

The Story of Hester Malpas

By

Letitia Elizabeth Landon

(L. E. L.)

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THE STORY OF HESTER MALPAS.

BY L. E. L.

THERE is a favourite in every family; and, generally speaking, that favourite is the most troublesome member in it. People evince a strange predilection for whatever plagues them. This, however, was not the case with Hester Malpas. The eldest of six children, she was her father's favourite, because from her only was he sure of a cheerful word and a bright smile. She was her mother's favourite, because every one said that she was the very image of that mother herself at sixteen. She was the favourite of all her brothers and sisters, because she listened patiently to all their complaints, and contributed to all their amusements; an infallible method, by the by, of securing popularity on a far more extended scale.

Mr. Malpas was the second son of a prosperous tradesman in Wapping,—a sickly child. Of course, he shrank from active amusement. Hence originated a love of reading, which, in his case, as in many others, was mistaken for a proof of abilities. Visions of his being a future lord chancellor, archbishop of Canterbury, or at least an alderman, soon began to stimulate the ambition of the little back-parlour where his parents nightly discussed the profits of the day, and the prospects of their family. The end of these hopes was a very common one;—at forty, Richard Malpas was a poor curate in Wiltshire, with a wife and six children, and no chance of bettering his condition. He

had married for love, under the frequent delusion of supposing that love will last under every circumstance most calculated to destroy it; and, secondly, that it can supply the place of everything else. Many a traveller paused to admire the beauty of the curate's cottage, with the pear-tree, whose trained branches covered the front; and the garden where, if there were few flowers, there was much fruit; and which was bounded on one side by a green field, and on the other by the yet greener churchyard. Behind stood the church, whose square tower was covered with ivy of a hundred years growth. Two old yews overshadowed the little gate; and rarely did the sunset glitter on the small panes of the Gothic windows without assembling half the children in the hamlet, whose gay voices and ringing laughter were in perfect unison with a scene whose chief characteristic was cheerfulness. But as whoso could have lifted up the ivy would have seen that the wall was mouldering beneath; and whoso could have looked from the long, flower-filled grass, and the glad and childish occupants of the rising mounds, to the dust and ashes that lay perishing below; so who could have looked into the interior of that pretty cottage would have seen regret, want, and despondency. Other sorrows soften the heart,—poverty hardens it. Nothing like poverty for chilling the affections and repressing the spirits. Its annoyances are all of the small and mean order; its regrets all of a selfish kind; its presence is perpetual; and the scant meal, and the grudging fire, are repeated day by day, yet who can become accustomed to them? Mr. and Mrs. Malpas had long since forgotten their youth; and if ever they referred to their marriage, on his part it was to feel, too late, what a drawback it had been to his prospects, and to turn in his mind all the college comforts and quiet of which his ill-fated union had deprived him. Nor was his wife without her regrets. A woman always exaggerates her beauty and its influence when they are past; and it was a perpetual grief to think what her pretty face might have done for her. As the children grew up, discomfort increased; breakfast, dinner,—supper was never attempted,—instead of assembling an affectionate group, each ready with some slight tale of daily occurrence, to which daily intercourse gives such interest, these meals were looked forward to with positive fear. There was never quite enough for all; and the very regret of the parents took, as is a common case, the form of scolding. When Hayley tried Serena's temper, he forgot the worst, the real trial—want; and want, too, felt more for others than for yourself. The mother's vanity, too,—and what mother is without vanity for her children?—was a constant grievance. It was hard that hers should be the prettiest and worst-dressed in the village. In her, the distress of their circumstances took the form of perpetual irritability,—that constant peevishness which frets over everything; while in Mr. Malpas it wore the provoking shape of sullen indifference.

In the midst of all this, Hester grew up;—but there are some natures nothing can spoil. The temper was as sweet as if it had not breathed the air of eternal quarrellings; the spirits as gay as if they had not been tried by the wearing disappointment of being almost always exerted in vain. She had ever something to do—something to suggest; and when the present was beyond any actual remedy, she could at least look forward; and this she did with a gaiety and an

energy altogether contagious. Everybody has some particular point on which they pique themselves; generally something which ill deserves the pride bestowed upon it. Richard Malpas particularly prided himself on never having stooped to conciliate the relations, who had both felt, and very openly expressed, the anger of disappointed hope on his marriage. His brother had lived and died in his father's shop: perhaps, as his discarded relative formed no part of his accounts, he had forgotten his very existence. On his death, shop and property were left to his sister Hester; or, as she was now called, Mrs. Hester Malpas. After a few years, during which she declared that she was cheated by everybody,—though it must be confessed that the year's balance told a different story every Christmas,—she sold her interest in the shop, and, retiring to a small house in the same street, resolved on making her old age comfortable. It is very hard to give up a favourite weak point; but to this sister Mr. Malpas at length resolved on applying for assistance;—he had at least the satisfaction of keeping the step a secret from his wife. Hester was his confidant,—Hester the sole admirer of “his beautiful letter.” Hester put it in the post-office; and Hester kept up his hopes by her own; and Hester went every day, even before it was possible an answer could arrive, to ask, “Any letter for my father?” for Mr. Malpas, fearing, in spite of his sanguine confidant, the probability of a refusal, had resolved that the letter should not be directed to his own house. Any domestic triumph, that the advice of writing, so often urged, had been taken too late, was by this means averted.

The day of the actual return of post passed, and brought no answer; but the next day saw Hester flying with breathless speed towards the little fir-tree copse, where her father awaited her coming. She held a letter in her hand. Mr. Malpas snatched it from her. He at once perceived that it was double, and post-paid. This gave him courage to open it, and the first thing he saw was the half of a bank-note for twenty pounds. To Hester this seemed inexhaustible riches; and even to her father it was a prodigious sum. For the first time she saw the tears stand in his eyes.

“Read it, child,” said he, in a broken voice. Hester kissed him, and was silent for a moment, and then proceeded with her task. The hand-writing was stiff, ugly, and legible; though the letters rather resembled the multiplication-table than the alphabet. The epistle ran as follows:—

“Dear Brother,—Received yours on the 16th instant, and reply on the 18th; the delay of one post being caused by getting a Bank of England note. I send one half for safety, and the other will be sent to-morrow. They can then be pasted neatly together. I sha'n't go back to old grievances, as your folly has been its own punishment. If people will be silly enough to marry, they must take the consequences. You say that your eldest daughter is named after me. Send her up to town and I will provide for her. It will be one mouth less to feed. You may count on the same sum (twenty pounds) yearly. I shall send directions about Hester's coming up, in my next letter.

“Your affectionate sister, HESTER MALPAS.”

Poor Hester gasped for breath when she came to her own name.

Even her glad temper sank at the bare idea of a separation from her parents.

“ Me, father !” exclaimed she ; “ oh ! what will my mother say ?”

“ No ; as she always does to anything I propose,” said her father.

To this Hester made no reply. She had long felt silence was the only answer to such exclamations. For once, like her father, Hester dreaded to return home. “ Is it possible,” thought she, “ we can be taking so much money home so slowly ?” and she loitered even more than her father. Hester had yet to learn that no earthly advantage comes without its drawback. At length the silence was broken, and Hester listened with conviction, and a good fit of crying, to the many advantages her whole family were to derive from her adoption by her aunt. Still, “ What will my mother say ?” was the only answer she could give.

When we expect the worst, it never happens. Mrs. Malpas caught at the idea of Hester’s going to town with an eagerness which inflicted on poor Hester the severest pang she had ever known. “ And is my mother so ready to part with me ?” was a very bitter thought. Still, if she could have read that mother’s heart, she would have been comforted. It was the excess of affection that made the sacrifice easy. All the belief in the sovereign power of a pretty face,—all the imagination which Mrs. Malpas had long ceased to exercise for herself,—were exerted for her daughter. Like all people who have lived their whole life in the country, she had the most unreal, the most magnificent ideas of London. Once there, and Hester’s future fortune was certain. Besides, she had another reason, which, however, from the want of confidence which ran through the whole family, she kept to herself. There was a certain handsome youth, the son of a neighbouring farmer, between whom and Hester she thought the more distance the better. She had suffered too much from a love-match herself to entertain the least kindness towards such a step. The faults we ourselves commit are always those to which we are most unforgiving. Hester herself had never thought about what the feeling was which made her blush whenever she met Frank Horton. No girl ever does. It was shyness, not deception, that made her avoid even the mention of his name. The word love had never passed between them. Still the image of her early playmate was very frequent amid the regrets with which she regarded leaving her native place. The next day brought the second letter from Mrs. Hester Malpas. It contained the other half of the bank-note ; and as it never seemed to have crossed the good lady’s mind that there could be an objection to her proposed adoption, she had made every arrangement for her journey the following week. She had taken her place in the coach, stated her intention of meeting her at the inn, and hoped that she worked well at her needle. There was little preparation to be made. Her aunt had said, “ that she could come with only the clothes on her back,” and she was taken very nearly at her word.

The evening before her departure, she went for a solitary walk, lingering amid all her old favourite haunts. Her spirits were worn out and dejected. It jarred cruelly upon her affectionate temper to find that her absence was matter of rejoicing to her whole family. The children, naturally enough, connected Hester’s departure with the new indulgences, the result of their aunt’s gift ; and childhood is as selfish

from thoughtlessness as age is from calculation. Her parents merged in the future that present which weighed so heavily upon poor Hester. She was stooping, with tearful eyes, to gather some wild flowers in the hedge, when Frank Horton, who had joined her unperceived, gathered them for her.

“And so, Hester, you are going to London, and will soon forget all your old friends.” Hester had no voice to assure him that she should not. Her silence gave her companion the better opportunity of expressing his regrets, doubly touching to the affectionate girl, who had just been thinking that her departure was lamented by no one. Hester’s heart was so full of love and sorrow, that it was impossible for some not to fall to his share; and they parted, if not with a positive promise, yet with a hope that their future life would, in some way or other, be connected together.

It was a sleepless night with the young traveller; and she awoke from a confused dream, which blended together familiar objects in a thousand fantastic combinations. She wakened up suddenly, and the first object on which her eyes opened was her mother,—the mother she had thought almost unkind,—seated weeping by the bedside. Not all Mrs. Malpas’s brilliant visions of the future could console, when it came to the actual parting. She bent over the fair and innocent face which looked so child-like asleep, in an agony of fear and love. Tomorrow, and the music of that ready footstep would be silent in their house,—to-morrow, and those sweet eyes would no more meet her own with their peculiar bright, yet watchful look. A little corded box was on the floor; she turned away from it, and burst into tears. It was the last suppressed sob that had roused her daughter. In a moment Hester was up, and weeping on her mother’s neck; and yet, sad as were the tears, they were pleasant when compared with those with which she had cried herself to sleep.

It was later than they had supposed; and the sound of the church clock striking five made them start; and Hester, with a trembling hand, began to dress. In half an hour the London coach would pass, and there were some fields between them and the high-road. This last half hour showed Hester how truly she was beloved. The youngest child neglected the breakfast; and while her father pressed her to eat, he could not eat himself. All felt movement a relief,—all accompanied her to the gate where they were to wait for the coming stage. They had scarcely reached the road, when the guard’s horn was heard in the distance. The coach appeared,—it stopped,—Hester took her place behind,—and again the horses were at full speed. The young traveller looked back; but her head was dizzy with the rapid and unaccustomed motion. The little group, that stood watching, swam before her sight. Still she saw them, and she did not feel quite alone. Tears shut them out,—she took her handkerchief; it was raised scarce an instant, but a rapid turn in the road shut them out from her lingering and longing gaze.

The guard, under whose especial charge she had been placed, did his best to console her; but found the attempt vain, and as he had children of his own, thought it all very proper that a daughter should cry at parting with her parents. He left her to the full indulgence of her tears. Nothing could well be more dreary than the journey was to poor

Hester. The bright morning soon clouded over, and a small, drizzling rain covered every object that might have diverted her attention, with a thick, dull mist. Such a sad and monotonous day leaves nothing to tell; and Hester found herself bewildered, cold, tired, hungry, and wretched, in the inn-yard where the coach stopped. Such a scene of confusion had never before met her sight; and she stood hopeless and frightened precisely in the place where the guard had helped her to alight, without an idea, or even a care, of what would happen to her next. She was roused by some one at her elbow inquiring "for the young woman that Mrs. Hester Malpas expected;" and in a moment the guard had consigned her to the care of a stranger. It was a neighbour whom her aunt had sent to meet her. Mr. Lowndes asked her how she did, received no answer, made up his mind that she was stupid and shy, considered that to talk was no part of his agreement with Mrs. Malpas, and hurried along the streets as fast as possible. The noise, the multitude of houses, the haste, the silence, made poor Hester's heart die within her. She felt indeed that she was come to a strange land, and grew more and more wretched at every narrow street through which they passed. At length her conductor stopped at a door: Hester started at the sound of the knocker. She was astonished at her guide's audacity in making such a noise, though, Heaven knows, it was but tame, meagre sort of rap after all.

"I have brought your niece safe," said Mr. Lowndes; "and good night in a hurry."

"Won't you walk in and have some supper?" said a voice so harsh that it gave an invitation the sound of a dismissal.

"No, no; some other night. I and my mistress will look in together."

Hester was sorry to part with him; she felt so desolate, that even the companionship of half an hour was something like a claim to an acquaintance.

"Come in, child," said the same forbidding voice; and a hand laid upon her arm conducted her into a small but comfortable-looking parlour. The light cheered, the warmth revived, but still Hester could not muster resolution enough to look up.

"Can't the girl speak?"

Hester tried to murmur some inarticulate sounds, but gave up the attempt in despair and tears.

"Poor thing! come, take a seat; you will be better after supper." And the old lady began to bustle about, and scold the servant for not bringing in the supper before it was possible.

"Take off your bonnet."

Hester obeyed; and the readiness with which this slight act was performed, together, perhaps, with the trace of crying very visible on the face, had a favourable effect on her hostess, who parted her hair on her forehead, and said, with much kindness of manner, "Your hair is the colour mine used to be—scarcely, I think, so long;—I used to be celebrated for my head of hair." And the complacency with which the elderly dame reverted to the only personal grace she had ever possessed diffused itself over her whole manner. Hester now looked at her aunt, who was the very reverse of what she had imagined: she had always thought she would be like her father, and fancied a tall, dark, and hand-

some face. No such thing. Mrs. Hester Malpas was near sixty (her niece had left age quite out of her calculation), and was little, thin, harsh-featured, and of that whole sharp and shrewish appearance so often held to be the characteristic of singlehood. She was, however, very kind to her young guest—only once spoke to her rather sharply for not eating the nice supper which she had provided, observing “that now-a-days young people were so whimsical;” adding, however, immediately afterwards, “Poor thing! I dare say you are thinking of home.” She lighted Hester herself to the little room which she was henceforth to consider her own, and bade her good night, saying, “I am a very early person, but never mind about to-morrow morning—I have no doubt you will be very sleepy.” And certainly Hester’s head was scarcely on her pillow before she was asleep.

Never was change so complete as that which now took place in Hester’s life. Nothing could be more dull, more monotonous, than her existence;—the history of one day might serve for all. They rose very early;—people who have nothing to do always make the day as long as possible:—they breakfasted—the same eternal two rolls, and a plate of thin bread and butter. After some time Hester was intrusted with the charge of washing the breakfast-things—a charge of no small importance, considering that her aunt regarded those small china teacups as the apple of her eye: then she read aloud the chapters and psalms of the day—then sat down to some task of interminable needlework—then dinner—then (after a few weeks’ residence had convinced Mrs. Malpas that her niece required exercise and might be trusted) she was allowed to walk for two hours—then came tea—the cups were washed again—then the work-basket was resumed—and Mrs. Hester told long stories of her more juvenile days—stories which, however, differed strangely from those treasured up by most elderly gentlewomen, whose memory is most tenacious of former conquests; but the reminiscences in which Mrs. Hester delighted to indulge were of the keen bargains she had driven, and the fortunate sales which she had effected. Had she talked of her feelings, Hester, like most girls, would have listened with all the patience of interest. An unhappy attachment is irresistible to the imagination of eighteen; but with these tender and arithmetical recollections it was impossible for any young woman to sympathize;—however, she listened very patiently—supper came at nine—and they went to bed at ten. Sometimes a neighbour of Mrs. Malpas’s own standing dropped in, and everything on the table was, if possible, found more fault with than usual. The truth was that Mrs. Hester Malpas had the best heart and the worst temper in the world, and she made the one an excuse for the other. Hester was grateful, and thought she was content—while her constant attention to her aunt’s slightest wish, the unvarying sweetness of her temper, won upon the old woman more than she would have acknowledged, even to herself. She scolded her, it is true, because she scolded every body; but she felt a really strong affection for her, which showed itself in increasing kindness to her family; and scarcely a month passed without some useful present, and which Hester had the pleasure of packing, directing, and sending off by the very coach which had brought herself to London. That dreary and terrible inn-yard was now connected with her pleasanter moments. Still this was but a weary life for a girl of nineteen, and Hester’s sweet laugh

grew an unfrequent sound, and her bright cheek lost its rich colour. The neighbours said that Mrs. Malpas was worrying her niece to death. This was not true. Mrs. Malpas was both fond of and kind to her niece in her way, and, had she noted the alteration, would have been the first to be anxious about her; but Hester's increasing silence and gravity were rather recommendations, and as to her looking pale, why she never had had any colour herself, and she did not see why her niece should have any—colour was all very well in the country.

A year passed away unmarked by any occurrence, when, one summer afternoon, as Hester was taking her accustomed walk, she heard her name suddenly pronounced. She turned, and saw Frank Horton.

"I have been watching for you," said he, hastily drawing her arm within his, and hurrying her along, "these two hours. I was afraid you would not come out; but here you are, prettier than ever!"

Hester walked on, flurried, confused, surprised, but delighted. It was not only Frank Horton that she was glad to see, but he brought with him a whole host of all her dearest remembrances—all her happiest hours came too—she faltered half a dozen hurried questions, and all about home. Frank Horton seemed, however, more desirous to talk about herself; he was eager in his expressions, and Hester was too little accustomed to flattery not to find it sweet. She prolonged her walk to the utmost, and when they separated, she had promised, first, that she would not mention their meeting to her aunt, and, secondly, that she would meet him the following day. It was with a heavy heart Hester bent over her work that evening. One, two, three days went by, and each day she met Frank Horton; the fourth, as she entered the parlour with her bonnet on, to ask, as was her custom, if her aunt wanted anything out, "No," said Mrs. Malpas, her harsh voice raised to its highest and harshest key, "you ungrateful, deceitful girl! I know what you want to go out for: take off your bonnet this moment, for out of the house you don't stir. Your young spark won't see you for one while, I can tell him."

Mechanically Hester obeyed: she took off her bonnet, and sat down. She knew she had done wrong, and she was far too unpractised in it to attempt a defence. Pale and trembling, she only attempted to conceal her tears. A few kind words, a tone of gentle remonstrance, and Mrs. Malpas might have moulded her to her will; but she was too angry, and reproach after reproach was showered upon the unhappy girl, till she could bear it no longer, and she left the room. Her aunt called her back, but she did not return. This was Hester's first act of open disobedience, and the indignation it excited was proportioned to the offence. Three more miserable days made up the week;—taunts, reproaches of every kind were lavished upon her—and what she felt most keenly was, that every person who came near the house was treated with an account of her falsehood and ingratitude, till at last Mr. Lowndes, the very person who gave the information, could not help exclaiming, "Lord, Mrs. Hester! she is not the first girl who did not tell every time she went out to meet her sweetheart."

If Hester was not the first girl, it would not be her aunt's fault if she was not the last—for not one moment in the twelve hours was there a cessation from the perpetual descant on the heinousness of her offence. On the Saturday night, after she had gone into her own room, the ser-

vant girl came up softly, and, giving her a letter, said, "Come, miss, don't take on so—I am sure no good will come of mistress's parting two true lovers; but dear, she never had one of her own—and such a handsome young man—but, Lord! is that her calling?" and the girl darted off, leaving Hester the letter.

A thrill of delight lighted up her pale face as she opened the precious epistle. Under any circumstances, what happiness, what an epoch in existence is the first love-letter!—and to Hester, who would have been thankful to a stranger for one word of kindness, what must not the page have seemed whose every word was tenderness? Frank wrote to say that he knew how she had been confined to the house—that he had kept purposely out of the way—and that he entreated her to meet him as she went to church the following Sunday—that he had something very important to tell her—and that he would never ask her to meet him again. Hester wondered in her own mind whether she should be allowed to go to church—trembled at the idea of thus profaning the sabbath—half resolved to confess all to her aunt—then found her courage sink at the idea of that aunt's severity—read the letter over again—and determined to meet him. She was late the ensuing morning, when Mrs. Hester came into her room, and exclaimed angrily, "So I suppose, as your spark has taken himself off, you do not want to go out? Please to make haste and get ready for church—I am sure you have need to pray for your sins."

Hester had not courage to reply. She dressed; and, after telling her she ought to be ashamed of making herself such a figure with crying, Mrs. Malpas dismissed both her and the servant to church. Very infirm, she herself rarely left the house, but used to read the service in the parlour, which was her sitting-room.

Trembling and miserable, Hester proceeded in the direction indicated by her lover; he was there before her,—and, with scarcely a word, she followed him hurriedly till they reached a more remote street, where, at least, neither were known. As they walked along, half Hester's attention had been given to the bell tolling for church; suddenly it ceased, and the silence smote upon her heart. Never before had she heard that bell cease but within the walls of the sacred edifice.

"Oh pray make haste—what can you have to say?—I shall be so late in church!" exclaimed she, breathless with haste and agitation.

"I shall not detain you again," replied he, in a low and broken voice. "Hester, I could not leave England without bidding you farewell, perhaps for ever!" She clung to his arm. To one who had never made but a single journey in all her life—whose idea of the world was composed of a small secluded village, and a few streets in a dull and unfrequented part of London—leaving England seemed like leaving life itself. "Yes, Hester," said her companion, gazing earnestly and sadly on her pale and anxious face, "I go on board to-day—I cannot stay here—I am off to America—I have done very wrong in renewing my acquaintance with you—but, with all my faults, I do love you, Hester, very truly and dearly. It was hard to leave my native country, and not leave one behind who would say 'God bless you!' when I left—or give me one kind thought when far, far away. I ask for no promise, Hester; but when I return, altered I hope for the better in every way, you will find Hester Malpas has been my hope and my object."

She could say nothing—the surprise of this departure overwhelmed every other feeling. She walked with him in silence—she listened to his words, and felt a vague sort of satisfaction in his expressions of attachment and fidelity; but she answered only by tears. Frank was the first to see the necessity of their parting. He accompanied her back to her aunt's, and Hester let herself in, as she had the key of the back-door. He followed her into the passage—he clasped her to his heart, and turned hastily away. Hester was not aware that he was gone till she heard the door close after him; she wanted consolation—it would have been a relief to have spoken to any one—she felt half inclined to seek her aunt and confess the meeting, but her courage failed, and she hurried into her own little room, where she was soon lost in a confused reverie which blended her aunt's anger and Frank's departure together.

Leaving her to the enjoyment (as people are said to enjoy a bad state of health) of her solitary and melancholy reverie, we will follow the worthy Mr. Lowndes out of church, who, leaving his wife to hurry home about dinner, declared his intention of paying Mrs. Hester Malpas a visit. The fact was, he had missed Hester from her accustomed place in church—thought that she was still kept prisoner to the house—and considering her to have been punished quite long enough, resolved to speak a word in her favour to her aunt. He knocked at the door, but instead of being let in with that promptitude which characterized all the movements of Mrs. Hester's household, he was kept waiting; he knocked again—still no answer. At this moment, just as Mr. Lowndes' temper was giving more way than the door, the servant girl came up, who had loitered longer on her way from church, arrived, and let them in together. She threw open the parlour door, but instantly sprung back with a scream. Mr. Lowndes advanced, but he, too, started back with an exclamation of horror. The girl caught hold of his arm, and both stood trembling for a moment, ere they mustered courage to enter that fated and fearful room. The presence of death is always awful, but death, the sudden and the violent, has a terror far beyond common and natural fear. The poor old lady was lying with her face on the floor, and the manner of her death was instantly obvious—a violent blow on the back of the head had fractured the skull, and a dark red stain marked the clean white cap, whence the blood was slowly trickling. They raised the body, and placed it in the large arm-chair, the customary seat of the deceased. "Good God! where is Miss Hester?" exclaimed Mr. Lowndes. The servant girl ran into the passage, and called at the foot of the stairs—she had not courage to ascend them. There was at first no answer—she called again—the door of Hester's apartment was opened slowly, and a light but hesitating step was heard. "Miss Hester, oh! Miss Hester, come down to your aunt." Hester's faint and broken voice answered, "Not yet, not yet—I cannot bear it."

Fatally were these words remembered against her. That evening saw the unfortunate girl confined in a solitary cell in Newgate. We shall only give the brief outline of the evidence that first threw, and then fixed the imputation of guilt upon her. It was evident that the murderer, whoever he was, had entered by the door: true, the window was open, but had any one entered through it there must have been the trace of footsteps on the little flower-bed of the small garden in front. The house, too, had been rifled by one who appeared to know it well, while

nothing but the most portable articles were taken—the few spoons, the old lady's watch, and whatever money there might have been, for not a shilling even was to be found anywhere. A letter, however, was found from Mr. Malpas to his sister, mentioning that Frank Horton, who had long been very wild, had been forced to quit the neighbourhood in consequence of having been engaged in an affray with some gamekeepers, and it was supposed that poaching was the least crime of the gang with whom he had been connected. The epistle concluded by a hope very earnestly expressed, that if, as common report went, Frank had gone up to London, he might not meet with Hester, and begging if he attempted to renew the acquaintance, a stop should be put to it at once. It was proved that Hester had met this young man several times in secret, the last in defiance of her aunt's express prohibition; that instead of going to church she had met him, and he had been seen leaving the house with all possible haste about the very time the murder had been committed, and he was traced to the river side. Two vessels had that morning sailed for America, but it was impossible to learn whether he was a passenger in either. Hester's own exclamation, too, seemed to confirm every suspicion, so did her terror, her confusion, and her bewildered manner. Every body said that she looked so guilty, and the coroner's inquest brought in a verdict for her committal.

It was a fine summer evening when Mr. Malpas and his family were seated, some in the porch of the cottage, while the younger children were scattered about the garden. There was an expression of cheerfulness in the face of the parents very different to the harsh, hard despondency of a twelvemonth since; and Hester, as her mother always prognosticated she would, had indeed brought a blessing on her family. Many an anxious glance was cast down the road, for to-day the post came in, and one of the boys had been dispatched to the village to see if there was a letter from Hester. The child was soon discovered running at full speed, and a letter was in his hand. "It is not my sister's handwriting," said he, with the blank look of disappointment. Mr. Malpas opened the epistle, which was from Mr. Lowndes, and broke kindly, though abruptly, his daughter's dreadful situation. The unhappy father sunk back senseless in his seat, and in care for his recovery Mrs. Malpas had a brief respite—but she, too, had to learn the wretched truth. How that miserable day passed no words may tell. Early next morning Mr. Malpas woke from the brief but heavy sleep of complete exhaustion; the cold grey light glared in from the window—he started from his seat, for he had never gone to bed—it was but a moment's oblivion, for the whole truth rose terrible and distinct. In such a state solitude was no relief, and he sought his wife to consult with her on the necessity of his going to London. He found only his other daughter, who had scarcely courage to tell him that her mother had already departed for town, and to give him the few scarcely legible lines which his wife had left.

The next evening, and Mrs. Malpas had found her way to the cell of her unhappy child. All was over—she had been tried and found guilty, not of the actual murder, but of abetting and concealing it, and the following morning was the one appointed when the sentence of the law was to be carried into effect. "This is not Hester!" exclaimed Mrs. Malpas, when she entered the cell: and even from a mother's lips the ejaculation might be excused, so little resemblance was there between

the pale emaciated creature before her, and the bright and blooming girl with whom she had parted. Hester was seated on the side of the iron bedstead—her hands clasping her knees, rocking herself to and fro, with a low monotonous moan, which would rather have seemed to indicate bodily pain than mental anguish. Her long hair—that long and beautiful brown hair of which her mother had been so proud—hung dishevelled over her shoulders, but more than half of it was grey. Her eyes were dim and sunk in her head, and looked straight forward, with a blank stupid expression. Her mother whispered her name—Hester made no answer; she took one of her hands—the prisoner drew it pettishly away. That live-long night the mother watched by her child—but that child never knew her again. After some time she seemed soothed by those kind and gentle caresses, but she never gave the slightest token of knowing from whom they came.

Morning arrived at last. With what loathing horror did Mrs. Malpas watch the dim grey light mark the dull outline of the grated window! The morning reddened, and as the first crimson touched Hester's face as it rested sleeping on her mother's shoulder, somewhat of its former beauty came back to that fair young face. She slept long, though it was a disturbed and convulsive slumber. She was roused by a noise in the passage—bolt and bar fell heavily; there was the sound of many steps—strange dark faces appeared at the door. They came to take the prisoner to the place of execution! The men approached Hester—they raised her from her seat—they bound her round childish arms behind her. The mother clung to her child, but that child clung not in return. Mrs. Malpas sunk, though still retaining her hold, on the floor. With what humanity such an office permitted, they disengaged her grasp—they bore away the unresisting prisoner—the door closed, and the wretched mother had looked upon her child for the last time.

It was about a twelvemonth after the execution of Hester Malpas that the family were seated again, on a fine summer evening, round the door of their cottage; but a dreadful alteration had taken place in all. The father and mother looked bowed to the very earth—the very children shrunk away if a stranger passed by. Mr. Malpas had inherited his sister's property, much more considerable than had ever been supposed; but though necessity forced its use, he loathed it like a curse. An unusual sight now—the postman was seen approaching—he brought Mr. Malpas a newspaper. He shuddered as he took it, for he knew Mr. Lowndes's handwriting again. He opened it mechanically, and a large "read this" directed his attention to a particular paragraph. It was the confession of a Jew watchmaker, who had just been executed for burglary; and, among other crimes, he stated that he was the real murderer of Mrs. Hester Malpas, for which a young woman, her niece, had been executed. He had entered the window by means of a plank thrown from the garden railing to the casement, when with one blow he stunned the old lady, who was reading. Mr. Malpas went no further—the thick and blinding tears fell heavily on the paper—he could not read it aloud, but he put it into his wife's hand, with a broken ejaculation, "Thank God, she was innocent!"

* * The facts of the Jew committing the murder, and the old lady's niece being hanged, are perfectly true. It happened in Wapping some forty years since.