Fleet−Footed Hester

George Gissing

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She was born and bred in Hackney the third child of a burly, thick−witted soldier, who had married without leave. Her mother, a thin but wiry woman, took in washing, and supported the family. At sixteen, Hester had a splendid physique: strangers imagined her a fine girl of nineteen or twenty. It was then she ceased running races with the lads in London Fields, for she was engaged to John Rayner, a foreman at the gasworks.

In spite of her petticoats she would not wear a frock that fell much below the ankle Hester could beat all but the champion runner of that locality; the average youth had no chance against her. Running was her delight and glory. At the short distance she made capital records, and for 'stay' she could have held her own in a public school paper−chase.

Of course John Rayner put an end to all that. It was her running, witnessed by chance when they were strangers to each other, that excited him to an uneasy interest. He made inquiries, sought out her parents, wooed, won a provisional assent; there was an understanding, however, that she should run no more, at all events, in places of public resort. Rayner's salary came to about two hundred a year; when he married he would take a house of his own; his wife must conform to the rules of civilisation. Hester willingly agreed, for, though she manifested no strong attachment, large prospects decidedly appealed to her, and she rejoiced in the envious admiration of girls who could not hope for a lover with more than thirty shillings a week.

Moreover, he was a man to be proud of. It would have been a calamity had Hester plighted her troth to some whippersnapper of a clerk or artisan, some mortal of poor blood and stinted stature. John Rayner was her male complement: a stalwart fellow, six feet or close upon it, of warm complexion, keen eye, independent bearing. Intellectually, altogether her superior, but a man of the open air, companionable, full of animal passions, little disposed to use his brains in the way of improving a very haphazard education. As a lad he had run away from home somewhere in the North and he throve well simply because he did not become a reprobate; for John there was no medium. For him, to fall in love meant something beyond the conception of common men. His fiery worship puzzled Hester, who as yet was by no means ripe for respondent passion.

She looked what she was, a noble savage. Her speech was the speech of Hackney, but on her lips it lost its excessive meanness, and became a fit expression of an elementary, not a degraded, mind. At school she had learnt little or nothing, yet idleness, in her case, seemed compatible with purity; an unconscious reserve kept her apart from the loose−tongued girls of the neighbourhood. She respected her body, was remarkable for cleanliness, aimed in attire at ease and decency, never at display. It was but rarely that she laughed; the sense of humour seemed quite lacking in her. But no one lived from day to day with more vigour of enjoyment. She had the appetite of a ploughboy. Notwithstanding her neglect of cheap triumphs, a vigorous ambition ruled her life. She boasted of John Rayner's four pounds a week because it seemed to her a very large income indeed; she liked the man because he seemed to her much stronger, and better−looking, and more authoritative than other men with whom she came in contact.

For half a year all went fairly well. Hester had worked at a pickle−factory, but Rayner, disapproving of this, secretly paid her mother an equivalent of the wages, that she might be kept at home. An elder sister, who had hitherto helped in the laundry, went out to work, and Hester took her place; not a very good arrangement, for the

girl would not trouble herself to starch and iron skilfully; but it was only for a short time. At seventeen Hester was to be married.

Then befell a calamity. Challenged to run against a lad who boasted himself to be somewhat in the race−course, Hester could not resist the temptation. Late one evening she stole forth and ran the race and was defeated. Soon hearing of this breach of their agreement, John Rayner came down in wrath. Had Hester been victorious in her contest, she might have bowed the head and asked pardon; mortification made her stubborn and resentful of chiding. There was a quarrel, of characteristic vigour on both sides, and for a week the two kept apart. The good offices of Hester's mother brought them together again, but John was not his old self; he had become suspicious, jealous. Presently he began to make inquiries concerning one Albert Batchelor, who seemed to be much at the house. He objected to this young man a paper−hanger's assistant, smelling of hair−oil and of insolence. Hester wrathfully defended the acquaintance: she had known Albert Batchelor all her life: his object, if any at all, was to make love to her sister; Mr Rayner must be a little less of an autocrat, notwithstanding his place at the gasworks and his ample pay. Language of this kind brought the blood into John's face; there was a second conflict, more vigorous than the former. Hester tore the ring from her finger, and flung it to the ground they were in Victoria Park.

'Tike it, and tike yerself off!' she exclaimed, with magnificent scorn, 'I don't want nothin' to do with a man like you.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' was the furious answer. 'It's very certain you won't do for me! Just send me back my letters, and and anything else you've no use for.'

'I'll very soon do that! And never show your bad−tempered face again near our 'ouse.'

John turned his back and marched away. His letters and presents were returned in a very ill−made parcel and the rupture seemed final.

'You're a fool, that's what you are!' observed Hester's mother. 'Now you may go to the pickles ag'in, and let your sister come back to the work as she didn't ought never to have left.'

'I'll go precious quick, and glad of it!' Hester made retort.

But she ran no more races and perceptibly a change had come over her. Old friends gave place to new girls of more pretentious stamp than those Hester had formerly chosen. She dressed with corresponding increase of showiness, began to frequent the Standard Theatre whenever she had money to spare, and 'carried on' with various young men. About this time her father died, which, on the whole, was a fortunate event, for he had grown of late too fond of rum, and might soon have been a serious burden upon the household which he had never exerted himself to assist. John Rayner heard the news, and one evening managed to encounter Hester in a street near her home. He spoke kindly, gently, but the girl answered only a few cold words and went her way.

A week later he saw her on Hackney Downs with Albert Batchelor. She was laughing noisily a thing John had never known her do.

One night Hester stayed out so late that her mother threatened chastisement if the offence were repeated. That threat brought about another crisis in the girl's life. She left home, took lodgings for herself, and henceforth held little communication with her family.

For a space of two years John Rayner spoke not a word to the girl he loved, and in the meanwhile his circumstances underwent a notable change. First of all, owing to outrageous fits of temper, he was dismissed from his place as foreman; his employers offered him work in the carpenter's shop, a notable degradation. At first John

scornfully refused, and left the works altogether; but in a few days extraordinary thing in so proud a man he returned as though humbled; he was willing to accept the inferior employment. Again he got into trouble, this time through drink; he was reduced to the smith's shop, and bore the disgrace without murmuring. Time went on; one day John fought with a fellow workman, and behaved like a wild beast. He had the choice given him of leaving the works altogether or 'going to the heap.' To go to the heap signified to labour as a loader of coke. John accepted his debasement, went to the heap, and toiled among the roughest men, making himself as one of them. He drank, and seemed to glory in the fate that had come upon him. To all appearances he was now a sturdy blackguard, coarse of language, violent in demeanour. He terrorised his companions; with him it was a word and a blow. His comely face had lost its tint of robust health; he wore grimy rags; his home was anywhere and nowhere.

Now of all these things Hester was well aware. An old friend of hers, a girl married at sixteen and widowed at twenty, knew John Rayner, and from time to time talked with him; this Mrs Heffron assiduously reported to Hester each calamitous step in John's history.

'It's because of you,' she kept repeating. 'If you was a girl with a 'art you'd go an' make it up with the poor man.'

'Me! A likely thing!'

'He's awfully fond of you.'

'How d'you know?' asked Hester, indifferently.

"Cos he always says he don't care for you not a bit.'

This, to be sure, was evidence. Hester mused, but would not discuss the matter. She talked a good deal just now of Albert Batchelor, whose employment kept him in South London, so that she saw him very seldom.

In the summer of this year Hester was just nineteen; she and Mrs Heffron went one Sunday morning into Victoria Park, taking it in turns to push a perambulator which contained the young widow's two−year−old child. At one point of their walk they passed a man who lay asleep on the grass; Hester went by without noticing him, but Mrs Heffron, suddenly casting back a glance, exclaimed in surpnse

'Why, that's Mr Rayner!'

Her companion stopped and looked. John lay in profound slumber, head on arm. He had dressed himself decently this morning and was clean. For nearly a minute Hester gazed at him, then made a summoning motion and went on.

'A precious good job I didn't marry 'im!' she said.

'It's all your fault, Hetty,' replied the other, looking back.

'No, it ain't. He'd have come low, anyway. He ain't half a man.'

Albert Batchelor proposed marriage to Hester for the third time, but she would give him no definite reply. That she encouraged him was not to be doubted. This autumn he spent a good deal of time in her company: she allowed him to say what he liked, and constantly smiled, but a characteristic reserve appeared in her replies when she made any. Frequently Hester spoke scarce twenty words in the course of an hour's walk. In fact, a strange silence had fallen upon her life, and she shunned ordinary companionship. Her temper was occasionally violent, but the old ardours never appeared in her; she had quite ceased to talk of her feats as a runner. In beauty, however, she had by no means fallen off; her lithe frame seemed to have reached the perfection of development,

and her face had more expressiveness, consequently more charm, than when it was wont to be flushed with the fervour of physical contest. No one attacked Hester's reputation; her talk was still pure, and to all appearances she went fancy−free.

On an evening of September, Batchelor and she walked in a quiet road not far from her lodgings. Few people passed them, but presently they were both aware that an acquaintance approached, no other than John Rayner. He wore the coarse clothes in which he worked 'at the heap.' Hester fixed her eyes upon him; he saw her, but would not look, and carelessly he went by.

'Will you let him insult me like that?' said the girl, in a hard voice, the moment after John had passed.

'Insult you? What did he do?'

'Why, he looked at me as insultin' as he could you must a'seen it. You're a nice man to walk with anyone!'

Her face was hot; she stood still, pointing after John's figure.

'It isn't the first time, neither,' she added, with breathless rapidity. 'If you let him go off like that I'll never speak to you again!'

Mr Batchelor was not exactly a combative man, though he had serviceable thews, and on occasion could face the enemy. The present affair annoyed him for he suspected that Hester had either imagined or invented the insult from Rayner; perhaps she wished to see John punished for the sake of old times. For an instant he hesitated.

'Coward!' cried the girl, with a face of bitter contempt.

That was more than Batchelor could endure.

'Hoigh!' he shouted, running after Rayner, who had reached a distance of twenty yards. 'Hoigh, you! jist stop, will you?'

The other turned in astonishment.

'Are you speaking to me?'

'Yis, I em. What d'ye mean by insultin' this young lydy? She says you looked at her insultin' and it ain't the first time neither. You jist come along 'ere an' apologise.'

John gazed at the speaker in bewilderment, then at Hester, who had moved a few steps this way.

'She says I've insulted her?'

'Mind who you're calling she. Why, you're at it again, a turnin' up yer nose '

'If you say another word to me,' said John fiercely, 'I'll leave you no nose to twist. Fool!'

He turned away, but at the same moment received a smart blow on the side of the face.

'That's your game, is it?' John remarked, again glancing towards Hester, who was leaning slightly forward, with eager gaze. 'Look out for yourself, then!'

His coat was off, and in less than a minute Albert Batchelor measured his length on the pavement. There sounded from the spectator of the fight a short mocking laugh. Up again, not much the worse, her champion made excellent play with his fists: blood was on Rayner's cheek. Unable to plant another knockdown blow, John had still the best of it. Crash, and crash again, sounded his slogging hits. At length he damaged his opponent's front teeth and brought him to his knees.

'Had enough, you fool?' he asked.

Three or four people had assembled, and others were rushing up. A window in the nearest house flew open; women's voices were heard. The light of a lamp, shining full on Hester, showed her watching with fierce delight.

'I wouldn't give in, if I was you,' she cried, tauntingly, to Batchelor.

Nor did he. The gathering crowd made it impossible. Another round was fought; it took perhaps, two minutes, and, in that space of time, Batchelor received so severe a thrashing that he tottered to the house steps, and sank there, helpless.

'Don't try it on again, young fellow,' was John's parting advice, as he took up his coat and hustled through the throng.

At the same moment Hester went off in the opposite direction, an exulting smile in her eyes. Albert Batchelor never again sought her society.

On reaching home, Hester lit her lamp it revealed a scrubby little bedroom with an attic window took off her hat and jacket, and deliberately lay down on the bed. She lay there for an hour or more, gazing at nothing, smiling, her lips moving as though she talked to herself. At eleven o'clock she rose, put on her hat, and once more left the house. She walked as far as the spot where the fight had taken place. It was very quiet here, and very gloomy. A policeman approached and she spoke to him.

'P'liceman, can you tell me 'ow fur it is from 'ere to the corner of Beck Street?' she pointed.

'Cawn't say exactly. Five 'undred yards, dessay.'

'Will you toime me while I run it there and back?'

The man laughed and made a joke, but in the end he consented to time her. Hester poised herself for a moment on her right foot, then sprang forward. She flew through the darkness and flew back again.

'Four minutes, two second,' said the policeman. 'Not bad, Miss!'

'Not bad? So that's all! Find me the girl as can do it better.'

And she ran off in high spirits.

A few days after, as she came out of the pickle factory, Mrs Heffron met her with an item of news. John Rayner had left the gasworks, and, what was more, had resolved to leave England. He was going to the Cape; might be off in a week's time.

'What's that to me?' said Hester, snappishly.

'If I was you I wouldn't let a man like that go abroad. Mrs Crow's 'usband went to the Cape, and they've never heard of him again to this day.'

'He may go to the devil for all I care,' rejoined Hester, with unusual violence of phrase. And she walked away without heeding her friend.

They met again before long. Mrs Heffron's child was very ill; the mother had nursed it two days and two nights; she was worn out, and sent for Hester. The girl made herself useful, and promised to sit up half the night whilst Mrs Heffron slept in a room which her landlady put at her disposal.

'I've 'ed a letter from Mr Rayner to−day,' said the widow, in an exhausted voice, as they sat by the child's bed.

'Oh!'

'He's goin' to−morrow. From Waterloo, first train in the morning.'

'Best thing he can do, dessay.'

Mrs Heffron took the crumpled letter out of her pocket and gazed at it.

'My God!' she exclaimed mournfully. 'If it was me, Hetty, he wouldn't go.'

Hester flashed a look at the thin face, pallid with fatigue. She said nothing; her eyes fell in abashment.

It was seven o'clock. Hester said she would go home for an hour, then return and watch over the child while the mother slept. But instead of going home, she walked to the nearest railway−station, which was Hackney Downs, and there, at the booking office, she put a question to the clerk.

'What's the first train from Waterloo in the mornin', please?'

'Main line?'

'To go to the Cape.'

The clerk laughed.

'Southampton, I suppose you mean, then, or Plymouth. Five−fifty; ten minutes to six.'

With this information, she presently returned to Mrs Heffron's lodging. It was arranged between them that Hester should sit up until two o'clock; the mother would then take her place. Mrs Heffron placed a watch on the mantelpiece, that her friend might call her, if necessary, when the time came. And at eight Hester seated herself, understanding perfectly what she had to do from time to time for the little sufferer.

Till midnight the child kept moaning and tossing on its bed. A dose of medicine given at that hour seemed to be of soothing effect. By half−past twelve all was quiet. Hester found the time go very slowly, for her mind was as feverish as the body of her little patient. One o'clock was striking; another hour

How had it happened? From complete wakefulness she had sunk into profound sleep, without warning. It was the child's voice that wakened her, reproaching her conscience. She ran to the watch, and saw with great relief that it was only half−past two. Mrs Heffron must still be sleeping, poor thing. At any other time Hester would have let her sleep on, but now she was eager to get away. Half−past two ten minutes to six; abundant time, but she must

get away.

She called the mother, and told her what hour it was. They talked for a few minutes, then, with a promise to look in again that evening, Hester left the house.

Dark, and a cold morning; happily, no rain. Hester ran home, admitted herself with a latch−key, went silently up into her bedroom, and hurriedly made a change of dress. She put on her best things; a nice black straw hat, just purchased for the winter; a warm jacket, which showed the grace of her figure; a serge skirt; round her neck a boa of feathers, cheap imitation of a fashionable adornment. Then she stole forth again. It must be about three.

Deeply absorbed in her tumultuous thoughts, she walked at a quick pace as far as the crossing of City Road and Old Street. Here she spoke to a policeman, and asked him which direction she had better take for Waterloo Station. The reply was that she couldn't do better than go straight on to the Bank, then turn westward, and so to the Strand.

Very well; would he tell her what time it was? Just upon twenty−five minutes past five.

She staggered as though he had struck her. Twenty−five minutes past five? Then Mrs Heffron's watch had stopped. She saw in a flash of miserable enlightenment the misfortune that had befallen her.

'But,' she panted, 'I must be at Waterloo by ten minutes to six.'

'You can't,' replied the policement stolidly 'unless you take a cab.'

She felt in her pockets. Not a penny. In changing her dress she had left her purse behind; and she remembered that it contained only a few coppers.

'How far is it ?'

'A matter of three miles,' was the leisurely answer. Five−and−twenty minutes: three miles. Without a word, without a look, Hester set off at her utmost speed.

Before reaching Finsbury Square, she pulled the boa from her neck, unbuttoned her jacket, loosely knotted the boa round her waist. As she came out into the open space between the Bank and the Mansion House, a clock pointed to one minute past the half−hour. She knew that it was now a straight run to the street which led out of the Strand towards Waterloo Bridge. But she must be prudent; agitation had made her heart beat violently; her breath came in painful pants; a 'stitch' in the side, and it would be all over with her.

So along the Poultry, along Cheapside, she ran with self−restraint, yet quickly, her hands clutched at her sides. Clanging hoofs upon the asphalt suggested to her that she might get a lift, but it was only a parcels−post van, the driver perched high above his flaring lanterns; it soon outstripped her. On she sped between the tall, silent houses, the closed shops. Only one or two pedestrians saw her, and they turned in curiosity as she bounded by.

At the crossing from Cheapside into St. Paul's Churchyard a policeman, caped and with bull's−eye at his belt, put himself sharply in her way.

'What's up? Where are you going?'

Hester would have flown past, but a heavy hand arrested her. The constable insisted on explanations, and she sobbed them out all the time trying to tear herself away.

'Waterloo the first train ten minutes to six someone goin' away '

The bull's eye searched her face bloodless, perspiring and pried about her body.

'Let me go, Sir! Oh, let me go!'

She had lost two or three minutes, but was free again. Like a spirit of the wind, the wind itself blowing fiercely along with her from the north−east she swept round the great Cathedral, and saw before her the descending lights of Ludgate Hill. How grateful she was for the downward slope! Her breath, much easier just when the policeman stopped her, had again become troubled with the heart−throbs of fear. At Ludgate Circus there came out from Blackfriars a market−cart, which turned westward, going to Covent Garden.

'Will you give me a lift?' she called out to the man who drove it.

Imprudent, perhaps; she might run quicker; but Fleet Street looked like a mountain before her. The man pulled up in a dawdling way, and began to gossip. Hester leapt to a seat beside him, and urged him on.

There was sudden revelation of busy life. She knew nothing of the newspaper trade; it astonished her to see buildings aflare with electric light; carts drawn up in a long row, side by side, along the pavement; trucks laden with huge bales; men labouring as if minutes meant life or death, as they did to her; for she felt that if she missed the train, if John Rayner were whirled away from her into the unknown, there would be nothing left to live for.

'Can't you go quicker?' she said feverishly.

The man asked questions; he was a chatterbox. Presently a big clock before her, that of the Law Courts, pointed, like the hand of fate, to twenty minutes before the hour. Oh! She could run quicker now that she had her breath again. Without a word she sprang down, fell violently on her hands and knees, was up and off. Moisture upon her hands blood, the street−lamp showed. But the injury gave no pain.

The cart kept up with her; she would have burst the sinews of her heart rather than let it pass.

St. Clement Danes the Strand. Here men were washing the road, drenching it with floods of water from a hose. Another great place of business, with bales flung about, men furiously at work, carts waiting or clattering away. She passed it like an arrow, and on, and on.

Somerset House Wellington Street the lights of Waterloo Bridge.

Again a policeman looked keenly at her, stepped forward. She shrieked at him, 'The train! The train!' and he did not pursue. From the river a fierce wind smote upon her, caught her breath. Had she looked eastward she would have seen the dome of St. Paul's black against a red rift in the sky. To−day the sun rose at a few minutes past six; dawn was breaking.

Many workmen were crossing the bridge, and carts rattled in both directions. Her breast seemed bound with iron; her throat was parched; her temples throbbed and anguished. Quicker but she could not, she could not! Men were staring after her, and some shouted. She saw the station now; she was under the bridge. A railway servant, hurrying on before her, turned as she overtook him.

'The train which way?' she gasped;

'Five−fifty? All right; you'll do it, my girl.'

He showed the approach to the main line and Hester sped on. Up the sharp incline she raced with a mail−van. She saw the sparks struck out by the horses' hoofs. Behind came a newspaper cart, with deafening uproar.

The clock the clock right before her! It was at a minute past the train time. Five minutes fast had she known it. On, in terror and agony! The outer platform was heaped with packages of newspapers, piles of them thrown back to await the slow train. A crowd of porters unloaded the vehicles, and rushed about with trucks. There was the sound of a jangling bell.

A long train, so long that she could not see the engine, waited with doors agape. No hurrying passengers; no confusion; trucks being briskly emptied into the vans, that was all. She was in time, but her eyes dazzled, and her limbs failed.

Then someone touched her. She turned. It was John Rayner. He had a rough new overcoat, a travelling cap, in his hand only a stout stick, and he looked at her with wide eyes of astonishment.

'What are you doing here?'

'I've come I've run all the way '

Her gasped words were barely intelligible.

'You came to see me off?'

Hester caught him by the hand in which he held his stick.

'Don't go! I want you! I'll marry you! '

'Ho, ho! Then you must go with me. I've done with this country.'

He drew his hand away, but kept his eyes fixed on hers.

'Go? To the Cape?'

'There's about one minute to get your ticket. I've got little enough money, but enough to pay your passage and leave us a pound or two when we get out there. Make your choice; a minute less than a minute.'

She tried to speak, but had no voice. John darted away from her to the booking−office, and returned with her ticket.

'Come along; my traps are in here.'

He seized her by the arm and drew her along. She could not mount the step of the carriage. He lifted her in; placed her on the seat.

'But I haven't got no clothes nothing!'

'I'll buy you some. We shall have two or three hours at Southampton before the ship sails. I say, how bad you look! Hetty!'

An official came to examine the tickets; he glanced with curiosity at the couple, then locked them in together. Again a bell rang.

'Hetty!'

She was all but fainting. John put his arms about her, kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her lips.

'I've run all the way '

Insensibly, the train began to move. Hester did not know that she had started until they were rushing past Vauxhall.

And behind them the red rift of the eastern sky broadened into day.