

**HESTER
A STORY OF
CONTEMPORARY LIFE**

VOL. II

BY
MRS. OLIPHANT

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

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

CHARLES LAMB.

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HESTER.

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

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