

HESTER
A STORY OF
CONTEMPORARY LIFE

VOL. III

BY
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"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.

BUSINESS AND LOVE.

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

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

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

"But, of course, it is a matter of business," said Emma, "and very important business too. What can be so important for a girl as settling? It is all very well for you to talk, but I am the

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

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

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

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

an auxiliary who might be of so much service to her. So she answered carelessly—

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I am not going."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?" said Hester, raising her eyes and fixing them upon him. "I should like, not that, but to do as Catherine Vernon did," she cried, lighting up in every line of her animated countenance. "I

should like to step in when ruin was coming and prop it up on my shoulders as she did, and meet the danger, and overcome it——"

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

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

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

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

looked at nowadays. You think it is you who——" Here Hester paused, with a rising colour, "I will not say what I was going to say," she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hester put out her hand to stop him. "That goes far deeper," she said, with a rising blush. What did she mean? Roland was sufficiently versed in all the questions of this kind, which are

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

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

bothering him a bit, I have lots of nice people, and grandmamma has never said she was tired of me. Then why should he take me away?"

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

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

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

"And so do I," Roland said.

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

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

"Ah!" cried Mrs. John, "if it can be prevented, Mr. Roland. That was what happened to my dear husband. He could not be cool, as, I suppose, it is right to be. But sometimes, don't you think

one likes a person better for not calculating too much, for letting himself be carried away?"

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

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

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

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

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

"He means a steady head, mother; there is no question of anything else," said Hester, very red and troubled. Her secret consciousness in respect to Edward made life and conversation

very difficult for her: she could not bear any animadversion upon him, though in her own heart she made many; and at the same time she could not defend him openly. What was he to her more than Harry was? The same far-off cousin—old friend: not so much, indeed, as Harry, for all the world knew that Harry would fain have established another relationship had it seemed good in Hester's eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

"And so do I now," cried Emma; "they always tell me it is indigestion, but that is not a nice reason to give when people think you are blushing about something. It is very disagreeable. Mine comes on often after dinner when we dine early, and all

the afternoon I am just a fright! It is a blessing it goes off towards evening when one is seeing people. Roland, you must take Hester and me into Redborough. I want to buy some gloves, and I dare say so does she, for the Merridews to-night."

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

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

"You are always so tidy," said Mrs. John, with a faint sigh. She could not but feel it would be an advantage if Hester, though so much superior, would get some of Emma's ways. She was so neat: never a hair out of order, or a shoe-tie loose. Whereas, now and then, in her own child, there were imperfections. But she smiled as she looked after them, going out to the door to see them go. Hester, with her varying complexion (which had nothing to do with her digestion), threw up her head to meet the wind with a movement so vigorous, so full of grace and life, that it was a pleasure to see. The mother thought that it was pretty to watch her drawing on her gloves, though, perhaps, it would have been tidier to button them carefully as Emma did, before she came down stairs; but then in those days gloves had

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