

**In this extract taken from a short story called *The Old Nurse's Story* by Elizabeth Gaskell (published in 1852), an elderly nurse called Hester reveals to the children in her care about a dark and mysterious incident from her past. This extract comes from the end of the story.**

5 Just at that moment my darling wakened with a sudden start: "My little girl is crying, oh, how she is crying!" and she tried to get up and go to her, but she got her feet entangled in the blanket, and I caught her up; for my flesh had begun to creep at these noises, which they heard while we could catch no sound. In a minute or two the noises came, and gathered fast, and filled our ears; we, too, heard voices and screams, and no longer heard the winter's wind that raged abroad. Mrs. Stark looked at me, and I at her, but we dared not speak. Suddenly Miss Furnivall, went towards the door, out into the ante-room, through the west lobby, and opened the door into the great hall. Mrs. Stark followed, and I durst not be left, though my heart almost stopped beating for fear. I wrapped my darling tight in my arms, and went out with them. In the hall the screams were louder than ever; they seemed to come from the east wing--nearer and nearer--close on the other side of the locked-up doors--close behind them. Then I noticed that the great bronze chandelier seemed all alight, though the hall was dim, and that a fire was blazing in the vast hearth-place, though it gave no heat; and I shuddered up with terror, and folded my darling closer to me. But as I did so the east door shook, and she, suddenly struggling to get free from me, cried, "Hester! I must go. My little girl is there I hear her; she is coming! Hester, I must go!"

10 I held her tight with all my strength; with a set will, I held her. If I had died, my hands would have grasped her still, I was so resolved in my mind. Miss Furnivall stood listening, and paid no regard to my darling, who had got down to the ground, and whom I, upon my knees now, was holding with both my arms clasped round her neck; she still striving and crying to get free.

20 All at once, the east door gave way with a thundering crash, as if torn open in a violent passion, and there came into that broad and mysterious light, the figure of a tall old man, with grey hair and gleaming eyes. He drove before him, with many a relentless gesture of abhorrence, a stern and beautiful woman, with a little child clinging to her dress.

25 "O Hester! Hester!" cried Miss Rosamond; "it's the lady! the lady below the holly-trees; and my little girl is with her. Hester! Hester! let me go to her; they are drawing me to them. I feel them--I feel them. I must go!"

30 Again she was almost convulsed by her efforts to get away; but I held her tighter and tighter, till I feared I should do her a hurt; but rather than let her go towards those terrible phantoms. They passed along towards the great hall-door, where the winds howled and ravened for their prey; but before they reached that, the lady turned; and I could see that she defied the old man with a fierce and proud defiance; but then she quailed--and then she threw up her arms wildly and piteously to save her child--her little child--from a blow from his uplifted crutch.

35 And Miss Rosamond was torn as by a power stronger than mine, and writhed in my arms, and sobbed (for by this time the poor darling was growing faint).

40 "They want me to go with them on to the Fells--they are drawing me to them. Oh, my little girl! I would come, but cruel, wicked Hester holds me very tight." But when she saw the uplifted crutch, she swooned away, and I thanked God for it. Just at this moment--when the tall old man, his hair streaming as in the blast of a furnace, was going to strike the little shrinking child--Miss Furnivall, the old woman by my side, cried out, "O father! father! spare the little innocent child!" But just then I saw--we all saw--another phantom shape itself, and grow clear out of the blue and misty light that filled the hall; we had not seen her till now, for

45 it was another lady who stood by the old man, with a look of relentless hate and triumphant  
scorn. That figure was very beautiful to look upon, with a soft, white hat drawn down over  
the proud brows, and a red and curling lip. It was dressed in an open robe of blue satin. I had  
seen that figure before. It was the likeness of Miss Furnivall in her youth; and the terrible  
phantoms moved on, regardless of old Miss Furnivall's wild entreaty,--and the uplifted crutch  
50 fell on the right shoulder of the little child, and the younger sister looked on, stony, and  
deadly serene. But at that moment, the dim lights, and the fire that gave no heat, went out of  
themselves, and Miss Furnivall lay at our feet stricken down by the palsy--death-stricken.

Yes! she was carried to her bed that night never to rise again. She lay with her face to the  
wall, muttering low, but muttering always: "Alas! alas! what is done in youth can never be  
55 undone in age! What is done in youth can never be undone in age!"