. And young Merridew was launching forth upon life, rather more lavishly than was consistent with his income and prospects. Harry was the least interested of the three, but even to him the idea of making a fortune in a few hours and being able to retire to the country to give himself up to dogs and horses, instead of going down to the bank every morning, was a beatific suggestion. The present writer does not pretend to be able to inform the reader exactly how it was, or in favour of which schemes, that the poet of the Stock Exchange managed to influence these rustic imaginations, but he did so. He filled their minds with an impatience of their own slow business and its mild percentages, even when he seemed to praise it.

"Perhaps it does feel slow work; I can't say. I think it is a vast deal more wholesome. It is very hard to keep your head steady, you know, when you feel that the chances of an hour or two may make you the richest man in England."

"Or the poorest perhaps?" said Edward, more with the idea of subduing himself than checking this flow of instruction.

"Ye-es," said Ashton, indifferently, "no doubt that's on the cards: but it ought not to be if your broker has a head on his shoulders. About the worst that can happen, if you take proper precautions, is that you're no worse than you were to start with, and better luck next time. I don't approve the 'gain or lose it all' system. But what will Miss Vernon say if we stay here talking shop all the evening?" he added.

There was never a more clever conclusion; it was like the exciting close of an act in the theatre, for he could not be persuaded to begin again. When they went reluctantly into the drawing-room, Ellen thought her Algernon had taken too much wine; and even Edward, who never offended the proprieties in any way, had a curious light in his eyes, and did not hear when he was spoken to. But Catherine Vernon, for her part, did not notice anything except the filial kindness of young Roland, and the sympathy and understanding which shone in his eyes.

CHAPTER III. CONFIDENCES

"I would not speculate if I were you," said Ashton. "What would be the good? You are very well off as you are. You are making your fortune steadily, far better than if you did it by a successful *coup*. Yes, yes, I can understand that a man should desire a little more excitement, and rebel against the monotony of a quiet life, but not you, Vernon, if you'll excuse my saying so. You don't go in for any sort of illegitimate pursuit. You don't play or bet; you have no claim upon you that you want extraordinary means of supplying – "

"How can you tell all that?" said Edward Vernon. "Do you think life's so easy a business that you can read it off from the surface, and make sure that everything is as it seems?"

"I don't say that. Of course, I go upon appearances. I can understand that perhaps you are tired of it – "

"Tired of it!" He twirled his stick violently in his hand, hitting at the rusty bramble branches and gorse bushes that bordered the Common as if they were his enemies. "I suppose one is apt to tire of anything that lasts and never varies," he cried with a forced laugh. "Yes, I am tired of it. Quiet life and safe business, and the hope of making a fortune, as you call it, steadily, in twenty or thirty years – Good life! Twenty or thirty years! Only think of the number of days in that, one after the other, one exactly like the other. I begin to feel as if I should welcome anything to break the monotony – crime itself."

"That means, old fellow," said Ashton, soothingly, "nerves, and nothing more."

Edward laughed out, a laugh which was not harmonious with the soft dulness of the autumnal atmosphere. "I have no nerves, nor tastes nor inclinations, nor any mind of my own," he said. "I do what it is the right thing to do. Though I am sick of it, I never show that. Nobody here has the slightest idea that I was ever impatient or irritable or weary in my life."

Ashton looked at him with some curiosity, but took no further notice. "Does Miss Vernon," he said, "take any share in the business of the bank – I mean, in the work, in the regulations?"

"Miss Vernon," said Edward, "takes a share in everything that is going on around her, it does not matter what. She has been so long used to be at the head of everything, that she thinks it her natural place; and, as she is old and a woman, it stands to reason – "

"But she is a very intelligent woman; and she must have a great deal of experience."

"The experience of a little country town, and of steady business, as you call it – oh, she has all that. But put your own views before her, or suggest even the advantages of the circulation of money, quick turning over, and balance of losses and gains – "

"I can understand that," said Ashton, "You don't appreciate the benefits of the Conservative element, Vernon. But for you and your steady-going banks, how could we operate at all? The money must be somewhere. We can't play with counters only in this game."

"There was no question of counters," said Edward; "we have the money in our hands. It seems to me that you and I should change places: you to do the steady business here, and please Aunt Catherine – who has taken a great fancy to you, you must know – I, to watch the tide, how it comes and how it goes."

"There might be worse arrangements," Ashton said with a laugh: but he added quickly, meeting a keen, sudden glance from Edward, "if you could transfer to me your training, and I mine to you. I am counted rather bold sometimes, you must know," he added, after a moment, returning that look. They talked with great apparent readiness and openness, but with a curious dread of mutual observation going on under the current of their talk all the time.

"So much the better," said Edward, "so long as you know when to hold in."

They were going along the side of the Common between the Grange and the Vernonry. It was Sunday afternoon – a dull day, the sky hanging low, the green parts of the Common very green, glistening with wetness, the gorse and brushwood very brown and faded. Nobody was about on this day of leisure. Even the slow country cart, the farmer's shandry, the occasional roll of a carriage, was absent from the silent road. There were no nursemaids and children from Redborough picking their way along the side path. Captain Morgan, feeling his rheumatism, had retired to his chimney corner; the young men had it all to themselves. Ashton had been lunching at the Grange. He was on the eve of going back to town to business, from which he declared he had been absent far too long. The object of his visit was not very clear to any one: he had left his grandparents for years without showing so much interest in them. But, whatever his motive had been, his expedition had not been without fruit. He had discovered a new and wealthy vein well worth working, and lit a fire which, no doubt, would light up still further illuminations, in some inflammable spirits. No one had received him more warmly than Edward Vernon, but he was less easy to make out than the others. He was less simple; his life did not correspond with the betrayals of his conversation, whereas neither Harry Vernon nor his brother-in-law, had anything to betray. What was evident, at least, was that Catherine Vernon smiled upon the acquaintance which had been formed so rapidly between her nephew and the stranger. She called Edward "your cousin" to Ashton, then laughed and apologised, explaining that where there were so many cousins it was difficult to remember that her relation was not Edward's too. When Ashton replied, "There is connection enough to justify the name, if it is agreeable to Vernon," there could be no doubt that it was, at least, agreeable to her. She smiled upon them from her window as they went out together, waving her hand. And no foolish mother could have been more unaware than Catherine, that the knowledge that she was there, watching with tender looks of affection the two figures as they went along, was to Edward irksome beyond expression. He felt no charm of love in the look, but substituted suspicion for tenderness, and believed that she was watching them, keeping them in sight as far as her eyes could carry, to spy out all they did, and make for herself an explanation of every gesture. He would not even have twirled his stick and cut down the brambles but in a momentary fit of forgetfulness. When they got beyond her range, he breathed more freely, but, even then, was not without a recollection that she had her opera-glasses at hand, and might, through them, be watching his demeanour still.

"Let us go this way," he said, turning into the road, which slanted away on the nearer side of the Vernonry, leading out into the open country and brown fields.

Ashton hesitated a moment. "I am not sure that I am not expected at home. It is my last day," he said.

"Home is a kind of irons," said Edward, "hand-cuffs, ankle chains. One is always like an unhappy cockatoo on a perch. Any little attempt at flight is always pulled back."

"I don't think that is my experience. My old people are very indulgent; but then, I am a mere visitor. Home does not mean much to me," said Ashton. If he had been in the presence of any lady he would have sighed as he said this – being in absolute freedom with one of his own kind he smiled, and it was Edward who sighed.

"There is such a thing as having too much of it," he said. "What I suffer from is want of air. Don't you perceive it? There is no atmosphere; every breath has been breathed over and over again. We want ventilation. We welcome every horror with delight in consequence – a murder – or even a big bankruptcy. I suppose that is why bankruptcies are so common," he added, as if struck with the idea. "A man requires a great deal of original impulse before he will go the length of murder. The other has a milder but similar attraction; you ruin other people, which shakes them up, and gives a change of air."

"Ill-omened words," said Ashton, laughing, and throwing out the fore-finger and little finger of his right hand with a play at superstition. "Ugly at all times, but especially when we are talking of business and the Stock Exchange."

"Are you aware," said Edward, sinking his voice, "that our predecessor, before Aunt Catherine, did something of the kind?"

"Who was he?"

"A certain John Vernon. His wife lives yonder, with the rest of Aunt Catherine's dependents in that red house. He found it too much for him; but it was a poor sort of a flash in the pan, and hurt nobody but himself."

"You would like to do more than that," said Ashton, with a laugh.

But in Edward's face there was no jest.

"I should like," he said, "if I broke down, to carry the whole concern along with me. I should like to pull it down about their ears as Samson pulled the temple, you know, upon his persecutors."

"Vernon," said Roland, "do you know that you are very rash, opening out like this to me? Don't you see it is quite possible I might betray you? I have no right to preach, but surely you can't have any reason to be so bitter. You seem tremendously well off, I can tell you, to a friendless fellow like me."

"I am very well off," said Edward, with a smile; "no man was ever better. I came out of a struggling family where I was to have gone to the colonies or something. My next brother got that chance, and here I am. John Vernon, so far as I can hear, was an extravagant fool. I have not the least sympathy with that. Money's a great power, but as for fine houses, or fine furniture, or show or dash as they call it – "

"I told you," said Ashton, "you have no vice."

Edward gave him a dark, suspicious look.

"I have even a contempt for it," he said.

"There are plenty of men who have that – a horror even; and yet can't do without the excitement."

"I prefer your sort of excitement. John Vernon, as I say, was a fool. He ran away, poor wretch, and Catherine stepped in, and re-made everything, and covered him with contempt."

"He is the father (is he dead?) of the – young lady – who is such a favourite with my grandfather?"

"Hester? Oh, you know her, do you? One of Aunt Catherine's pensioners in the Vernonry, as she calls it."

"It is a little hard upon them to be called dependents; my old people live there. They have their own little income to live upon. Miss Vernon gives them their house, I believe, which is very kind, but not enough to justify the name of pensioners."

"That is our way here," said Edward laughing. "We are very ready to give, but we like to take the good of it. It is not respectful to call the place the Vernonry, but we do it. We are delighted to be kind; the more you will take from us, the better we will like you. We even – rather like you to be ungrateful. It satisfies our theory."

"Vernon, all that seems to me to be diabolical, you know, I wish you wouldn't. Miss Hester is a little of your way of thinking, I fear. She makes it amusing though. There are parties, it appears, where she stands all night in a corner, or looks at photographs."

"She says that, does she?" said Edward. His smile had not been a pleasant one, but now it disappeared from his face. "And I suppose she tells you that I never go near her? I have to look after the old ladies and take them to supper. I have the honour of standing in the position of master of the house."

"I don't know that she blames any one," said Ashton indifferently. "It is more fun than anger. Talk of want of air, Vernon; that poor child wants air if you please. She is as full of spirit and life as any one I ever saw. She would like to do something."

"Something! What kind of something? Go on the stage – or what?"

"I have never heard of the stage or anything of the kind. She wants work."

"Excitement!" Edward said, with an impatient gleam in his eyes.

"She is like you then," said Ashton, trying to laugh, but not with much cordiality, for he felt himself growing angry in spite of himself.

There was excitement enough now in Edward Vernon's face. It grew dark with passion and intolerance.

"A woman is altogether different," he said; then subduing himself with a change in his voice from rage to scorn, "she will soon have it in her power to change all that. Don't you know she is going to marry Harry Vernon? – an excellent match for her – money and little brains – whereas she has much brains and little money, the very thing in marriage," he concluded, with a harsh laugh.

"Is that so?" said Ashton.

He had been listening quite at his ease, turning his face towards his companion, and it was a satisfaction to Edward to see that the stranger's countenance clouded over. He was astonished, and Edward could not help hoping more than astonished – for being sore and bitter himself he liked to see another feel the sting.

"That's well," Roland said after a moment, "if she likes it. I should not have thought – but a week's acquaintance does not show you much of a character. I am glad to hear it," he said, after a pause, "if she likes it," which was but a dubious sort of satisfaction after all.

Edward looked at him again with an expression of gratified feeling. He was glad to have given his new friend a little friendly stab. It pleased him to see Roland wince. When one is very uneasy one's self, that is always a little consolation. He looked at him and enjoyed it, then turned away from the subject which had given him this momentary pleasure.

"Let us return to our muttons," he said. "Tell me what you think of these papers? I put them into my pocket to show you. Now that we are fairly out of sight" – then he turned back to glance along the still damp road, upon which there was not a single shadow but their own – "and nobody can spy upon us – for I distrust windows – we may think of business a little," the young man said.

Ashton looked at him as he took the papers with a glance as suspicious as his own. They had grown into a sort of sudden intimacy in a single night. Edward had been exactly in the state of mind to which Roland's revelation of chances and possibilities was as flame to tinder. To have his impatient desires and longings made practical was everything to him, and the prudence and business instinct left in him which made him hesitate to make the plunge by himself without skilled guidance, endowed the newcomer with an importance which nothing else could have given him. He was at home in those regions which were so entrancing and exciting, yet strange to Edward. These communications had brought them to something like confidential friendship, and yet they did not know each other, and in many things were mutually antipathetic, repelling, rather than attracting each other. This interview, though it was to seal the connection between them, made their mutual want of sympathy more apparent. Edward had showed the worst side of himself, and knew it. He felt even that his self-betrayal had been so great as to put him almost in his companion's power, while at the same time Ashton had impertinently interposed in the family affairs (a point upon which Edward was as susceptible as any one) by what he had permitted himself to say about Hester. Ashton, on the other hand, whose temper in a way was generous and easy, regarded the fortunate but ungrateful possessor of Catherine Vernon's sympathies with an indignant astonishment. To have been so taken up by such a woman, to have her affection, her confidence, her unbounded approbation and trust, and to so repay her! It was incredible, and the fellow was – Should he fling up all his pretence at sympathy with this cub, and go off at once, rather abandoning the possible advantage than consenting to ally himself with such a being? This was the point at which they stood for a moment; but beside the pull of mutual interest how were they ever to explain the sudden breach, should they follow their mutual inclinations and make one? It would be necessary to say something, and what could be said? and then there lay before Edward a world of fabulous gain, of sudden wealth, of a hundred excitements to which Roland seemed to hold the key; and before Roland the consciousness that not only the advantage of having Edward, but a whole population of eager country people ready to put their money into his hands,

and give him such power of immediate action as he had scarcely dreamt of, depended upon his self-restraint. Accordingly the sole evidence of their absolute distrust and dislike of each other, was this mutual look, exchanged just before they entered upon the closest relations of mutual aid.

It was a curious scene for such a beginning. The solitude of the country road was complete; there was no one to interrupt them. Although they were in the freedom of the open air, and subject to be overtaken by any passer-by, yet the Sunday stillness was so intense that they might have been in the most secret retirement on earth. Had they been seated together in Edward's room at home, a hundred disturbances were possible. Servants can never be shut out; if it is only to mend the fire they will appear in the middle of the most private conference. And Catherine herself, all unconscious that her presence was disagreeable, might have come to the door to summon them, or perhaps even to bring them, with her own kind hands, the cups of tea which in his heart Edward loathed as one of the signs of his slavery. They were the drink of bondage – those poor cups that never inebriate. He hated even the fragrance of them – the little steams ascending. Thank Heaven no one could bring him tea out upon the high road! The chill outer air, the faint scent of mossy damp and decay, the dim atmosphere without a sparkle in it, the absolute quiet, would have better suited confidences of a different description. But if business is not sentimental it is at least so urgent and engrossing, that it becomes indifferent to circumstances. The do-nothing calm of the Sunday closed curiously around the group; their rustling papers and eager countenances brought the strangest interruption of restless life into the almost dead and blank quiet. The season, the weather, the hour, the brown quiescent fields in which for the only moment of the year no mystery of growth was going on, but only a silent waiting for the seeds and the spring; this day of leisure when everything was at rest, all the surrounding circumstances united to throw into full relief the strange centre to the landscape – the two figures which brought a sharp interest of life into this still-breathing atmosphere, and waiting stagnation, and Sunday calm.

CHAPTER IV. ROLAND

Roland Ashton had been in little doubt as to his own motives when he came after so many years' indifference to "look up" his old grandparents, and take up late, yet not too late, the traditions of filial duty. These traditions, indeed, had no existence for this young man. His mother, the victim of a dissipated and hopeless spendthrift, had died when her children were young, and her father and mother had stood aloof from all but the earliest years of the handful of boys and girls she left behind. The children scrambled up somehow, and, as is not unusual among children, whom the squalor of a parent's vice has disgusted from their earliest consciousness, succeeded in doing well; the girls making much better marriages than could have been hoped for; the boys, flung into the world on their own account at a very early age, finding the means of maintaining themselves, and even pushing forward to a position as good as that which their father had lost. That father had happily died and gone out of all power to injure them, a number of years before, and it was only on a rare visit to the elder sister, who alone knew much about the family connections, that Roland had learned something of the state of affairs at Redborough.

Elinor was old enough to remember the time when the grandfather and grandmother had taken charge of the little weeping band of babies in their far-off helpless days, and she had kept up a certain correspondence with them, when, half ruined by that effort, they were saved by Catherine Vernon, the mysterious, wealthy cousin, of whose name everybody in the family had heard. Elinor remembered so many details when her memory was jogged, that it occurred to Roland that it would be a very good thing to go down to Redborough and pay his grandfather a visit. Catherine Vernon might turn out to be worth cultivating. She had stepped in to save old Captain Morgan and his wife from the consequences of their own liberality to their daughter's children. She had a little colony of pensioners about her, Elinor was informed. She was very rich, so rich that she did not know what to do with her money. There was a swarm of Vernons round her, eating her up.

"We are her nearest relations on her mother's side," Elinor had said. "I do not see why we should not have our chance too. Don't forget us, Roland, if you make any way; and you ought to do something; for you have the right way with women," his sister said, with some admiration and a little doubt. Her faith was that he was sure to succeed, her doubt whether his success would be of use to anybody but himself; but however it might turn out, it was always better that one of the Ashtons should benefit by Catherine Vernon's colossal fortune, than that it should all go into the hands of the other people.

Roland himself was well aware that he had the right way with women. This was not the result of art and calculation, but was pure nature. The young man was bent upon his own ends, without much consideration, in great matters, of other people. But in small matters he was very considerate, and had a delightful way of deferring to the comfort of those about him. And he had the power of looking interested, and even of feeling interested in everybody he addressed. And he had fine eyes! What more is needed to enable a young man to make his way with women? He was very popular; he might have married well had he chosen to take that step; indeed, the chief thing against him was, that he had wavered too long more than once, before he could make up his mind to hurt the feelings of a sensitive girl by not asking her to marry him. It was not, to be sure, his fault, if they thought that was his meaning. A prudent girl will never allow herself to think so until she is asked point-blank; and when you came to investigate each case, there really was nothing against Roland. He had made himself agreeable, but then, that was his way. He could not help making himself agreeable. The very tone of his voice changed when he spoke to any woman who pleased him, and he was very catholic in his tastes. Most women pleased him if they had good looks, or even the remains of good looks; or

if they were clever; or even if they were *nice*; and he was pleasant to all, old and young. The quality was not without its dangers; but it had great advantages. He came to Redborough fully determined to make the conquest of Catherine Vernon, whom, save that she was rich and benevolent, he knew very little about. Very rich (according to Elinor), rather foolishly benevolent, old – a young man who has the right way with women could scarcely be indifferent to such a description. He determined to find an opportunity in the dull time of the year, when business was not too exacting, to pay some of the long over-due respect and gratitude which he owed to his grandfather. Captain Morgan professed to have cut himself clear of all his relationships, but it was true that twenty years before, he had spent everything he had, and deprived himself of every comfort, he and his wife, for the maintenance of his daughter's children. He had never got any return for this from the children, who knew very little about him. And it was full time that Roland should come with his power of making himself agreeable to pay the family debt – no harm if he did something for the family fortunes by the way.

And it has been seen that the young man fully proved, and at once, the justice of his sister's description of him. His grandmother, to be sure, was vanquished by his very name, by a resemblance which she found out in his mouth and eyelids to his mother, and by the old love which had never been extinguished, and could not be extinguished in her motherly old bosom. But Hester, by a mere chance encounter in the fire-light, without even seeing him, without knowing his name, had been moved to a degree of interest such as she was not conscious of having ever felt before. And Catherine Vernon had yielded at once, and without a struggle, to his influence. This was delightful enough, but after all it did not come to very much, for Roland found himself plunged into the midst of a society upon which he had not at all reckoned. The community at the Vernonry was simple; he was prepared for that, and understood it. But when he went to the Grange and made acquaintance with the closer circle there, the young men to whom Catherine had made over the bank and all its interests, and especially Edward, who was established as if he had been her son, in her house, a change came over Roland's plans and anticipations. He had a strong desire for his own advantage, and inclination to follow that wherever it might lead him; but he was not malignant in his selfishness. He had no wish to interfere, unless it proved to be absolutely necessary, with another man's career, or to injure his fellow-creatures in promoting his own interest. And it cannot be denied that he felt a shock of disappointment which, as he found when he reasoned with himself on the subject, was somewhat unreasonable. How could he expect the field to be clear for him, and the rich, childless woman of fortune left at his mercy? As if there were not crowds of other people in the world who had a quick eye for their own advantage, and clear sight to see who was likely to serve it! But these discoveries put him out. They made his mission purposeless. They reduced it to the mere visit to his grandfather, which he had called it, but which he by no means intended it solely to be.

After this first shock of disappointment, however, Roland began to find himself at once amused and interested by the new community, into the midst of which he had dropped. The inmates of the Vernonry were all simple enough. To be very poor and obliged to accept favours from a rich relative, yet never to be able to escape the sense of humiliation, and a grudge against those who are better off – that is indeed too general: and it is even a conventional necessity of the imagination, that there should be bickerings and private little spites among neighbours so closely thrown together. Ashton did not see much of the Miss Vernon-Ridgways, who had refused to know him at Catherine's house, nor of their kindred spirit Mr. Mildmay Vernon; but he could imagine them, and did so easily. Nor was the gentle little widow, who was now on one side now on the other, according as the last speaker moved her, or the young heroine her daughter, difficult to realise. But Catherine, and the closer group of her relations, puzzled him more. That she should gauge them all so exactly, yet go on with them, pouring kindness upon their ungrateful heads with a sort of amusement at their ingratitude, almost a malicious pleasure in it, surprised him less than that among all who surrounded her there was no one who gave to her a real and faithful devotion. And her faith in Edward, whose impatience of her bonds was the greatest of all, seemed to Roland in his spectatorship so pitiful, that he could scarcely help

crying out against it to earth and heaven. He was sorry for her all the more that she was so little sorry for herself, and it seemed to him that of all her surroundings he was the only one who was sorry for Catherine. Even his old people as he called them, did not fathom that curse of her loneliness. They thought with everybody else that Edward was a true son to her, studying her wishes, and thinking of nothing so much as how to please her. It appalled him when he thought of the snarl on Edward's lips, the profound discontent in his soul. It would be cruel above all things to warn her – she who felt herself so clear-sighted – of the deception she was the victim of; and yet what could it come to but unhappiness? Roland felt himself overpowered and almost overawed by this combination. Nobody but he, it seemed, had divined it. He had walked back with Edward to the Grange after their long talk and consultation, and had taken off his hat with a smile of kindness to the indistinct figure still seated in the window, which Edward recognised with a secret grimace. To see her seated there looking out for their return, was a pleasure to the more genial spirit. It would have pleased him to feel that there was some one who would look out for his coming, who would watch him like this, with tenderness as he went away. But then he had no experience of the kind in his own person, and Edward perhaps had too much of it. While the one went indoors with a bitter sense that he could go nowhere without being watched, the other turned away with a pleasant look back, waving his hand to Catherine Vernon in the window. She was not likely to adopt him, but she was kind to him, a pleasant, handsome old woman, and a most creditable relative. He was glad he had come if it were for that and no more. There were other reasons too why Roland should be glad he had come. He had found a new client, nay, a group of new clients, by whose means he could extend his business and his prospects – solid people with real money to risk, not men of straw. Though he was full of aspirations they were all of a practical kind. He meant to make his fortune; he meant to do the very best for his customers who trusted him as well as for himself, and his spirits rose when he thought what a power of extensive and successful operation would be given him by the money of all these new people who were so eager to face the risks of speculation. They should not suffer by it; their confidence in him should be repaid, and not only his, but their fortunes would be made. The certainty of this went to his head a little, like wine. It had been well for him to come. It had been the most important step he had ever taken in his life. It was not what he had hoped for, and yet it was the thing above all others that he wanted, a new start for him in the world, and probably the turning-point of his life. Other matters were small in comparison with this, and approbation or disappointment has little to do with a new customer in any branch of business. As for other interests he might have taken up on the way, the importance of them was nothing. Hester was a pretty girl, and it was natural to him to have an occupation of that sort in hand; but to suppose that he was sufficiently interested to allow any thought of her to beguile him from matters so much more serious, would have been vain indeed. He felt just such a momentary touch of pique in hearing that she was going to be married, as a woman-beauty does when she hears of any conquests but her own. If she had seen him (Roland) first, she would not have been, he felt, so easily won; but he laughed at himself for the thought, as perhaps the woman-beauty would scarcely have been moved to do.

CHAPTER V. WARNING

"I think, if you will let me, I will send down Emma for a little fresh air and to make your acquaintance, grandmother. She is rather of the butterfly order of girls, but there is no harm in her. And as it is likely that I shall have a good deal to do with the Vernons – "

"What do you want with the Vernons? Why should you have a good deal to do with them?" asked Captain Morgan, hastily, and it must be added rather testily, for the old man's usually placid humour had been disturbed of late.

"In the most legitimate way," said Ashton. "You can't wish me, now that I am just launched in business, to shut my eyes to my own advantage. It will be for their advantage too. They are going to be customers of mine. When you have a man's money to invest you have a good deal to do with him. I shall have to come and go in all likelihood often."

"Your customers – and their money to invest – what do mean by that? I hope you haven't taken advantage of my relationship with Catherine Vernon to draw in those boys of hers – "

"Grandfather," said Roland, with an *air digne* which it was impossible not to respect, "if you think a little you will see how injurious your words are. I cannot for a moment suppose you mean them. Catherine Vernon's boys, as you call them, are nearly as old, and I suppose as capable of judging what is for their advantage, as I am. If they choose to entrust me with their business, is there any reason why I should refuse it? I am glad to get everything I can."

"Yes, sir, there is a reason," said Captain Morgan. "I know what speculation is. I know what happens when a hot-headed young fellow gets a little bit of success, and the gambling fever gets into his veins. Edward Vernon is just the sort of fellow to fall a victim. He is a morose, ill-tempered, bilious being – "

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