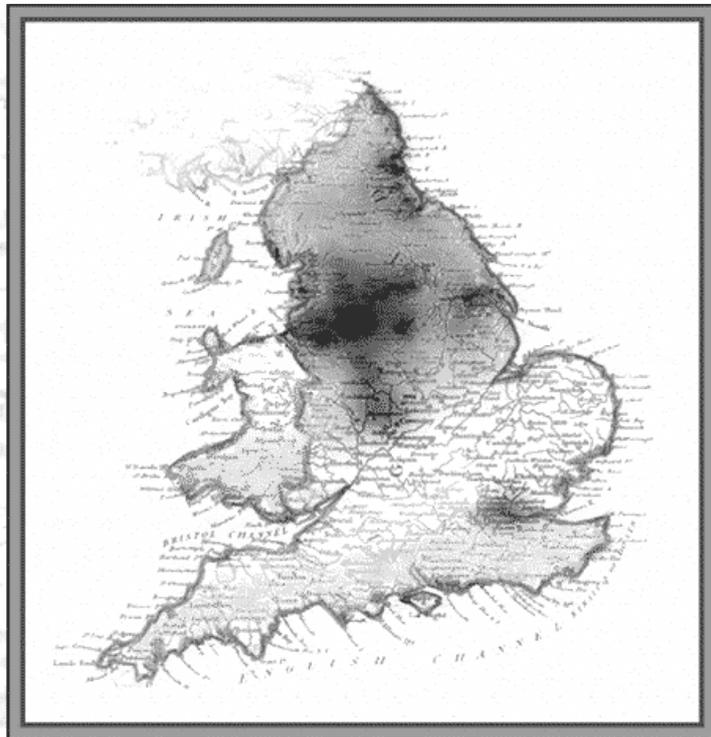


Elizabeth Gaskell
North and South
Abridged



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Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell was born Elizabeth Stevenson in 1810 in London. Her father William Stevenson had worked as a church minister before resigning his post; he then took up scientific farming in Scotland for a few years before becoming a civil servant. His wife, Elizabeth, bore him eight children, of whom only the oldest and youngest survived – John and Elizabeth. The young Elizabeth's mother died when she was one.

Elizabeth was taken to live with her aunt Hannah Lumb in Knutsford, Cheshire (a town she later used as the basis for her novel *Cranford*.) At the age of twenty-one, she met William Gaskell, assistant minister at Cross Street Chapel in Manchester; they married, and lived in Manchester, which was then a busy and expanding industrial city. Through her husband's work, and teaching at Sunday School, she became acquainted with the poorer inhabitants of the city and their problems – poverty, squalor and disease.

The couple had three children: two girls and a boy. It was after her baby son died that Elizabeth began to write her first novel, partly as a distraction from grief. She had already written sketches and short stories for journals; but the novel *Mary Barton* (1848), describing the lives of working-class people, established her as a writer. It was both controversial, because of its perceived bias against the factory owners, and hugely popular. Subsequently, Elizabeth got to know a number of eminent authors including Dickens, Carlyle and Charlotte Bronte, as well as social reformers like Harriet Martineau.

Her next full-length work, *Cranford*, was published in parts in Dickens's journal *Household Words* from 1851-53; it was a gentle and humorous account of ladies living in a country town. However, with *Ruth* (1853), she took up a socially controversial subject – that of pregnancy outside marriage, a theme which scandalised many readers.

North and South was her next novel, published in weekly parts in *Household Words* from 1854-55. In it, Gaskell returned to an industrial setting: her fictional city of Milton was modelled on Manchester. The book describes the conflict between Margaret Hale, an idealistic young woman from the rural south of England, and the stern and practical northern mill-owner John Thornton – a conflict which is echoed by that between the mill-owners and workers. The novel is even-handed in showing all points of view; though when it was published, some readers felt it leaned too far on the side of the workers. Its appearance in *Household Words* came immediately after the serialisation of Dickens's own novel *Hard Times*, which tackled the same subject of northern factory-workers and masters, though written with a very different emphasis and style.

North and South was soon afterwards published in one volume, with a revised and expanded ending. Elizabeth Gaskell felt drained by the effort of finishing the book, and was also deeply affected by the death in 1855 of her friend Charlotte Bronte, whose biography she went on to write at Patrick Bronte's request. After this was published in 1857, there followed a number of short stories and the novel *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), which was set during the Napoleonic Wars. Her final work *Wives and Daughters* was a masterly account of small-town lives; it was not quite finished when, in 1865, Elizabeth Gaskell died suddenly at the age of fifty-five.

After her death, Elizabeth Gaskell's literary reputation gradually faded until the mid-twentieth century, when interest in her social themes revived. She is now regarded as a major Victorian novelist. As Jenny Uglow writes in her excellent biography, 'Gaskell does not take our breath away at her breadth and penetration as George Eliot does, nor can she match the visionary intensity of Charlotte Bronte, but her unforced storytelling power and impassioned sympathy create an unrivalled range of fully imagined worlds.' *

*Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell, a Habit of Stories* (Faber and Faber, 1993.)

Note on the Abridgement

This abridgement aims to make *North and South* easier to read and understand whilst leaving the plot and characterisation fully intact. It is about two-thirds the length of the original book. No scenes have been omitted, but long descriptive passages and speeches have been shortened. A few expressions have been paraphrased; and in one or two places, extra phrases have been added to make clear what the Victorian reader would have taken for granted (e.g. that the heroine does not go into formal society while she is in mourning). Extra paragraph breaks have also been inserted.

This abridgment is intended for general readers rather than serious students of Elizabeth Gaskell's work. If you are studying *North and South* for academic purposes, the full novel can be found free online at Project Gutenberg and elsewhere.

Dialect

Before reading the book, it is useful to know a couple of words in the Lancashire dialect used by characters such as the Higgins family. I have left this largely unchanged except for a few tweaks to make their speech easier to understand. However, two words need explanation:

Hoo means *she*. It derives from *heo*, the Anglo-Saxon word for *she*; this usage is no longer found.

To *clem* means to starve, go hungry: so *clemmed* means famished. It can also mean squeezed or pinched. Both usages derive from the Anglo-Saxon *clamm*, meaning fetter, prison or grip.

Although some features of this 19th century dialect have disappeared, recordings of various Lancashire dialects can be heard on the British Library website. These include a recording made by an inhabitant (born in 1882) of Harwood, half way between Manchester and Burnley, where Nicholas Higgins came from. This gives a good idea of the sort of accent the Higgins family might be imagined to have:

<http://sounds.bl.uk/Accents-and-dialects/Survey-of-English-dialects/021M-C0908X0045XX-0200V1>

[Note in 2025: this link is currently unavailable following a major cyber-attack on the British Library website. It is to be hoped it will be available again at some point.]

Notes on the [social and industrial context of *North and South*](#) appear at the end of the ebook.

CHAPTER 1

HASTE TO THE WEDDING

‘Edith!’ said Margaret gently, ‘Edith!’

But, as Margaret half suspected, Edith had fallen asleep. She lay curled up on the sofa in the drawing-room in Harley Street, looking very lovely in her white muslin and blue ribbons. If Titania had ever been dressed in white muslin and blue ribbons, and had fallen asleep on a crimson sofa in a drawing-room, Edith might have been taken for her. Margaret was struck afresh by her cousin’s beauty.

They had grown up together from childhood. Edith had always been noted for prettiness; but Margaret had never thought about it until recently, when the prospect of soon losing her companion gave force to Edith’s charms. They had been talking about her wedding dress, and Captain Lennox, and Edith’s future life at Corfu, where his regiment was stationed; and the difficulty of keeping a piano in good tune (a difficulty which Edith seemed to consider as one of the most formidable that could befall her in her married life.) But the whispers had become drowsy; and Margaret, after a few minutes, found that in spite of the buzz in the next room, Edith had rolled herself up into a soft ball of muslin and ribbon, and gone off into a peaceful little after-dinner nap.

Margaret had been on the point of telling her cousin of her plans for her own future life, in the country parsonage where her father and mother lived; and where her bright holidays had always been passed, though for the last ten years her aunt Shaw’s house had been her home. She brooded silently over the coming change in her life. It was a happy brooding, although tinged with regret at being separated from her gentle aunt and cousin. As she thought of the delight of filling the important post of only daughter in Helstone parsonage, pieces of the conversation from the next room came to her ears.

Her aunt Shaw was talking to the five or six ladies who had dined there, and whose husbands were still in the dining-room. They were neighbours whom Mrs. Shaw called friends, because she happened to dine with them more frequently than with any other people. They had been invited to a farewell dinner in honour of Edith’s approaching marriage. Edith had objected, for Captain Lennox was expected to arrive by a late train that very evening; but, although she was a spoiled child, she was too careless and idle to have a very strong will, and gave way when she heard of the delicacies which her mother had ordered. She had contented herself by playing with the food on her plate, and looking grave and absent. Now, while Edith slept, Margaret overheard her aunt’s conversation.

‘I suffered myself; of course I was happy with the poor dear General, but still disparity of age is a drawback; one that I was resolved Edith should not have. I foresaw that the dear child was likely to marry early; I had quite a prophetic feeling when Captain Lennox’ – and here the voice dropped into a whisper, but Margaret could easily supply the blank.

The course of true love in Edith’s case had run remarkably smooth. Mrs. Shaw had urged on the marriage, although it was below some people’s expectations for the young and pretty heiress. But Mrs. Shaw said that her only child should marry for

love – and sighed emphatically, as if love had not been her motive for marrying the General.

She enjoyed the romance of the engagement rather more than her daughter. Although Edith was very thoroughly and properly in love, still she would have preferred a good house in Belgravia to the picturesque life which Captain Lennox described at Corfu. Anything of a gipsy or make-shift life was really distasteful to her. Yet had anyone come along with a fine house and a title, Edith would still have clung to Captain Lennox; though afterwards she might have had little qualms of ill-concealed regret. In this she was her mother's child. After deliberately marrying General Shaw with no warmer feeling than respect for his character and establishment, Mrs. Shaw was constantly, though quietly, bemoaning her hard lot in being united to one whom she could not love.

'I have spared no expense in her trousseau,' were the next words Margaret heard. 'She has all the beautiful Indian shawls and scarfs the General gave me.'

'She is a lucky girl,' replied another voice. 'What kind are they? Delhi?'

'Edith! Edith!' called her aunt. Margaret stepped forward.

'Edith is asleep, Aunt Shaw. Is it anything I can do?'

All the ladies said 'Poor child!' on receiving this distressing news about Edith; and the lap-dog in Mrs. Shaw's arms began to bark.

'Hush, Tiny! you naughty girl! you will waken your mistress. It was only to ask Edith if she would tell Newton to bring down her shawls: perhaps you would go, Margaret dear?'

Margaret went up into the old nursery at the top of the house, where Newton was busy sorting out some lace which was required for the wedding. While Newton went to find the shawls, Margaret looked round the nursery.

It was the first room in that house with which she had become familiar nine years ago, when she was brought, all untamed from the forest, to share the home, the play, and the lessons of her cousin Edith. She remembered the dark, dim look of the London nursery, presided over by an austere nurse, who was terribly particular about clean hands and torn frocks. She recollected the first tea up there – separate from her father and aunt, who were dining somewhere down an infinite depth of stairs. At home, Margaret had always had her meals with her father and mother.

Oh! well did the tall stately girl of eighteen remember the tears shed with such wild passion of grief by the little girl of nine, as she hid her face under the bed-clothes, that first night; and how she was told not to cry by the nurse, because it would disturb Miss Edith; and how she had cried more quietly, till her grand, pretty aunt had come softly upstairs with Mr. Hale to show him his little sleeping daughter. Then Margaret had hushed her sobs, and tried to lie as if asleep, for fear of making her father unhappy by her grief – which she rather thought it was wrong to feel after the planning and contriving they had gone through at home, before coming up to London.

Now she had got to love the old nursery; and she looked round with regret at the idea of leaving it for ever.

'Ah, Newton!' said she, 'We shall all be sorry to leave this dear old room.'

'Indeed, miss, I shan't. My eyes are not so good as they were, and the light here is so bad that I can't see to darn except at the window, where there's always a shocking draught.'

'Well, I dare say you will have both good light and warmth at Naples. You must keep your darning till then. Thank you, Newton, I can take them down.'

So Margaret went down laden with shawls. Her aunt asked her to stand as a model on which to display them, since Edith was still asleep. Margaret's tall figure set off the long folds of the gorgeous shawls that would have half-smothered Edith. She stood under the chandelier, quite silent and passive, while her aunt adjusted the draperies. Occasionally, as she was turned round, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, and smiled at her own appearance there in the garb of a princess. She touched the shawls gently, and was enjoying their brilliant splendour as a child would do, when the door opened, and Mr. Henry Lennox was announced.

Some of the ladies started back, as if ashamed of their feminine interest in dress. Mrs. Shaw held out her hand to the newcomer; Margaret stood perfectly still, thinking she might be yet wanted to model the shawls; but looking at Mr. Lennox with a bright, amused face, as if sure of his sympathy in her ludicrous situation.

Her aunt became absorbed in asking Mr. Henry Lennox about his brother the bridegroom and various other members of the Lennox family; and Margaret saw she was no more wanted as shawl-bearer. She devoted herself to amusing the other visitors, whom her aunt had for the moment forgotten. Edith came in, blinking at the stronger light, shaking back her slightly-ruffled curls, and altogether looking like the Sleeping Beauty just startled from her dreams. A Lennox was worth rousing herself for; and she had questions to ask about her unseen future sister-in-law, for whom she professed so much affection that Margaret might have almost felt jealous.

As soon as Henry Lennox was released by Edith, he went to sit by Margaret. She had not been certain whether he would come that night; now she was sure of a pleasant evening. He liked and disliked pretty nearly the same things that she did. Her face lit up into an honest, open brightness, and she received him with a smile which had not a tinge of shyness or self-consciousness.

'Well, I suppose you are all in the depths of ladies' business,' he said. 'Very different to my business of law. Playing with shawls is very different work to drawing up settlements.'

'Ah, I knew you would be amused to find us all so occupied in admiring finery. But really, Indian shawls are very perfect things of their kind.'

'No doubt. Their prices are very perfect, too. This is your last dinner-party, is it not? There are no more before Thursday?'

'No. After this evening we shall feel at rest, which I have not done for many weeks. I shall be glad to have time to think, and I am sure Edith will.'

'I am not so sure about her; but I can fancy that you will. Whenever I have seen you lately, you have been carried away by a whirlwind of some other person's making.'

'Yes,' said Margaret, rather sadly, remembering the never-ending commotion about trifles that had been going on for a month. 'I wonder if a marriage must always be preceded by a whirlwind, or whether there might not rather be a calm and peaceful time before it.'

An indescribable weariness of all the arrangements for a pretty effect oppressed her now; and she really wanted someone to help her to a few pleasant, quiet ideas about marriage.

'Oh, of course,' he replied in a graver tone. 'There are forms and ceremonies to be gone through, not so much to satisfy oneself, as to stop the world's mouth. But how would you have a wedding arranged?'

‘I have never thought much about it; only I should like it to be a fine summer morning; and I should like to walk to church through the shade of trees; and to have fewer bridesmaids, and no wedding-breakfast.’

‘The idea of stately simplicity accords well with your character.’

Margaret did not quite like this speech. She winced away from it, remembering former occasions on which he had tried to compliment her about her character. She said:

‘It is natural for me to think of Helstone church, and the walk to it, rather than of driving up a paved street to a London church.’

‘Tell me about Helstone. I should like to have some idea of the place you will be living in, when this house is shut up. Is Helstone a village, or a town?’

‘Oh, only a hamlet; I don’t think I could call it a village. There is the church and a few houses on the green – cottages, rather, with roses growing all over them.’

‘And flowering all the year round, especially at Christmas – make your picture complete,’ said he.

‘No,’ replied Margaret, somewhat annoyed, ‘I am not making a picture. I am trying to describe Helstone as it really is.’

‘I am penitent,’ he answered. ‘Only it sounded like a village in a tale rather than in real life.’

‘And so it is,’ she replied eagerly. ‘All the other places in England that I have seen appear so hard and prosaic-looking, after the New Forest. Helstone is like a village in one of Tennyson’s poems. But I won’t try and describe it any more. You would only laugh.’

‘Indeed, I would not. But I see you are resolved. Well, then, tell me what I really want to know: what the parsonage is like.’

‘Oh, I can’t describe it. It is home, and I can’t put its charm into words.’

‘I submit. You are rather severe tonight, Margaret.’

‘How?’ said she, turning her large soft eyes full upon him. ‘I did not know I was.’

‘Why, because I made an unlucky remark, you will neither tell me what Helstone is like, nor will you say anything about your home, though I have told you how much I want to hear about it.’

‘But indeed I cannot tell you about my own home.’

‘Well, then—’ pausing for a moment – ‘tell me what you do there. Here, you read, or have lessons, or otherwise improve your mind, till mid-day; take a walk before lunch, go for a drive with your aunt after, and have engagements in the evening. At Helstone, shall you ride, drive, or walk?’

‘Walk, decidedly. We have no horse, not even for papa. He walks all over his parish. The walks are so beautiful, it would be a shame to drive.’

‘Shall you garden much? That, I believe, is a proper employment for young ladies in the country.’

‘I don’t know. I am afraid I shan’t like such hard work.’

‘Archery parties – picnics – hunt-balls?’

‘Oh, no!’ said she, laughing. ‘Papa’s living is very small; and even if we were near such things, I doubt if I should go to them.’

‘I see; you won’t tell me anything. You will only tell me that you are not going to do this and that. Before the vacation ends, I think I shall pay you a call, and see what you really do.’

‘I hope you will. Then you will see for yourself how beautiful Helstone is. Now I must go. Edith is sitting down to play the piano, and I just know enough music to turn the pages for her; and Aunt Shaw won’t like us to talk.’

Edith played brilliantly. In the middle of the piece the door half-opened, and Edith saw Captain Lennox outside. She threw down her music and rushed out of the room, leaving Margaret confused and blushing, to explain to the astonished guests what vision had caused the sudden flight. Captain Lennox had come earlier than expected; or was it really so late? They looked at their watches, were duly shocked, and took their leave.

Then Edith came back, glowing with pleasure, half-shyly, half-proudly leading in her tall handsome Captain. Mrs. Shaw welcomed him in her kindly way, which had always something plaintive in it, arising from the long habit of considering herself a victim to an uncongenial marriage. With the General gone, she had a good life, with few drawbacks, and had been rather perplexed to find an anxiety. She had, however, settled upon her health as a source of apprehension; she had a nervous little cough whenever she thought about it; and some complaisant doctor ordered her just what she desired – a winter in Italy. Thus she was able to complain in her soft manner, while in reality doing just what she liked.

It was in this way she began to speak of her journey to Captain Lennox, who agreed to all she said, while his eyes sought Edith, who was ordering up good things to eat, in spite of his assurances that he had dined within the last two hours.

Mr. Henry Lennox stood leaning against the chimney-piece, amused with the family scene. He was the plain one in a singularly good-looking family; but his face was intelligent, keen, and mobile; and Margaret wondered what he was thinking about, while he kept silence, but observed her and Edith with slightly sarcastic interest. The sarcastic feeling was caused by Mrs. Shaw’s conversation; his interest was in what he saw – the pretty sight of the two cousins busy in little arrangements about the table.

Edith enjoyed showing her lover how well she could behave as a soldier’s wife. She found that the water in the urn was cold, and ordered up the great kitchen tea-kettle; but when she met it at the door, and tried to carry it in, it was too heavy, and she came in pouting, with a black mark on her muslin gown, and a little round white hand indented by the handle, which she showed to Captain Lennox, just like a hurt child; and, of course, the remedy was the same in both cases. Margaret’s quickly-adjusted spirit-lamp was more effective, though not so like Edith’s idea of barrack-life. After this evening all was bustle till the wedding was over.

CHAPTER 2

ROSES AND THORNS

After the wedding Margaret travelled quietly home with her father. Her mother had stayed at home for a multitude of half-reasons, which nobody fully understood except Mr. Hale, who was aware that she had felt her grey satin gown was too old for the occasion. As he had not the money to buy his wife a new outfit, she would not show herself at her only niece's wedding.

If Mrs. Shaw had guessed at the real reason why Mrs. Hale did not accompany her husband, she would have showered down gowns upon her sister; but it was nearly twenty years since Mrs. Shaw had been the poor, pretty Miss Beresford, and she had forgotten all misfortunes except that of disparity of age in marriage, on which she could talk by the half-hour. Dearest Maria had married the man of her heart, with the sweetest temper and jet-black hair; Mr. Hale was one of the most delightful preachers she had ever heard, and a perfect model of a parish priest. So Mrs. Shaw concluded: 'Married for love, what can dearest Maria have to wish for in this world?'

Mrs. Hale might have truthfully answered, 'A silver-grey silk, a white bonnet, dozens of things for the wedding, and hundreds of things for the house.' Margaret only knew that her mother had not found it convenient to come, and she was not sorry that they would meet at Helstone parsonage, rather than during the confusion of the last few days in Harley Street. Her mind and body ached now with the recollection of all she had done and said within the last forty-eight hours. The hurried farewells oppressed her with a sad regret for the times that were no more; it did not matter what those times had been, they were gone never to return.

Margaret's heart felt heavier than she could have thought possible in going to her own dear longed-for home. She wrenched her mind away from the recollection of the past to the bright contemplation of the hopeful future. She looked at her dear father leaning back asleep in the railway carriage; his black hair was grey now, and thinner. The finely cut bones of his face were plainly to be seen. The face was in the repose of weariness, rather than the serene calm of one who led a placid, contented life. Margaret was painfully struck by his worn, anxious expression; and she looked into the past, to find the cause for the lines of distress and depression.

'Poor Frederick!' thought she, sighing. 'Oh! if only Frederick had been a clergyman, instead of going into the navy, and being lost to us! I wish I knew all about it. I never understood it from Aunt Shaw; I only knew he could not come back to England because of that terrible affair. Poor dear papa! how sad he looks! I am so glad I am going home, to comfort him and mamma.'

She was ready with a bright smile to greet her father when he awakened. He smiled back, but faintly, as if it were an unusual exertion; and his face returned into its lines of habitual anxiety. He had the same large, soft eyes as his daughter. Margaret was more like him than like her mother.

Sometimes people wondered that parents so handsome should have a daughter who was so far from conventionally beautiful. Her mouth was wide; no rosebud that could only open just enough to let out a 'yes' and 'no.' But the wide mouth was one soft curve of rich red lips; and the skin, if not white, had an ivory smoothness and

delicacy. If the look on her face was in general too dignified and reserved for one so young, now, talking to her father, it was full of dimples and childish gladness.

It was late July when Margaret returned home. The forest trees were a dark, dusky green; the ferns below them caught the slanting sunbeams; the weather was broodingly still. Margaret used to tramp along by her father's side, crushing down the ferns with her light foot – out on to the broad commons into the warm scented light, seeing multitudes of wild, free, living creatures, revelling in the sunshine and the flowers.

She took a pride in the New Forest. Its people were her people. She made friends with them; delighted in using their peculiar words; nursed their babies; talked or read with slow distinctness to their old people; carried dainty messes to their sick; and resolved before long to teach at the school, where her father went every day; but she was continually tempted off to go and see some friend in some cottage in the green shade of the forest.

Her out-of-doors life was perfect. Her indoors life had its drawbacks. She perceived that all was not as it should be there. Her mother, always kind and tender towards her, seemed discontented with their situation; thought that the bishop was strangely neglectful in not giving Mr. Hale a better living; and almost reproached her husband because he did not wish to leave the parish to go to a larger one.

He would sigh that if he could do what he ought in little Helstone, he should be thankful; but every day he was more overpowered; the world became more bewildering. When his wife urged him to seek preferment, Margaret saw that her father shrank more and more; and she strove to reconcile her mother to Helstone. Mrs. Hale said that the nearness of so many trees affected her health, so Margaret would try to tempt her on to the beautiful, broad, sun-streaked common, for she was sure that her mother had become too used to an indoors life. This did good for a time; but when the autumn drew on, and the weather became changeable, her mother's idea of the unhealthiness of the place increased; and she resumed her complaints.

Margaret was unprepared for this marring of the peace of home. She had rather revelled in the idea of giving up the luxuries of Harley Street. But the cloud never comes from that part of the sky where we watch for it. There had been slight complaints from her mother about Helstone during Margaret's holidays at home before; but in the general happiness of the memory of those times, she had forgotten the small, less pleasant details.

In late September, the autumnal rains and storms came on, and Margaret had to stay in the house more. Helstone was at some distance from any neighbours of their own standing.

'It is undoubtedly one of the most out-of-the-way places in England,' said Mrs. Hale plaintively. 'Papa has no one to associate with here; he is thrown away, seeing no one but farmers and labourers. If we lived at the other side of the parish, it would be something; we should be almost within walking distance of the Stansfields, and certainly the Gormans.'

'Gormans,' said Margaret. 'Are those the Gormans who made their fortunes in trade at Southampton? Oh! I'm glad we don't visit them. I don't like shoppy people. I think we are far better off, knowing only cottagers and labourers, and people without pretence.'

'You must not be so fastidious, Margaret, dear!' said her mother, secretly thinking of a young and handsome Mr. Gorman whom she had once met.

‘No! I call mine a very comprehensive taste. I like all people whose occupations have to do with land; I like soldiers and sailors, and the three learned professions – the church, law and medicine. I’m sure you don’t want me to admire butchers and bakers, and candlestick-makers, do you, mamma?’

‘But the Gormans were neither butchers nor bakers, but very respectable coach-builders.’

‘Coach-building is a trade all the same, and a much more useless one than that of butchers or bakers. Oh! how tired I used to be of the drives every day in Aunt Shaw’s carriage, and how I longed to walk!’

And walk Margaret did, in spite of the weather. She was so happy out of doors, at her father’s side, that she almost danced; and with the soft violence of the west wind behind her, she seemed to be borne over the heath as lightly and easily as a fallen leaf wafted by the autumn breeze.

But the evenings were rather difficult to fill up agreeably. Immediately after tea her father withdrew into his small library, and she and her mother were left alone. Mrs. Hale had never cared much for books, and had always discouraged her husband from reading aloud to her. At one time they had tried backgammon; but as Mr. Hale took an increasing interest in his school and his parishioners, he found that the resulting interruptions were resented by his wife. So he withdrew into his library, to spend his evenings at home in reading the speculative and metaphysical books which were his delight.

When Margaret had been here before, she had brought down with her a great box of books, recommended by masters or governesses, and had found the summer’s day too short to get through her reading. Now there were only the well-bound little-read English Classics on the small bookshelves in the drawing-room. Thomson’s Seasons and Middleton’s Cicero were the lightest, newest, and most amusing. Margaret told her mother every detail of her London life, to which Mrs. Hale listened with interest; sometimes amused, but at other times inclined to compare her sister’s comfortable life with the narrower means at Helstone vicarage.

On such evenings Margaret was apt to stop talking rather abruptly, and listen to the drip-drip of the rain. Once or twice she wondered if she might venture a question on a subject very near to her heart, and ask where Frederick was now; what he was doing; how long it was since they had heard from him. But she was aware that her mother’s delicate health, and dislike of Helstone, dated from the time of the mutiny in which Frederick had been involved – the full account of which Margaret had never heard, and which now seemed doomed to be buried in sad oblivion. So she turned away from the subject. Her father seemed the best person to ask for information; though when she was with him, she thought that she could speak more easily to her mother.

In one of the letters she had received at Harley Street, her father had told her that they had heard from Frederick. He was still at Rio, and very well in health, and sent his best love; which was dry bones, but not the living news she longed for.

Frederick was always spoken of as ‘Poor Frederick.’ His room was kept exactly as he had left it; and was regularly dusted by Dixon, Mrs. Hale’s maid, who did no other housework, but remembered the day when she had been engaged by Lady Beresford as maid to the pretty Miss Beresfords. Dixon had always considered Mr. Hale as the blight which had fallen upon her young lady’s prospects. If Miss Beresford had not been in such a hurry to marry a poor country clergyman, there was no knowing what she might not have become. But Dixon was too loyal to desert her

in her affliction and downfall (alias her married life). She remained devoted. Master Frederick had been her favourite; and her dignified manner softened when she went in to arrange his room as carefully as if he might be coming home that very evening.

Margaret could not help believing that there had been some news of Frederick, unknown to her mother, which was making her father anxious. Mrs. Hale did not seem to perceive any change in her husband. His spirits were always easily affected by the welfare of others. He would be depressed for many days after witnessing a death-bed, or hearing of a crime. But now Margaret noticed an absence of mind, as if his thoughts were pre-occupied. Mr. Hale did not go out among his parishioners as much as usual; he was more shut up in his study, and anxious for the village postman to call. He loitered about the garden or stood dreamily by the study window until the postman had been. Then he turned into the room to begin his day's work, with all the signs of a heavy heart and an occupied mind.

But Margaret was at an age when any fears are easily banished by a bright sunny day. And when the fine days of October came on, her cares were all blown away as lightly as thistledown, and she thought of nothing but the glories of the forest. The fern-harvest was over, and now that the rain was gone, many a deep glade was accessible. Margaret had learnt drawing with Edith; and now decided to sketch what she could before winter set in.

Accordingly, she was preparing her board one morning, when Sarah, the housemaid, threw wide open the drawing-room door and announced, 'Mr. Henry Lennox.'

CHAPTER 3

‘THE MORE HASTE THE WORSE SPEED’

Margaret had been thinking of him only a moment before. Her face brightened as she put down her board, and went forward to shake hands with him.

‘Mamma and I want to ask you about Edith; I am so obliged to you for coming,’ she said.

‘Did not I say that I should?’ asked he, in a low tone.

‘But I heard of you far away in the Highlands.’

‘Oh!’ said he, more lightly, ‘our young couple were playing such foolish pranks, running all sorts of risks, climbing this mountain, sailing on that lake, that I really thought they needed a mentor to take care of them. They were quite beyond my uncle’s management, and kept the old gentleman in a panic. I thought it my duty not to leave them till I had seen them safely embarked at Plymouth.’

‘Edith never mentioned that. To be sure, she has written in such a hurry lately. Did they really sail on Tuesday?’

‘Yes. Edith gave me all sorts of messages for you. I believe I have a little note somewhere; here it is.’

‘Thank you,’ exclaimed Margaret; and then, wishing to read it alone and unwatched, she made the excuse of going to tell her mother that Mr. Lennox was there.

When she had left him, he began to scrutinise the little drawing-room. It was looking its best in the streaming light of the morning sun. The window was open, and clustering roses and honeysuckle came peeping round the corner; the small lawn was gorgeous with verbenas and bright geraniums. But the very brightness outside made the colours within seem poor and faded. The room was smaller and shabbier than he had expected as a background for Margaret, herself so queenly.

He took up one of the books lying on the table; it was the *Paradiso* of Dante. By it lay a dictionary, and some words copied out in Margaret’s hand-writing. They made a dull list, but somehow he liked looking at them. He put them down with a sigh.

Margaret meanwhile had found her mother. It was one of Mrs. Hale’s fitful days, when everything was a difficulty; including Mr. Lennox’s visit, although secretly she felt complimented by his calling.

‘It is most unfortunate! We have nothing but cold meat, and yet, of course, we must ask him to dinner. And your papa is in such low spirits this morning – I don’t know why. I went into the study just now, and he had his face in his hands. I told him I was sure Helstone air did not agree with him, and he suddenly lifted up his head, and begged me not to speak a word more against Helstone, he could not bear it; if there was one place he loved on earth it was Helstone. But I am sure it is the damp air.’

Margaret felt as if a thin cold cloud had come between her and the sun. She drew her mother back to the subject of Mr. Lennox.

‘Papa likes Mr. Lennox; they got on together famously at the wedding. His coming will do papa good. And never mind dinner, dear mamma. Cold meat will do capitally for lunch.’

‘But what are we to do with him till then? It is only half-past ten.’

‘I’ll ask him to go out sketching with me. That will take him out of your way, mamma. Only do come in now; he will think it strange if you don’t.’

Mrs. Hale took off her black silk apron, and smoothed her face. She looked a very pretty lady-like woman, as she greeted Mr. Lennox cordially. He accepted the invitation to lunch with a glad readiness that made Mrs. Hale wish she could add something to the cold beef. He was delighted with Margaret’s idea of going sketching together. She brought out her drawing materials, and the two set out in merry spirits.

‘Now, please, just stop here for a minute,’ said Margaret. ‘These are the cottages that haunted me so during the rainy fortnight, reproaching me for not having sketched them.’

‘Before they tumbled down. Truly, if they are to be sketched – and they are very picturesque – we had better not put it off till next year. But where shall we sit?’

‘Oh! On this beautiful tree trunk. I will put my shawl over it, and it will be a regular forest throne.’

‘With your feet in that puddle for a regal footstool! Who lives in these cottages?’

‘One is uninhabited,’ said she; ‘the foresters are going to take it down, as soon as the old man who lives in the other is dead, poor old fellow! Look – there he is – I must go and speak to him.’

The old man stood bareheaded in the sun, leaning on his stick in front of his cottage. His stiff features relaxed into a slow smile as Margaret went up to him. Mr. Lennox hastily added the two figures to his sketch – as Margaret perceived later, when they were putting away the paints. She laughed and blushed.

‘Now, I call that treacherous,’ said she. ‘I little thought you were drawing old Isaac and me.’

‘It was irresistible. You can’t know how strong a temptation it was. I hardly dare tell you how much I shall like this sketch.’

He was not quite sure whether she heard this latter sentence before she went to the brook to wash her palette. She came back rather flushed, but looking perfectly unconscious. He was glad of it, for the speech had slipped from him unawares – a rare thing in his case.

When they reached home, the clouds on her mother’s brow had cleared under the lucky influence of a brace of carp, most opportunely presented by a neighbour. Mr. Hale had returned from his morning’s round, and was waiting by the garden gate. He looked a complete gentleman in his rather threadbare coat and well-worn hat.

Margaret was proud of her father; she had always a tender pride in seeing how favourably he impressed every stranger. Still her quick eye sought his face and found there traces of some unusual disturbance.

Mr. Hale asked to look at their sketches.

‘I think you have made the tints on the thatch too dark, have you not?’ He returned Margaret’s to her, and held out his hand for Mr. Lennox’s.

‘No, papa! I don’t think I have. It is so much darker in the rain. Is that not like, papa?’ said she, peeping over his shoulder, as he looked at the figures in Mr. Lennox’s drawing.

‘Yes, very like. Your way of holding yourself is capital. And it is just like poor old Isaac. What is this hanging from the branch of the tree? Not a bird’s nest, surely.’

‘Oh no! that is my bonnet. I wonder if I could manage figures. There are so many people about here whom I should like to sketch.’

‘I should say you would succeed,’ said Mr. Lennox. ‘I think myself I have succeeded pretty well in yours.’ Mr. Hale had gone into the house, while Margaret was lingering to pluck some roses.

‘A regular London girl would understand the implied meaning of that speech,’ thought Mr. Lennox. ‘She would look through every speech a young man made her for a compliment. But I don’t believe – stay!’ exclaimed he. ‘Let me help you.’ He gathered some velvety roses that were above her reach, and sent her in, pleased and happy, to arrange her flowers.

The conversation at dinner flowed on quietly and agreeably. There was the latest news of Mrs. Shaw in Italy to be exchanged; and in the unpretending simplicity of the parsonage-ways, Mr. Lennox forgot his first feeling on finding her father’s living was so small.

‘Margaret, my child, you might have gathered us some pears for our dessert,’ said Mr. Hale. ‘There are a few brown beurres against the south wall. Run and gather us some.’

‘I propose that we adjourn into the garden, and eat them there,’ said Mr. Lennox. ‘Nothing is so delicious as the crisp, juicy fruit, scented by the sun. The worst is, the wasps are impudent enough to dispute it.’

He rose to follow Margaret outside. She made a plate for the pears out of a beetroot leaf, which threw up their colour admirably. Mr. Lennox looked more at her than at the pears; but her father, determined to make the most of the hour he had stolen from his anxiety, chose the ripest fruit, and sat down on the garden bench to enjoy it. Margaret and Mr. Lennox strolled along the little terrace-walk under the south wall, where the bees still hummed busily.

‘What a perfect life you seem to live here! I have always felt rather contemptuously towards the poets, with their “Mine be a cot beside a hill,” and that sort of thing: but just now I feel as if twenty years’ hard study of law would be amply rewarded by one year of such an exquisite serene life as this. Such skies!’ – looking up – ‘such crimson and amber foliage, so perfectly motionless!’ He pointed to some of the great forest trees which shut in the garden like a nest.

‘Our skies are not always so deep a blue as now. We have rain, and our leaves do fall, and get sodden: though I think Helstone is about as perfect a place as any in the world. Recollect how you scorned my description of it in Harley Street: “a village in a tale.”’

‘Scorned, Margaret! That is rather a hard word.’

‘Perhaps it is. Only I should have liked to have talked to you about Helstone, and you spoke disrespectfully of it as a mere village in a tale.’

‘I will never do so again,’ said he, warmly. They turned the corner.

‘I could almost wish, Margaret—’ He stopped and hesitated. It was so unusual for the fluent lawyer to hesitate that Margaret looked up at him in questioning wonder; but in an instant she wished herself back with her mother – her father – anywhere away from him, for she was sure he was going to say something to which she should not know what to reply.

Her pride made her conquer her sudden agitation, which she hoped he had not perceived. Of course she could answer; and it was poor and despicable of her to shrink from hearing any speech.

‘Margaret,’ said he, getting sudden possession of her hand, so that she was forced to stand still and listen, despising herself for the fluttering of her heart.

‘Margaret, I wish you did not like Helstone so much – did not seem so perfectly

happy here. I have been hoping to find you regretting London – and London friends – enough to make you listen more kindly’ (for she was quietly, but firmly, striving to remove her hand from his grasp) ‘to one who has not much to offer apart from future prospects – but who does love you, Margaret, almost in spite of himself. Margaret, have I startled you too much? Speak!’

For he saw her lips quivering almost as if she were going to cry. She made a strong effort to be calm; she would not speak till she had mastered her voice, and then she said:

‘I was startled. I did not know that you cared for me in that way. I have always thought of you as a friend; and, please, I would rather go on thinking of you so. I cannot answer you as you want me to do, and yet I should feel so sorry if I vexed you.’

‘Margaret,’ said he, looking into her eyes, which met his with their open, straight look. ‘Do you’ – he was going to say, ‘love anyone else?’ But it seemed as if this question would be an insult. ‘Forgive me. I have been too abrupt. I am punished. Only let me hope. Tell me you have never seen anyone whom you could—’ Again he could not end his sentence.

Margaret reproached herself as the cause of his distress. ‘Ah! if only you had never got this fancy into your head! It was such a pleasure to think of you as a friend.’

‘But may I not hope, Margaret, that some time you will think of me as a lover? Not yet, but some time.’

She was silent, trying to discover the truth in her own heart, before replying. Then she said:

‘I could never think of you except as a friend. Pray, let us both forget that all this’ (‘disagreeable,’ she was going to say, but stopped short) ‘conversation has taken place.’

He paused. Then, in his habitual cold tone, he answered:

‘Of course, as your feelings are so decided, and as this conversation has been so evidently unpleasant to you, it had better not be remembered. That is all very fine in theory, that plan of forgetting whatever is painful, but it will be somewhat difficult for me, at least, to carry it out.’

‘You are vexed,’ said she, sadly; ‘yet how can I help it?’

She looked so truly grieved, that he struggled for a moment with his real disappointment, and then answered more cheerfully, but still with a little hardness in his tone:

‘You should make allowances for the mortification, not only of a lover, Margaret, but of a man not given to romance in general, who has been carried out of his usual habits by the force of a passion – well, we will say no more of that; but he meets only with rejection. I shall have to console myself with scorning my own folly. A struggling barrister to think of matrimony!’

Margaret could not answer this. The whole tone of it annoyed her. It seemed to call out the points which had often repelled her; while yet he was the pleasantest man, the most sympathising friend, the person of all others who understood her best in Harley Street. She felt a tinge of contempt mingle itself with her pain at having refused him. Her beautiful lip curled in a slight disdain.

It was well that, having made the round of the garden, they came suddenly upon Mr. Hale. He had not yet finished the pear, which he had delicately peeled in one long strip, and which he was enjoying in a deliberate manner. Margaret felt stunned, and unable to recover her self-possession enough to join in the trivial conversation

between her father and Mr. Lennox. She was grave; wondering when Mr. Lennox would go, and allow her to think.

He was almost as anxious to depart as she was for him to leave; but a few minutes light talking was a sacrifice which he owed to his mortified vanity, or his self-respect. He glanced at her sad and pensive face.

‘She is not so indifferent to me as she believes,’ thought he. ‘I do not give up hope.’

He had begun conversing with quiet sarcasm, speaking of life in London and the country in a mocking manner. Mr. Hale was puzzled. His visitor was a different man to the one he had seen earlier; a lighter, cleverer, more worldly man, and, as such, dissonant to Mr. Hale. It was a relief to all three when Mr. Lennox said that he must go to catch the train. They went to the house to find Mrs. Hale, and wish her good-bye.

At the last moment, Henry Lennox’s real self broke through the crust.

‘Margaret, don’t despise me; I have a heart, despite all this good-for-nothing way of talking. I believe I love you more than ever – if I do not hate you – for the disdain with which you have listened to me during this last half-hour. Good-bye, Margaret!’

CHAPTER 4

DOUBTS AND DIFFICULTIES

He was gone. Margaret went to dress for tea. As she waited in the drawing-room for her mother to come down, she sat thinking over the day, the happy walk, the happy sketching, the cheerful pleasant dinner, and the uncomfortable, miserable walk in the garden.

How different men were to women! Here was she disturbed and unhappy, because her instinct had made her refuse him; while he, not many minutes after a rejection of what ought to have been the holiest proposal of his life, could speak as if law briefs, success, and agreeable society were the sole objects of his desires. Oh dear! how she could have loved him if he had only been different. Then she thought that, after all, his lightness might have been assumed to cover the bitter disappointment which would have been stamped on her own heart if she had loved and been rejected.

Her mother came in before this whirl of thoughts was adjusted into anything like order. Margaret had to shake off her recollections, and listen sympathetically to the account of Dixon's complaints about the ironing, and how Susan Lightfoot had been seen with artificial flowers in her bonnet. Mr. Hale sipped his tea in abstracted silence; Margaret had the responses all to herself. She wondered how her father and mother could be so regardless of Mr. Lennox's visit as never to mention his name. She forgot that he had not made them an offer.

After tea Mr. Hale got up and stood by the chimney-piece, leaning his head on his hand, and from time to time sighing deeply. Mrs. Hale went out to consult with Dixon. Margaret was preparing her mother's wool-work, and rather shrinking from the thought of the long evening, and wishing bedtime were come.

'Margaret!' said Mr. Hale in a sudden desperate way, that made her start. 'Is that tapestry thing of immediate consequence? Can you leave it and come into my study? I want to speak to you about something very serious.'

Margaret immediately thought of Mr. Lennox, and felt guilty and ashamed of having grown so much into a woman as to be thought of in marriage. But she soon felt it was not about the day's events that her father wished to speak to her. He made her take a chair; he stirred the fire, snuffed the candles, and sighed once or twice before saying, with a jerk—

'Margaret! I am going to leave Helstone.'

'Leave Helstone, papa! But why?'

Mr. Hale did not answer for a minute or two. Nervous and confused, he opened his lips to speak several times, but closed them again without having the courage to utter a word. Margaret could not bear the suspense.

'But why, dear papa? Do tell me!'

He looked up at her suddenly, and then said with enforced calmness:

'Because I must no longer be a minister in the Church of England.'

Margaret had imagined that the preferment which her mother so much desired had befallen her father at last – and would force him to leave beloved Helstone, to perhaps go and live in a stately Cathedral Close. That would have been a lingering pain; but nothing to the shock she received from Mr. Hale's last speech. What could

he mean? The distress on his face gave her a sudden sickening. Could he have become implicated in anything Frederick had done? Frederick was an outlaw. Had her father, out of love for his son, connived at any—

‘Oh! what is it? do speak, papa! Why can you no longer be a clergyman? Surely, if the bishop were told all we know about Frederick—’

‘It is nothing about Frederick. It is all myself. Margaret, I will tell you, and answer any questions this once, but after tonight let us never speak of it again. I can meet the consequences of my painful, miserable doubts; but it is an effort beyond me to speak of what has caused me so much suffering.’

‘Doubts, papa! Doubts as to religion?’ asked Margaret, more shocked than ever.

‘No! not doubts as to religion.’ He paused, and then began again, speaking rapidly, as if to get over a task:

‘You could not understand it all, if I told you – my anxiety, for years, to know whether I had any right to hold my living – my efforts to quench my smouldering doubts by the authority of the Church. Oh! Margaret, how I love the holy Church from which I am to be shut out!’ He could not go on for a moment. It seemed to Margaret as terribly mysterious as if her father were about to turn Mahometan.

‘I have been reading today of the two thousand who were ejected from their churches,’ continued Mr. Hale, smiling faintly, ‘trying to steal some of their bravery; but I cannot help feeling it acutely.’

‘But, papa, have you considered? Oh! it seems so terrible, so shocking,’ said Margaret, suddenly bursting into tears. The staid foundation of her home, of her idea of her beloved father, seemed reeling and rocking. What could she say? What was to be done?

Her distress made Mr. Hale nerve himself. He swallowed down the dry sobs which had been heaving up from his heart, and going to his bookcase, took down a volume which had lately given him strength.

‘Listen, dear Margaret,’ said he, putting one arm round her waist. She grasped his hand, but she could not lift up her head; nor indeed could she attend to what he read, so great was her agitation.

‘This is written by one who was once a clergyman in a country parish, like me; a Mr. Oldfield, a minister in Derbyshire, a hundred and sixty years ago. His trials are over. He fought the good fight.’ These last two sentences he spoke low, as if to himself. Then he read aloud:

“‘When thou canst no longer continue in thy work without dishonour to God, discredit to religion, foregoing thy integrity, wounding conscience, spoiling thy peace, and risking thy salvation; then thou must believe that God will turn thy very silence, deprivation, and laying aside, to His glory, and the advancement of the Gospel’s interest. When God will not use thee in one kind, yet He will in another. A soul that desires to serve and honour Him shall never lack opportunity to do it; nor think He hath but one way in which He can glorify Himself by thee. Thou wilt have little thanks, O my soul! if, when thou art charged with corrupting God’s worship, falsifying thy vows, thou pretendest a necessity for it in order to continue in the ministry.’”

As he read this, he felt as if he too could be brave and firm in doing what he believed to be right; but as he ceased he heard Margaret’s low convulsive sob; and his courage sank.

‘Margaret, dear!’ said he, ‘think of the early martyrs.’

‘But, father,’ said she, lifting up her flushed, tear-wet face, ‘the early martyrs suffered for the truth, while you – oh! dear papa!’

‘I suffer for conscience’ sake, my child,’ said he, with tremulous dignity. ‘I must do what my conscience bids. Your poor mother’s fond wish has brought on this crisis, for which I hope I am thankful. A month ago the bishop offered me another living; if I had accepted it, I should have had to make a fresh declaration of conformity to the Liturgy. Margaret, I tried to do it; I tried to content myself with simply refusing the preferment, and staying quietly here – strangling my conscience. God forgive me!’

He rose and walked up and down the room. At last he said,

‘Margaret, we must leave Helstone.’

‘Yes! I see. But when?’

‘I have written to the bishop,’ said Mr. Hale, collapsing into his depressed manner as soon as he came to talk of hard matter-of-fact details, ‘informing him of my intention to resign this vicarage. He has been most kind; he has argued with me in vain. I shall have to take my resignation to him in person. That will be a trial, but far worse will be the parting from my dear people. There is a curate appointed to read prayers. He will come tomorrow. Next Sunday I preach my farewell sermon.’

So sudden? thought Margaret; and yet perhaps it was as well. Lingered would only add stings to the pain. ‘What does mamma say?’ asked she.

Her father began to walk about again before he answered.

‘Margaret, I am a poor coward after all. I cannot bear to give pain. I know your mother’s married life has not been all she hoped – and this will be such a blow to her, that I have not had the heart to tell her. She must be told though, now,’ said he, looking wistfully at his daughter.

Margaret was almost overpowered with the idea that her mother knew nothing of it.

‘Yes, indeed she must. She will be shocked – where are we to go?’ said she, struck with fresh wonder as to their future plans.

‘To Milton-Northern,’ he answered, with a dull indifference, perceiving his daughter’s pain.

‘Milton-Northern! The manufacturing town in Darkshire? Why there, papa?’

‘Because there I can earn bread for my family. Because I know no one there, and no one knows Helstone, or can ever talk to me about it.’

‘Bread for your family! I thought you and mamma had—’ She stopped as she saw the gathering gloom on her father’s brow. But he turned it off with an effort.

‘You shall be told all, Margaret. Only help me to tell your mother. The idea of her distress turns me sick with dread. Perhaps you could break it to her tomorrow. I will be going out for the day, to bid people good-bye. Would you dislike breaking it to her very much?’

Margaret did dislike it, did shrink from it more than from anything she had ever had to do in her life before. She could not speak. Then she conquered herself, and said, with a bright strong look on her face:

‘It is a painful thing, but it must be done, and I will do it as well as I can. You must have many painful things to do.’

Mr. Hale shook his head: he pressed her hand in gratitude. Margaret nearly burst out crying again. To turn her thoughts, she said: ‘Now tell me, papa, what our plans are. You and mamma have some money of your own, have you not?’

‘Yes. I suppose we have about a hundred and seventy pounds a year. Seventy of that has always gone to Frederick, since he has been abroad. I don’t know if he wants it all. He must have some pay for serving with the Spanish army.’

‘Frederick must not suffer,’ said Margaret decidedly, ‘in a foreign country; so unjustly treated by his own. A hundred is left. Could not we live on a hundred a year in some very quiet part of England?’

‘No!’ said Mr. Hale. ‘That would not answer. I must do something. I must make myself busy, to keep off morbid thoughts. But in a country parish I should be so painfully reminded of Helstone, I could not bear it, Margaret. And a hundred a year would not go far towards providing your mother with all the comforts she ought to have. No: we must go to Milton. That is settled. I can always decide better by myself,’ said he, as a half apology for having arranged it already.

Margaret resolved to keep silence. After all, what did it signify where they went, compared to the one terrible change?

Mr. Hale continued: ‘A few months ago, when my misery of doubt became more than I could bear, I wrote to Mr. Bell – you remember Mr. Bell, Margaret?’

‘I never saw him, but I know who he is. Frederick’s godfather – your old tutor at Oxford, don’t you mean?’

‘Yes. He is a Fellow of Plymouth College. He is a native of Milton-Northern, and has property there. Well, I felt sure of sympathy from Mr. Bell. I don’t know that he gave me much strength; he has always lived an easy life in his college. But he has been as kind as can be. And it is owing to him we are going to Milton. He has tenants and houses there; so, though the place is too bustling for him, he keeps up the connection; and he tells me that there is a good opening for a private tutor.’

‘A private tutor!’ said Margaret scornfully. ‘What do manufacturers want with the classics, or literature, or the accomplishments of a gentleman?’

‘Oh,’ said her father, ‘some of them seem to be fine fellows, conscious of their own deficiencies, which is more than many a man at Oxford is. Some want to learn themselves; some want their children to be better instructed than they themselves have been. Mr. Bell has recommended me to a Mr. Thornton, a tenant of his, and a very intelligent man, as far as I can judge from his letters. And in Milton, Margaret, I shall find a busy life, if not a happy one, and I shall never be reminded of Helstone.’

There was the secret motive, as Margaret knew from her own feelings. It would be different. Although she almost detested all she had ever heard of the North of England – the manufacturers, the people, the wild, bleak country – there was this one recommendation: it would be different from Helstone, and could never remind them of that beloved place.

‘When do we go?’ she asked.

‘In a fortnight; after my resignation is sent in, I shall have no right to remain.’

Margaret was almost stunned. ‘In a fortnight!’

‘Nothing is fixed,’ said her father anxiously. But she recovered herself immediately.

‘Yes, papa, it had better be fixed soon. Only mamma knows nothing about it! That is the great perplexity.’

‘Poor Maria!’ replied Mr. Hale. ‘I dare not tell her!’

‘No,’ said Margaret, sadly. ‘I will do it. Give me till tomorrow evening to choose my time. Oh, papa,’ cried she, with sudden passionate entreaty, ‘say it is a nightmare – not the waking truth! You cannot mean that you are really going to leave the Church – to give up Helstone – led away by some delusion!’

Mr. Hale sat in rigid stillness. Then he said in a slow, hoarse, measured way: 'I do mean it, Margaret. Do not doubt the reality of my words and my resolve.' He looked at her in a steady, stony manner.

She gazed back with pleading eyes before she would believe that it was irrevocable. Then she arose and went, without another word, towards the door.

As her fingers were on the handle he called her back. He was standing by the fireplace, shrunk and stooping; but as she came near he drew himself up to his full height, and, placing his hands on her head, he said solemnly:

'The blessing of God be upon thee, my child!'

'And may He restore you to His Church,' responded she. The next moment she feared lest this answer might hurt him, and she threw her arms round his neck. He held her for a minute. She heard him murmur to himself, 'The martyrs and confessors had more pain to bear – I will not shrink.'

They were startled by hearing Mrs. Hale inquiring for her daughter. Mr. Hale hurriedly said:

'Go, Margaret, go. I shall be out all tomorrow. Before night you will have told your mother.'

'Yes,' she replied, and returned to the drawing-room in a stunned and dizzy state.

CHAPTER 5

DECISION

Margaret made a good listener to all her mother's little plans for helping the poorer parishioners, though each new project was a stab to her heart. Old Simon's rheumatism might be bad and his eyesight worse; there would be no one to go and read to him, and take him broth. Mary Domville's little crippled boy would crawl in vain to the door and look for her coming through the forest. These poor friends, and many others, would never understand why she had forsaken them.

'The winter is likely to be severe,' said her mother, 'and the old people must be helped.'

'Oh, mamma, let us do all we can,' said Margaret eagerly; 'we may not be here long.'

'Do you feel ill, my darling?' asked Mrs. Hale. 'You look pale and tired. It is this damp, unhealthy air.'

'No. no, mamma: it is delicious air. It smells fresh and pure after the smokiness of Harley Street. But I am tired: it must be near bedtime.'

'You had better go to bed, dear. Ask Dixon for some gruel. I am afraid you have taken cold.'

'Oh, mamma,' said Margaret, faintly smiling as she kissed her mother, 'I am quite well – don't alarm yourself.'

To soothe her mother's anxiety, she submitted to a basin of gruel. She was lying in bed when Mrs. Hale came up to kiss her good-night. But the instant she heard her mother's door locked, she sprang out of bed, and throwing her dressing-gown on, began to pace up and down the room, until the creaking of the boards reminded her that she must make no noise.

She went and curled up on the window-seat. That morning when she had looked out, her heart had danced at seeing the sunlight on the church tower. This evening she sat down with a dull cold pain, which seemed to have pressed the youth and buoyancy out of her heart. Mr. Henry Lennox's visit was like a dream. The hard reality was that her father had made himself an outcast; all the resulting changes grouped themselves around that one great blighting fact.

She looked out upon the dark-grey lines of the church tower, square and straight, cutting against the deep blue transparent depths beyond, into which she gazed, and felt that she might gaze for ever, seeing at every moment some farther distance, and yet no sign of God! It seemed to her as if the earth was utterly desolate. Those never-ending depths of space, in their still serenity, were mocking to her. The cries of earth's sufferers might ascend into that infinite splendour of vastness and be lost for ever, before they reached His throne.

Her father came in unheard, and touched her shoulder.

'Margaret, I heard you were up. I could not help coming in to ask you to pray with me – to say the Lord's Prayer; that will do us both good.'

They knelt by the window-seat – he looking up, she bowed in humble shame. God was there, hearing her father's whispered words. Her father might be a heretic; but had not she, in her despair five minutes before, shown herself a far more utter sceptic?

After her father left her, she stole to bed like a child ashamed of its fault. If the world was full of perplexing problems, she would only ask to see the one step needful for the hour.

Mr. Lennox's proposal – the memory of which had been so rudely pushed aside by the day's events – haunted her dreams that night. He was climbing up some tall tree to reach the branch whereon was slung her bonnet: he was falling, and she was struggling to save him, but held back by some invisible powerful hand. He was dead. And then she was once more in the Harley Street drawing-room, talking to him as of old, and yet knowing that she had seen him killed by that terrible fall.

Miserable night! She awoke with a start, unrefreshed, and conscious of a reality worse even than her feverish dreams. It all came back upon her; the sorrow and the terrible discord. Where had her father wandered, led by doubts which were to her temptations of the Evil One? She longed to ask, and yet did not want to hear.

The fine crisp morning made her mother particularly happy at breakfast-time. She talked on, not heeding her husband's silence and Margaret's monosyllabic answers. Before the things were cleared away, Mr. Hale got up.

'I shall not be at home till evening. I am going to Bracy Common, and will be back to tea at seven.'

Margaret knew what he meant. By seven the announcement must be made to her mother. Mr. Hale would have delayed making it till half-past six, but Margaret was of different stuff. She could not bear the weight on her mind all day long: better get it over. But while she stood by the window, waiting for the servant to leave the room, her mother had gone upstairs to put on her things to go to the school. She came down briskly, ready equipped.

'Mother, come round the garden with me this morning,' said Margaret, putting her arm round Mrs. Hale's waist.

They went outside. Mrs. Hale said something – Margaret could not tell what. Her eye caught on a bee entering a deep-belled flower: when that bee flew forth she would begin. Out he came.

'Mamma! Papa is going to leave Helstone!' she blurted. 'He's going to leave the Church, and live in Milton-Northern.'

'What makes you say so?' asked Mrs. Hale, in an incredulous voice. 'Who has been telling you such nonsense?'

'Papa himself,' said Margaret, longing to say something gentle and consoling, but not knowing how. Mrs. Hale sat down on a garden bench, and began to cry.

'I don't understand you,' she said. 'You have made some great mistake.'

'No, mother, I have made no mistake. Papa has written to the bishop, saying that he has such doubts that he cannot remain a priest of the Church of England, and that he must give up Helstone. He has also consulted Mr. Bell – Frederick's godfather, you know; and it is arranged that we shall go to live in Milton-Northern.'

Mrs. Hale looked up in Margaret's face. 'I don't think it can be true,' said she, at length. 'He would surely have told me.'

It came strongly upon Margaret's mind that her mother ought to have been told: that whatever her faults of discontent, it was an error in her father to have left her to learn of this change from her child. She sat down by her mother, and took her unresisting head on her breast, bending her own soft cheeks down caressingly to touch her face.

‘Darling mamma! we were so afraid of giving you pain. Papa felt so acutely – you know you are not strong, and there would have been terrible suspense to go through.’

‘When did he tell you, Margaret?’

‘Yesterday, only yesterday,’ replied Margaret, detecting the jealousy which prompted the inquiry. ‘Poor papa!’ – trying to divert her mother’s thoughts into compassion for all her father had gone through. Mrs. Hale raised her head.

‘What does he mean by having doubts?’ she asked. ‘Surely, he does not mean that he knows better than the Church.’

Margaret shook her head, and the tears came into her eyes.

‘Can’t the bishop set him right?’ asked Mrs. Hale, half impatiently.

‘I’m afraid not,’ said Margaret. ‘But I did not ask. It is all settled at any rate. He is going to leave Helstone in a fortnight.’

‘In a fortnight!’ exclaimed Mrs. Hale, beginning to take relief in tears. ‘This is very strange – very unfeeling. He has doubts, and gives up his living, all without consulting me. If he had told me his doubts at the start I could have nipped them in the bud.’

Mistaken as Margaret felt her father’s conduct to have been, she could not bear to hear it blamed by her mother.

‘I hoped you might have been glad to leave Helstone, mamma,’ said she. ‘You have never been well in this air, you know.’

‘You can’t think the smoky air of a manufacturing town, all chimneys and dirt, would be better than this air, which is pure and sweet, even if it is too soft. Fancy living in the middle of factories, and factory people! Though if your father leaves the Church, we shall not be admitted into society anywhere. It will be such a disgrace! Poor dear Sir John! It is well he is not alive to see this! Every day after dinner, when I was a girl at Beresford Court, Sir John used to give the first toast – “Church and King, and down with the Rump.”’

Margaret was glad that her mother’s thoughts were turned away from the fact of her husband’s silence.

‘You know, we have very little society here, mamma. The Gormans, who are our nearest neighbours, have been in trade just as much as these Milton-Northern people.’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Hale, almost indignantly, ‘but the Gormans made carriages for half the gentry of the county; but these factory people – who on earth wears cotton that can afford linen?’

‘Well, mamma, I am not standing up for the cotton-spinners, any more than for any other trades-people. We shall have little enough to do with them.’

‘Why on earth has your father fixed on Milton-Northern to live in?’

‘Partly,’ said Margaret, sighing, ‘because it is so very different from Helstone – partly because Mr. Bell says there is an opening there for a private tutor.’

‘Why can’t he go to Oxford, and be a tutor to gentlemen?’

‘You forget, mamma! His doubts would do him no good at Oxford.’

Mrs. Hale was silent for some time, quietly crying. At last she said:

‘And the furniture – how in the world are we to manage the removal? We have only a fortnight to think about it!’

Margaret was inexpressibly relieved to find that her mother’s distress was lowered to this point, on which she could do so much to help. She promised to

arrange as much as could be fixed before they knew more definitively what Mr. Hale intended to do.

Throughout the day Margaret never left her mother; bending her whole soul to sympathise in all the various turns her feelings took. Towards evening, she became anxious that her father should find a soothing welcome awaiting him, after his day of fatigue and distress. She dwelt upon what he must have borne in secret for long; her mother only replied coldly that he ought to have told her; and Margaret turned faint at heart when she heard her father's step in the hall. She dared not go to meet him, for fear of her mother's jealous annoyance. She heard him linger, as if awaiting her, and she dared not stir; she saw by her mother's twitching lips that she too was aware that her husband had returned.

Presently he opened the door, and stood there uncertain whether to come in. His face was pale; his eyes were timid; but that look of despondent uncertainty touched his wife's heart. She went to him, and threw herself on his breast, crying out—

‘Oh! Richard, Richard, you should have told me sooner!’

And then Margaret left her, and rushed upstairs to throw herself on her bed, and hide her face in the pillows to stifle the hysteric sobs that would force their way out at last, after the rigid self-control of the day. How long she lay thus she could not tell. She heard no noise, though the housemaid came in to arrange the room. The affrighted girl stole out again on tip-toe, and told Mrs. Dixon that Miss Hale was crying as if her heart would break.

Margaret felt herself touched, and started up; she saw the figure of Dixon in shadow, holding the candle away from her eyes, swollen and blinded as they were.

‘Oh, Dixon! I did not hear you come in!’ said Margaret, resuming her trembling self-restraint. ‘Is it very late?’ She moved her wet ruffled hair off her face, and tried to look as though nothing were the matter; as if she had only been asleep.

‘I hardly can tell what time it is,’ replied Dixon, in an aggrieved tone. ‘Since your mamma told me this terrible news, I’ve lost all count of time. I’m sure I don’t know what is to become of us all. When Charlotte told me you were sobbing, Miss Hale, I thought, no wonder, poor thing! And master turning Dissenter at his time of life! As I said to missus, “What would poor Sir John have said? He never liked your marrying Mr. Hale, but if he could have known it would come to this, he would have sworn worse oaths than ever!”’

Dixon was so used to commenting upon Mr. Hale's proceedings to her mistress that she never noticed Margaret's flashing eye. To hear her father talked of in this way by a servant!

‘Dixon,’ she said, in a low tone, which had a sound in it of some threatening storm. ‘Dixon! you forget to whom you are speaking.’ She stood upright and firm, fixing the maid with her steady eye. ‘I am Mr. Hale's daughter. Go! You have made a strange mistake, and one that I am sure you will be sorry for when you think about it.’

Dixon hung irresolutely about the room for a minute. Margaret repeated, ‘You may leave me.’ Dixon did not know whether to resent these words or to cry; either course would have worked with her mistress: but, as she said to herself, ‘Miss Margaret has a touch of the old gentleman about her, as well as poor Master Frederick.’ She was subdued enough to say, in a half humble, half injured tone:

‘Mayn't I unfasten your gown, miss, and do your hair?’

‘No! not tonight, thank you.’ And Margaret gravely saw her out of the room. From henceforth Dixon obeyed and admired Margaret. She said it was because she

was so like poor Master Frederick; but the truth was, that Dixon liked to feel herself ruled by a powerful and decided nature.

Margaret needed all Dixon's help. A fortnight was a very short time to make arrangements for their removal. Almost anyone but Mr. Hale would have been practical enough to see that in so short a time it would be difficult to fix on any house in Milton-Northern to which they could move their furniture. Mrs. Hale, overpowered by her troubles, became really ill, and Margaret felt almost relieved when her mother took to her bed, and left the management of affairs to her.

For the one thing clear was the necessity for leaving Helstone. Mr. Hale's successor was appointed; there must be no lingering. Her father came home every evening more and more depressed, after the leave-taking which he had resolved to have with every parishioner. Margaret did not know whom to ask for advice. The cook and Charlotte worked willingly at all the moving and packing; and as far as that went, Margaret's sense enabled her to direct how it should be done. But where were they to go to? Straight to Milton, or where?

Margaret resolved to ask her father one evening, in spite of his evident fatigue and low spirits. He answered:

'My dear! I have really had too much to think about to settle this. What does your mother say? What does she wish? Poor Maria!'

Dixon had just come into the room, and catching Mr. Hale's last words, made bold to say, 'My poor mistress!'

'You don't think her worse today?'

'I'm sure I can't say, sir. The illness seems so much more on the mind than on the body.'

Mr. Hale looked distressed.

'You had better take mamma her tea while it is hot, Dixon,' said Margaret, in a tone of quiet authority.

'Oh! I beg your pardon, miss! My thoughts was otherwise occupied.'

'Papa!' said Margaret, 'it is this suspense that is bad for you both. I think that I could get mamma to help me in planning, if you could tell me what to plan for. She has never expressed any wish, and only thinks of what can't be helped. Are we to go straight to Milton? Have you taken a house there?'

'No,' he replied. 'I suppose we must go into lodgings, and look about for a house.'

'And pack up the furniture so that it can be left at the railway station, till we have one?'

'I suppose so. Do what you think best. Only remember, we shall have much less money to spend.'

They had never had much, as Margaret knew. She felt that it was a great weight suddenly thrown upon her shoulders. Four months ago, all the decisions she needed to make were what dress to wear, and to help Edith draw up the lists of who should take who in to dinner. Now every day brought some momentous question to be settled.

Her father went up after tea to sit with his wife. Margaret remained alone in the drawing-room. Suddenly she took a candle and went into her father's study for a great atlas, and lugging it back into the drawing-room, she began to pore over the map of England. She looked up brightly when her father came downstairs.

'I have hit upon such a beautiful plan. Look here – in Darkshire, not far from Milton, is Heston, which I have heard is such a pleasant little bathing-place. Now, don't you think we could get mamma there with Dixon, while you and I go and look

at houses, and get one ready for her in Milton? She would get a breath of sea air to set her up for the winter, and be spared all the fatigue, and Dixon would enjoy taking care of her.'

'Is Dixon to go with us?' asked Mr. Hale, in a kind of helpless dismay.

'Oh, yes!' said Margaret. 'Dixon quite intends it, and I don't know what mamma would do without her.'

'But we shall have to put up with a very different way of living, I am afraid. Everything is so much dearer in a town. To tell you the truth, Margaret, I sometimes feel as if that woman gave herself airs.'

'To be sure she does, papa,' replied Margaret; 'and if she has to put up with a different style of living, we shall have to put up with her airs. But she really loves us all, and would be miserable to leave us; so, for mamma's sake, I do think she must go.'

'Very well, my dear. How far is Heston from Milton?'

'About thirty miles; that is not much!'

'If you really think it will do your mother good, let it be fixed so.'

This was a great step. Now Margaret could plan in good earnest. And now Mrs. Hale could rouse herself from her languor, and forget her suffering in thinking of the pleasure of going to the sea-side. Her only regret was that Mr. Hale could not be with her all the fortnight she was to be there, as he had been once, when they were engaged, and she had been staying with Sir John and Lady Beresford at Torquay.

CHAPTER 6

FAREWELL

The last day came; the house was full of packing-cases, which were being carted off to the railway station. The rooms had strange echoes, and the light came harshly and strongly in through the uncurtained windows. The house seemed already unfamiliar.

Mrs. Hale's dressing-room was left untouched to the last; there she and Dixon were packing up clothes, and now and then exclaiming fondly on some forgotten treasure, or relic of the children when they were little. They did not make much progress with their work.

Downstairs, Margaret stood calm and collected, ready to advise the men who had been called in to help the cook and Charlotte. These two, crying between whiles, wondered how the young lady could keep up so, and agreed that she probably did not care much for Helstone, having been so long in London. There she stood, very pale and quiet, with her large grave eyes observing everything. They could not understand how her heart was aching, with a heavy pressure that no sighs could relieve. Constant exertion was the only way to keep herself from crying out with pain.

Moreover, if she gave way, who was to manage? Her father was examining papers, books, registers and what not, in the vestry with the clerk; and he had his own books to pack up. Besides, was Margaret one to give way before strange men, or even household friends like the cook and Charlotte? Not she.

But at last the four packers went into the kitchen to their tea; and Margaret moved stiffly and slowly away from her place in the hall, through the bare echoing drawing-room, out into the twilight of an early November evening. There was a veil of soft dull mist obscuring all objects, giving them a lilac hue, for the sun had not yet fully set; a robin was singing. The leaves were more gorgeous than ever; the first touch of frost would lay them all low on the ground. Already one or two were floating down, amber and golden in the low slanting sun-rays.

Margaret went along the walk under the pear-tree wall. She had never been along it since she paced it at Henry Lennox's side. Here he began to speak of what she must not think of now. Only a fortnight ago! And all so changed! Where was he now? In London; dining with the Harley Street set, or with friends of his own. Even now, while she walked sadly through that damp and drear garden in the dusk, with everything falling and fading, and turning to decay around her, he might be gladly putting away his law-books, and freshening himself up, as he had told her he often did, by a run in the Temple Gardens, hearing the roar of the city and catching glimpses of its lights in the river.

Here there was no sound. The robin had gone away into the vast stillness of night. Now and then, a distant cottage door opened and shut, as if to admit the tired labourer to his home. A stealthy, creeping, crunching sound among the crisp fallen leaves of the forest, beyond the garden, seemed closer. Margaret knew it was some poacher. From her bedroom, with her candle extinguished, and revelling in the solemn beauty of the heavens and earth, she had many a time seen the light noiseless leap of poachers over the garden-fence, their quick tramp across the dewy moonlit lawn to disappear in the black still shadow beyond. She had felt no fear of them. But tonight she was afraid, she knew not why. She heard Charlotte locking up for the

night, unaware that anyone had gone out into the garden. A small branch came down heavily in the forest. Margaret ran to the window, and rapped at it hurriedly.

‘Let me in, Charlotte!’ Her heart did not stop fluttering till she was safe in the drawing-room, with the windows fastened. Chill was the dreary and dismantled room, with no fire or light but Charlotte’s candle.

‘I was afraid you were shutting me out, Charlotte,’ said Margaret, half-smiling. ‘And then you would never have heard me in the kitchen.’

‘Oh, miss, I should have been sure to have missed you. I have put tea in master’s study, as being the most comfortable room.’

‘Thank you, Charlotte. You are a kind girl. I shall be sorry to leave you. You must try and write to me. I shall always be glad to get a letter from Helstone, you know.’

In the study, there was a good blazing fire. Margaret sat down on the rug to warm herself, clasping her hands round her knees; her head dropped a little in despondency. But when she heard her father’s step outside, she started up, and hastily shaking back her heavy black hair, and wiping a few tears away, she went to open the door for him. He showed far more depression than she did. She could hardly get him to talk, despite her efforts.

‘Have you been for a very long walk today?’ asked she, on seeing his refusal to touch any food.

‘To Fordham Beeches. I went to see Widow Maltby; she is sadly grieved at not having wished you good-bye. She says little Susan has kept watch down the lane for days past. – Nay, Margaret, what is the matter, dear?’

The thought of the child watching for her, and continually disappointed – from no forgetfulness on her part, but from sheer inability to leave home – was the last drop in poor Margaret’s cup, and she was sobbing as if her heart would break. Mr. Hale was perplexed. Margaret tried to check herself, but could not yet speak. She heard him talking to himself.

‘I cannot bear it. I cannot bear to see the sufferings of others. Oh, is there no going back?’

‘No, father,’ said Margaret, looking straight at him, and speaking low and steadily. ‘It is bad to believe you in error, but it would be infinitely worse to think you a hypocrite. It is only that I am tired tonight; I am not suffering from what you have done, dear papa.’ Finding that tears would come in spite of herself, she added, ‘I had better go and take mamma this cup of tea.’

The next morning they were wrenched away from beloved Helstone. They had seen the last of the long low parsonage, half-covered with China-roses and pyracanthus. In the carriage to the station, Margaret strove to catch the last glimpse of the old church tower above the forest trees; but her father was looking for it too, and she silently acknowledged his greater right to the window from which it could be seen. She leant back and shut her eyes, the tears rolling slowly down her cheeks.

They were to stop in London overnight. Poor Mrs. Hale had cried nearly all day; and Dixon showed her sorrow by extreme crossness, and an irritable attempt to keep her skirts from touching Mr. Hale, whom she regarded as the cause of all this suffering.

It was the very busiest time of a London afternoon in November when they arrived. It was long since Mrs. Hale had been in London; and she roused up, almost like a child, to look at the streets, and exclaim at the shops and carriages.

‘Oh, there’s Harrison’s, where I bought so many of my wedding-things. Dear! how altered! They’ve got immense plate-glass windows, larger than Crawford’s in Southampton. Oh, I declare – Margaret, we have just passed Mr. Henry Lennox. Where can he be going, among all these shops?’

Margaret started forwards, and then quickly fell back, half-smiling at herself. They were a hundred yards away by this time; but he seemed like a relic of Helstone – he was associated with a bright morning, an eventful day, and she should have liked to have seen him, without his seeing her.

The long evening was passed in an hotel. Everyone they saw appeared hurrying to some appointment. They alone seemed friendless and desolate. Yet within a mile, Margaret knew of house after house where she and her mother would be welcomed, if they came in gladness. But if they came sorrowing, and wanting sympathy in their complicated trouble, then they would be felt as a shadow in all these acquaintances’ homes. London life is too whirling and full to allow that deep silence of feeling which the friends of Job showed, when ‘they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him; for they saw that his grief was very great.’

CHAPTER 7

NEW SCENES AND FACES

The next afternoon they travelled on the railway to Heston. Heston was one long straggling street, running parallel to the seashore. It was different from the little bathing-places in the south of England: to use a Scotch word, everything looked more 'purposelike.' The people looked busier; the colours looked greyer. In such towns in the south of England, Margaret had seen shopmen lounging at their doors to look up and down the street. Here, if they had any leisure, they busied themselves in the shop – even, Margaret fancied, to the unnecessary unrolling and rerolling of ribbons. All these differences struck her, as she and her mother went out next morning to look for lodgings.

Two nights in hotels had cost more than anticipated, and they were glad to take the first clean, cheerful rooms they found. There, for the first time for many days, Margaret felt at rest. There was a dreaminess which made it still more perfect and luxurious. The distant sea, lapping the sandy shore; the cries of the donkey-boys; the stroll down to the beach to breathe the sea-air, soft and warm even at the end of November; the great long misty sea-line touching the sky; the white sail of a distant boat turning silver in some pale sunbeam: she felt she could dream her life away here, without thinking of the past or future.

But the future must be met, however stern and iron it might be. One evening it was arranged that Margaret and her father should go the next day to Milton-Northern, and look for a house. Mr. Hale was anxious to see Mr. Thornton and ascertain his position. Margaret had a repugnance to the idea of a manufacturing town, and would willingly have put off the expedition.

For several miles before they reached Milton, they saw a deep lead-coloured cloud hanging over the horizon above it, contrasting with the pale wintry sky. Nearer to the town, the air had a faint taste and smell of smoke. They were whirled over long, straight, hopeless streets of small brick houses. Here and there a great oblong many-windowed factory stood up, like a hen among her chickens, puffing out black smoke, and accounting for the cloud.

As they drove through the streets, they had to stop constantly; loaded lorries blocked up the thoroughfares. Margaret had now and then been into the city of London in her drives with her aunt. But there the heavy lumbering vehicles seemed to have various purposes; here, every van, wagon and truck bore cotton, either raw in bags, or woven, in the form of bales of calico. People thronged the footpaths, most of them well-dressed as regarded the material, but with a slovenly looseness which struck Margaret as different from the shabby, threadbare smartness of a similar class in London.

'New Street,' said Mr. Hale. 'This, Bell tells me, is the main street in Milton. It was the making of this street into a great thoroughfare, thirty years ago, which has caused his property to rise so much in value. Mr. Thornton's mill must be nearby, for he is Mr. Bell's tenant. Before we look for those houses we marked in the *Milton Times*, I will see if there is any letter for me at our hotel from Mr. Thornton. He said he would let me know anything he might hear about the houses.'

There were no letters awaiting him, so they set out on their house-hunting. Thirty pounds a year was all they could afford, but in Hampshire they could have found a roomy house and pleasant garden for the money. Here, even the necessary two sitting-rooms and four bed-rooms seemed unattainable. They went through their list, rejecting each as they visited it. Then they looked at each other in dismay.

‘We must go back to the second, I think,’ said Margaret. ‘That one in the suburb of Crampton? There were three sitting-rooms; don’t you remember how we laughed at the number compared with the three bedrooms? But I have planned it all. The front room downstairs is to be your study and our dining-room, for mamma is to have the cheerful sitting-room; and that room upstairs, with the atrocious blue and pink paper, had a pretty view of the plain with the river, or canal, or whatever it is, down below. Then I could have the little bedroom behind – over the kitchen – and you and mamma the room behind the drawing-room.’

‘But Dixon, and a servant-girl?’

‘Wait a minute. Dixon is to have, let me see – the back sitting-room. I think she will like that. And the girl can have that sloping attic over your room and mamma’s. Won’t that do?’

‘I dare say it will. But the wallpapers. What taste!’

‘Never mind, papa! Surely you can charm the landlord into re-papering the drawing-room and your bedroom; and your book-shelves will hide a great deal of that gaudy pattern in the dining-room.’

‘Then you think it the best? If so, I had better go and call on the landlord. I will take you back to the hotel, where you can order lunch, and by the time it is ready, I shall be with you. I hope I shall be able to get new wallpaper.’

Her father took her through the entrance of the hotel, and went away. Just as Margaret was entering their sitting-room, she was addressed by a waiter:

‘I beg your pardon, ma’am. I had no time to tell the gentleman. Mr. Thornton called directly after you left; and, as I understood you would be back in an hour, I told him so, and he came again five minutes ago, and said he would wait for Mr. Hale. He is in your room now, ma’am.’

‘Thank you. My father will return soon.’ Margaret opened the door and went in; straight, fearless and dignified, as usual. She felt no awkwardness; here was a person come on business to her father; and she would treat him with civility.

Mr. Thornton was a good deal more surprised and discomfited than she. Instead of a quiet, middle-aged clergyman, a young lady came forward with frank dignity – a young lady of a different type to those he was in the habit of seeing. Her dress was very plain: a close straw bonnet of the best material; a dark silk gown, without any trimming; a large Indian shawl, which she wore as an empress wears her drapery. He did not understand who she was, as he caught the simple, straight, unabashed look. He had heard that Mr. Hale had a daughter, but he had imagined that she was a little girl; and his words would not come.

‘Mr. Thornton, I believe!’ said Margaret, after a pause. ‘Will you sit down? Unfortunately my father was not told that you were here, and he has gone away on some business. But he will come back soon. I am sorry you have had the trouble of calling twice.’

Mr. Thornton was in the habit of authority himself, but she seemed to assume some kind of rule over him. He calmly took a seat at her bidding.

‘Do you know where Mr. Hale has gone? Perhaps I might be able to find him.’

‘He has gone to a Mr. Donkin’s; the landlord of the house my father wishes to take in Crampton.’

Mr. Thornton knew the house. He had seen the advertisement, and been to look at it, in compliance with a request of Mr. Bell’s: and also because of his own interest in Mr. Hale’s circumstances. Mr. Thornton had thought that the house in Crampton, despite a certain vulgarity, was really just the thing; but now that he saw Margaret, with her superb ways of moving and looking, he began to feel ashamed of having imagined that it would do very well for the Hales.

Margaret could not help her looks; but the short curled upper lip, the round, up-turned chin, the manner of carrying her head, and her movements, full of a soft feminine defiance, always gave strangers the impression of haughtiness. She was tired now, and would rather have rested; but she owed it to herself to speak courteously to this stranger. She wished that he would go, instead of sitting there, curtly answering all her remarks.

She had taken off her shawl, and sat facing the light. Her full beauty met his eye; her round white throat rising out of the lithe figure; her moving lips not breaking the cold serene look of her face; her eyes meeting his with quiet freedom. He almost said to himself that he did not like her. While he looked upon her with admiration, she looked at him with proud indifference, taking him, he thought, for what he was – a great rough fellow, with not a refinement about him. Her quiet coldness he interpreted as contempt, and resented it so much that he was almost inclined to get up and go away, and have nothing more to do with these supercilious Hales.

Just as Margaret had exhausted her last subject of conversation, her father came in, and with a pleasant gentlemanly apology reinstated his family in Mr. Thornton’s good opinion. The two men had much to say about their mutual friend, Mr. Bell; and Margaret, glad that her part of entertaining the visitor was over, went to the window and was gazing out at the street, when her father spoke to her:

‘Margaret! the landlord will persist in admiring that hideous paper, and I am afraid we must let it remain.’

‘Oh dear! I am sorry!’ she replied, and began to consider if she could hide part of it, at least, with some of her sketches. Her father, meanwhile, was pressing Mr. Thornton to stay to luncheon. It would have been very inconvenient to him to do so, yet he felt that he should accept, if Margaret also invited him. She did not, and he was glad, yet irritated at her. She gave him a low, grave bow when he left, and he felt more awkward and self-conscious than he had ever done in his life.

‘Well, Margaret, now to luncheon. Mr. Thornton must have been waiting a long time, I’m afraid.’

‘It seemed exceedingly long to me. I was just at the last gasp when you came in. He gave such short, abrupt answers.’

‘Very much to the point though, I should think. He is a clearheaded fellow. He said that Crampton is on gravelly soil, and by far the most healthy suburb near Milton.’

When they returned to Heston, Mrs. Hale was full of questions. ‘And what is Mr. Thornton like?’

‘Ask Margaret,’ said her husband. ‘She and he had a long attempt at conversation, while I was away speaking to the landlord.’

‘Oh! I hardly know what he is like,’ said Margaret lazily. ‘He is a tall, broad-shouldered man, about – how old, papa?’

‘I should guess about thirty.’

‘About thirty – neither exactly plain, nor handsome, nothing remarkable – not quite a gentleman; but that was hardly to be expected.’

‘Not vulgar or common though,’ put in her father.

‘Oh, no!’ said Margaret. ‘With such an expression of resolution and power, no face could be vulgar or common. I should not like to have to bargain with him; he looks very inflexible. Altogether he seems made for his niche, mamma; sagacious, and strong, as becomes a great tradesman.’

‘Don’t call the Milton manufacturers tradesmen, Margaret,’ said her father. ‘They are very different.’

‘Are they? If you think the term is not correct, papa, I won’t use it. But, oh mamma! speaking of vulgarity, you must prepare yourself for our drawing-room paper. Pink and blue roses, with yellow leaves!’

But when they moved to their new house in Milton, the obnoxious wallpaper was gone. The landlord let them think that he had relented; there was no need to tell them that what he did not care to do for an unknown Mr. Hale, he was only too glad to do at the short sharp remonstrance of Mr. Thornton, the wealthy manufacturer.

CHAPTER 8

HOME SICKNESS

It needed more than the pretty papering of the rooms to reconcile them to Milton. The thick yellow November fogs had come on; and the view of the river was shut out when Mrs. Hale arrived at her new home.

Margaret and Dixon had been at work for two days, unpacking and arranging, but everything still looked in disorder. Outside, fog crept up to the windows, and was driven in to every open door in choking, unwholesome white wreaths.

‘Oh, Margaret! are we to live here?’ asked Mrs. Hale in blank dismay. Margaret, dreary at heart, made herself say,

‘Oh, the fogs in London are sometimes far worse!’

‘But in London you knew that friends lay behind it. Here, we are desolate. Oh Dixon, what a place this is!’

‘Indeed, ma’am, I’m sure it will be your death before long! Miss Hale, that’s far too heavy for you to lift.’

‘Not at all, thank you, Dixon,’ replied Margaret coldly. ‘The best thing we can do for mamma is to get her room ready for her to go to bed, while I bring her a cup of coffee.’

Mr. Hale was equally out of spirits, and equally came to Margaret for sympathy.

‘Margaret, I do believe this is an unhealthy place. I wish I had gone to Wales; this is really terrible,’ said he.

There was no comfort to be given. They were settled in Milton, and must endure smoke and fogs; indeed, all other life seemed shut out from them by as thick a fog of circumstance. Only the day before, Mr. Hale had been reckoning up with dismay how much their removal and fortnight at Heston had cost, and he found it had absorbed nearly all his ready money. No! here they were, and here they must remain.

At night, Margaret felt inclined to sit down in a stupor of despair. The heavy smoky air hung about her bedroom, which occupied a long narrow projection at the back of the house. The window looked onto the blank wall of a similar projection, only ten feet distant. It loomed through the fog like a great barrier to hope.

Inside the room everything was in confusion. All their efforts had been directed to make her mother’s room comfortable. Margaret sat down on a box which had been labelled at Helstone – beautiful Helstone! She lost herself in dismal thought: but at last she remembered that she had a letter from Edith which she had only half read in the bustle.

It told of their arrival at Corfu; their voyage along the Mediterranean – the music and dancing on board ship; her gay new life; her house with its trellised balcony, and its views over white cliffs and deep blue sea. Edith wrote fluently and well. Captain Lennox and another lately married officer shared a villa, high up on the beautiful cliffs. Their days seemed spent in boating and picnics, utterly free from any cloud. Edith’s husband had to attend drill, and she had to copy out the newest English tunes for the benefit of the bandmaster; those were their most arduous duties. She expressed an affectionate hope that Margaret might come out and pay her a long visit. She asked if Margaret remembered the day a year ago when it rained in Harley Street;

and how Edith would not put on her new gown to go to a stupid dinner, and get it all wet; and how at that very dinner they had first met Captain Lennox.

Yes! Margaret remembered it well. The recollection of the handsome luxury of the house, the peaceful, untroubled ease there, came vividly before her, in strange contrast to the present. The smooth sea of that old life closed up, without a mark left to tell where it had been. The dinners, the shopping, the dancing, were all going on for ever, though her Aunt Shaw and Edith were no longer there; and she, of course, was even less missed. She doubted if any of that old set ever thought of her, except Henry Lennox. He too would strive to forget her, because of the pain she had caused him.

Then she penetrated farther into what might have been. If she had accepted him, and this change in her father's opinions and station had taken place, she knew it would have been impatiently received by Mr. Lennox. She could bear the change, because she knew her father's purity of purpose, and that strengthened her to endure his errors, grave and serious though she thought they were. But it would have oppressed and irritated Mr. Lennox.

As she realised what might have been, she grew thankful for what was. They were at the lowest now; they could not be worse. Edith's astonishment and her aunt Shaw's dismay would have to be met bravely, when their letters came. So Margaret rose up and began slowly to undress herself. She fell asleep hoping for some brightness, either internal or external.

But if she had known how long it would be before the brightness came, her heart would have sunk low. The time of year was harmful to health as well as spirits. Her mother caught a severe cold, and Dixon was not well, although she would not allow Margaret to try and take care of her. They could find no servant girl to assist her; all were at work in the factories; or at least, Dixon did not approve of any who applied. So they had to keep a charwoman in almost constant employ.

Mr. Hale met with several pupils, recommended to him by Mr. Bell or Mr. Thornton. They were mostly of the age when many boys would be still at school; but according to the prevalent notions of Milton, to make a lad into a good tradesman he must be caught young, and acclimatised to the life of the mill, or office, or warehouse. If he were sent to even the Scotch Universities, he came back unsettled for commerce; how much more so if he went to Oxford or Cambridge, where he could not be entered till he was eighteen? So most of the manufacturers placed their sons in work at fourteen or fifteen, unsparingly cutting away all off-shoots in the direction of literature or mental cultivation, in hopes of throwing the whole vigour of the plant into commerce.

Still there were some wiser parents; and some young men who saw their own deficiencies, and tried to remedy them. There were even some men in the prime of life, who had the stern wisdom to acknowledge their own ignorance, and to learn late what they should have learnt early. Mr. Thornton was perhaps the oldest of Mr. Hale's pupils. He was certainly the favourite. Mr. Hale got into the habit of quoting his opinions so frequently that it became a little domestic joke to wonder how much time in his lessons could have been devoted to learning, so much of it appeared to have been spent in conversation.

Margaret encouraged this merry way of viewing her father's acquaintance with Mr. Thornton, because she felt that her mother was inclined to be jealous of it. When his time had been solely occupied with his books and his parishioners, she had

appeared to care little whether she saw much of him or not; but now that he looked eagerly forward to meeting Mr. Thornton, she seemed hurt and annoyed.

After his quiet life in a country parsonage, Mr. Hale was somewhat dazzled by the energy which conquered immense difficulties with ease; the power of Milton's machinery, and the power of its men, impressed him with a sense of grandeur. But Margaret went less abroad among machinery and men; saw less of power in its public effect, and, as it happened, she was thrown together with one or two of those who must be acute sufferers for the good of many. The question always is, has everything been done to make the sufferings of these exceptions as small as possible? Or, in the triumph of the procession, have the helpless been trampled on, instead of being gently lifted aside out of the way of the conqueror, whom they have no power to accompany on his march?

Margaret had to look for a servant to help Dixon, who had at first undertaken to find one herself. But Dixon's ideas of helpful girls were founded on the recollection of tidy elder scholars at Helstone school, who treated her with respect, and even fright. Dixon could not endure the rough independent way in which the Milton girls who applied for the servant's place answered her inquiries. They even questioned her back again; having doubts of their own about the solvency of a family who lived in a house at thirty pounds a-year, and yet gave themselves airs, and kept such a high and mighty ladies' maid.

Margaret was weary of Dixon's accounts of the behaviour of these would-be servants. True, she herself was repelled by the rough uncourteous manners of these people; she shrunk with fastidious pride from their hail-fellow accost, and resented their unconcealed curiosity as to the income of any family who lived in Milton without being engaged in trade. But if Margaret took it on herself to find a servant, she could spare her mother the recital of Dixon's disappointments and insults.

So Margaret went to butchers and grocers, seeking for a suitable girl; and lowered her hopes every week, with the difficulty of finding anyone who did not prefer the better wages and greater independence of working in a mill. It was something of a trial to Margaret to go out by herself in this busy bustling place. Mrs. Shaw had always insisted that a footman should accompany her, if she went beyond Harley Street, and Margaret had silently rebelled: she had doubly enjoyed the free rambles of her forest life, from the contrast. There, she walked with a bounding fearless step, and occasionally broke out into a run, or halted, listening to and watching the wild creatures who sang in the leafy courts, or glanced out with keen eyes from the low brushwood or tangled furze. It was a trial to come down from this to the decorous pace necessary in the streets.

But there was a more serious annoyance. In the streets around Crampton there were many mills, out of which poured streams of men and women two or three times a day. They came rushing along, with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughs and jests, aimed at all those above them in rank. Their unrestrained voices, and their carelessness of all common rules of politeness, frightened Margaret a little at first. The girls, with their rough, but not unfriendly freedom, would comment on her dress, and even touch her shawl or gown to check the exact material; once or twice they asked her about some article which they admired. There was such a simple reliance on her womanly sympathy with their love of dress, that she gladly replied to these inquiries, as soon as she understood them; and half-smiled back.

She did not mind meeting any number of girls, loud spoken and boisterous though they might be. But she dreaded and fired up against the workmen, who

commented not on her dress, but on her looks, in the same open fearless manner. She had always felt that any remark on her personal appearance was an impertinence; now she had to endure undisguised admiration from these outspoken men. Their very outspokenness showed their innocence of any intention to hurt her, as she would have perceived if she had been less frightened. Out of her fright came a flash of indignation which made her face scarlet, and her dark eyes gather flame, as she heard some of their speeches. Yet there were other sayings of theirs, which, once back home, amused her.

For instance, one day she passed several men who paid her the not unusual compliment of wishing she was their sweetheart. One of them added, 'Your bonny face, my lass, makes the day look brighter.' And another day, as she was unconsciously smiling at some thought, she was addressed by a poorly-dressed, middle-aged workman, with: 'You may well smile, my lass; many a one would smile to have such a bonny face.'

This man looked so careworn that Margaret could not help giving him an answering smile, glad to think that her looks, such as they were, should have had the power to call up a pleasant thought. He seemed to understand her acknowledging glance, and a silent recognition was established between them whenever their paths crossed. They never exchanged a word beyond that first compliment; yet somehow Margaret looked upon this man with more interest than upon anyone else in Milton. Once or twice, on Sundays, she saw him walking with a girl, evidently his daughter, and, if possible, still more unhealthy than he was himself.

One day Margaret and her father had been as far as the fields that lay around the town. It was now early spring, and she had gathered some of the hedge flowers, dog-violets, celandines, and the like, with an unspoken lament in her heart for the sweet profusion of the South. Her father left her to go into Milton upon business; and on the road home she met her humble friends. The girl looked wistfully at the flowers, and, acting on a sudden impulse, Margaret offered them to her. Her pale blue eyes lightened up as she took them, and her father spoke.

'Thank yo, Miss. Bessy'll think a deal o' them flowers; that hoo will; and I shall think a deal o' your kindness. Yo're not of this country, I reckon?'

'No!' said Margaret, half sighing. 'I come from the South – from Hampshire,' she continued, a little afraid of using a name which he did not understand.

'That's beyond London, I reckon? And I come fro' Burnley-ways, forty mile to th' North. And yet, yo see, North and South has both met and made kind o' friends in this big smoky place.'

Margaret had slackened her pace to walk alongside the man, whose steps were slowed by the feebleness of his daughter. She now spoke to the girl, with a tender pity that went right to the father's heart.

'I'm afraid you are not very strong.'

'No,' said the girl, 'nor never will be.'

'Spring is coming,' said Margaret, as if to suggest hopeful thoughts.

'Spring nor summer will do me good,' said the girl quietly.

Margaret looked up at the man, expecting some contradiction from him. But he said, 'I'm afeared hoo speaks truth. I'm afeared hoo's too far gone.'

'I shall have a spring where I'm bound to, and flowers, and amaranths, and shining robes besides,' said his daughter.

'Poor lass, poor lass!' said her father in a low tone. 'I'm none so sure o' that; but it's a comfort to thee, poor lass – it'll be soon.'

Margaret was shocked, but not repelled; rather, interested.

‘Where do you live? I think we must be neighbours, we meet so often.’

‘We’re at nine Frances Street, second to th’ left after yo’ve past th’ Goulden Dragon.’

‘And your name?’

‘It’s Nicholas Higgins. Hoo’s called Bessy Higgins. Whatten yo’ asking for?’

Margaret was surprised at this last question, for at Helstone it would have been an understood thing that she intended to call upon any poor neighbour whose name and address she had asked for.

‘I thought – I meant to come and see you.’ She suddenly felt rather shy of offering the visit, without having any reason for it beyond kindly interest. It seemed to be an impertinence; she read this too in the man’s eyes.

‘I’m none so fond of having strange folk in my house.’ But then, as he saw her heightened colour, he added, ‘Yo’re a foreigner, and maybe don’t know many folk here, and yo’ve given my wench here flowers; – yo may come if yo like.’

Margaret was half-amused, half-nettled at this answer. She was not sure if she would go after all. But when they came to Frances Street, the girl stopped, and said,

‘Yo’ll not forget yo’re to come and see us.’

‘Aye, aye,’ said the father, impatiently, ‘hoo’ll come. Hoo’s a bit set up now, because hoo thinks I might ha’ spoken more civilly; but hoo’ll think better on it, and come. I can read her proud bonny face like a book. Come along, Bess; there’s the mill bell ringing.’

Margaret went home, wondering at her new friends, and smiling at the man’s insight into what had been passing in her mind. From that day Milton became a brighter place to her. It was not the long, bleak sunny days of spring that reconciled her to the town. It was that in it she had found a human interest.

CHAPTER 9

DRESSING FOR TEA

The day after this meeting with Higgins and his daughter, Mr. Hale came upstairs into the little drawing-room. He began to examine different objects there, but Margaret saw that it was merely a nervous way of putting off something he wished, yet feared to say. Out it came at last—

‘My dear! I’ve asked Mr. Thornton to come to tea tonight.’

Mrs. Hale was leaning back in her easy chair, with her eyes shut, and an expression of pain on her face which had become habitual to her of late. But now she roused up querulously.

‘Mr. Thornton! tonight! What in the world does the man want to come here for? And Dixon is washing my muslins and laces, and there is no soft water with these horrid east winds, which I suppose we shall have all year in Milton.’

‘The wind is veering round, my dear,’ said Mr. Hale, looking out at the smoke rather vaguely.

‘Don’t tell me!’ said Mrs. Hale, shuddering, and wrapping her shawl tightly about her. ‘But, east or west wind, I suppose this man comes.’

‘Oh, mamma, Mr. Thornton looks like a person who would enjoy battling with everything – winds included. The more it rains and blows, the more certain we are to have him. I’ll go and help Dixon. And he won’t want any amusement beyond talking to papa. You know, Papa, I have only seen him once, and then we were so puzzled to know what to say to each other that we did not get on particularly well.’

‘He is not a lady’s man.’

Margaret looked scornful. ‘I don’t particularly admire ladies’ men, papa. But Mr. Thornton comes here as your friend, so we will give him a welcome, and some cocoa-nut cakes. Dixon will be flattered if we ask her to make some; and I will iron your caps, mamma.’

Margaret had planned other employments for herself: a letter to Edith, some Dante, a visit to the Higginses. But, instead, she ironed away, listening to Dixon’s complaints, and hoping that her sympathy might prevent Dixon from carrying the recital of her sorrows to Mrs. Hale. Margaret had to remind herself of her father’s regard for Mr. Thornton, to subdue the weariness that was stealing over her, and bringing on one of the bad headaches to which she had lately become liable. She could hardly speak when she sat down at last, and told her mother that she was no longer Peggy the laundry-maid, but Margaret Hale the lady. She meant this speech for a little joke, and was vexed with herself when she found her mother taking it seriously.

‘Yes! if anyone had told me, when I was Miss Beresford, that a child of mine would have to stand in a little poky kitchen, working away like any servant, so that we might prepare to receive a tradesman—’

‘Oh, mamma!’ said Margaret, ‘I don’t mind ironing, or any kind of work, for you and papa. I am a born and bred lady through it all. I am just tired now; but in half an hour I shall be ready to do the same over again. And as to Mr. Thornton’s being in trade, why, he can’t help that, poor fellow. I don’t suppose his education would fit

him for much else.' She rose slowly and went to her own room; for just now she could not bear much more.

In Mr. Thornton's house, at this very same time, a similar scene was going on. A large-boned lady, long past middle age, sat at work in a grim handsomely-furnished dining-room. Her features were strong and massive, and held a decided expression. She was a firm, severe, dignified woman, handsomely dressed in black silk. She was mending a large table-cloth, holding it up against the light occasionally. There was not a book in the room, except six volumes of Bible Commentaries, which lay on the sideboard, flanked by a tea-urn and a lamp. In some remote room, someone was practising the piano very rapidly and rather carelessly. Mrs. Thornton heard a decisive step pass the dining-room door.

'John! Is that you?'

Her son opened the door.

'What has brought you home so early? I thought you were going to tea with that Mr. Hale.'

'So I am, mother; I am come home to dress!'

'Dress! humph! Why should you dress to go and take a cup of tea with an old parson?'

'Mr. Hale is a gentleman, and his wife and daughter are ladies.'

'Wife and daughter! Do they teach too? What do they do? You have never mentioned them.'

'No! because I have never seen Mrs. Hale; I have only seen Miss Hale for half an hour.'

'Take care you don't get caught by a penniless girl, John.'

'I am not easily caught, mother, as I think you know. But I must not have Miss Hale spoken of in that way, which, you know, is offensive to me. I never was aware of any young lady trying to catch me yet, nor do I believe that any has given themselves that useless trouble.'

'Well! I only say, take care. Perhaps our Milton girls have too much spirit and good feeling to go angling after husbands; but this Miss Hale comes out of the aristocratic counties, where, if all tales be true, rich husbands are reckoned prizes.'

Mr. Thornton's brow contracted. 'Mother,' (with a short scornful laugh), 'I confess that the only time I saw Miss Hale, she treated me with a haughty civility which had a strong flavour of contempt. She was as aloof as a queen. Be easy, mother.'

'No! I am not easy. What business had she, a renegade clergyman's daughter, to turn up her nose at you! I would dress up for none of them, if I were you.'

'Mr. Hale is good, and gentle, and learned. As for Mrs. Hale, I will tell you what she is like tonight, if you care to hear.' He shut the door and was gone.

'Despise my son! Humph! I should like to know where she could find such another! He's the noblest, stoutest heart I ever knew. I don't care if I am his mother; I can see what's what. I know what Fanny is; and I know what John is. Despise him! I hate her!'

CHAPTER 10

WROUGHT IRON AND GOLD

Mr. Thornton left the house, and walked rapidly to Crampton. He was anxious not to slight his new friend by arriving late. The church clock struck half past seven as he rang the door-bell, and was ushered into the little drawing-room.

He was kindly greeted by Mr. Hale, who led him to his wife. Her pale face made a silent excuse for the cold languor of her greeting. Margaret was lighting the lamp when he entered; it threw a pretty light into the centre of the dusky room.

Somehow, that room contrasted itself with the one he had lately left; handsome and ponderous, with no sign of feminine habitation, except in the one spot where his mother sat. To be sure, that was a dining-room; but his mother's drawing-room was not like this either. It was twenty times as fine; not one quarter as comfortable. Here were no mirrors, no gilding – just the dear old Helstone chintz-curtains and chair covers. In one window was a tall white vase, from which drooped wreaths of English ivy, pale-green birch, and copper-coloured beech-leaves. Pretty baskets of work stood about: and books lay on one table, as if recently put down. Behind the door was a table set for tea, with cocoa-nut cakes, and a basket piled with oranges and ruddy American apples, heaped on leaves.

It appeared to Mr. Thornton that all these graceful cares especially fitted Margaret. She stood by the tea-table in a light-coloured muslin gown, not attending to the conversation, but busy with the tea-cups, among which her ivory hands moved with pretty, noiseless daintiness. She had a bracelet on one arm, which would fall down over her round wrist. Mr. Thornton watched the replacing of this troublesome ornament with far more attention than he listened to her father. It fascinated him to see her push it up impatiently, until it tightened her soft flesh; and then to mark the loosening – the fall. He could almost have exclaimed, 'There it goes, again!'

Margaret handed him his cup of tea with the proud air of an unwilling slave; but her eye caught the moment when he was ready for another cup; and he almost longed to ask her to do for him what he saw her compelled to do for her father, who took her little finger and thumb in his masculine hand, and made them serve as sugar-tongs. Mr. Thornton saw her beautiful eyes lifted to her father, full of light, half-laughter and half-love, as this bit of pantomime went on between the two.

Margaret's head still ached; but she was resolved to throw herself into the breach, if there was any long pause, rather than give her father's guest any cause to think himself neglected. But the conversation went on; and after tea Margaret drew into a corner with her work. She felt that she might let her thoughts roam, without fear of being suddenly wanted to fill up a gap.

Mr. Thornton and Mr. Hale were both absorbed in some subject they had started discussing at their last meeting. On looking up from her work, Margaret's eye was caught by the difference in appearance between the two men. Her father was of slight figure, when contrasted with the tall, massive frame of the other. The lines in her father's face were soft and waving, with a frequent trembling movement passing over them, showing every fluctuating emotion; the eyelids were large and arched, giving to the eyes a languid beauty which was almost feminine.

In Mr. Thornton's face the straight brows fell low over clear, deep-set, earnest eyes, which seemed intent enough to penetrate into the very core of what he was looking at. The lines in the face were few but firm, as if they were carved in marble; his lips were slightly compressed over teeth so faultless as to give the effect of sudden sunlight when a rare bright smile shone out of the eyes. It changed his whole look from a severe and resolved expression to the keen honest enjoyment of the moment, which is seldom shown so fearlessly except by children. Margaret liked this smile; it was the first thing she had admired in this new friend of her father's; and the opposition of character seemed to explain the attraction the two men evidently felt towards each other.

She rearranged her mother's wool-work, and fell back into her own thoughts, while Mr. Thornton forgot her presence in explaining to Mr. Hale the magnificent power, yet delicate adjustment of the steam-hammer, which was recalling to Mr. Hale some of the wonderful stories of genii in the Arabian Nights – one moment stretching from earth to sky, at the next obediently compressed into a vase small enough to be held in a child's hand.

'And this practical realisation of a gigantic thought came out of one man's brain in our good town. That man has it within him to mount, step by step, to higher marvels still. And I'll be bound to say, we have many among us who could carry on the war which shall compel all material power to yield to science. I won't deny that I am proud of belonging to a town – perhaps I should rather say a district – which has given birth to such grandeur of conception. I would rather be a man toiling, suffering – even failing – here. than lead a dull prosperous life in the old worn grooves of what you call aristocratic society down in the South, with their slow days of careless ease. One may be clogged with honey and unable to rise and fly.'

'You are mistaken,' said Margaret, roused by the aspersion on her beloved South to a vehemence that brought the colour into her cheeks and angry tears into her eyes. 'You do not know anything about the South. If there is less adventure or less progress there from the gambling spirit of trade, which seems necessary to force out these wonderful inventions, there is less suffering also. I see men here going about in the streets who look ground down by sorrow or care – who are not only sufferers but haters. Now, in the South we have our poor, but they have not that terrible expression of a sullen sense of injustice which I see here. You do not know the South, Mr. Thornton,' she concluded, angry with herself for having said so much.

'And may I say you do not know the North?' asked he, with an inexpressible gentleness, as he saw that he had really hurt her. She remained resolutely silent; her passionate longing for the lovely haunts she had left made her feel that her voice would tremble if she spoke.

'At any rate, Mr. Thornton,' said Mrs. Hale, 'you will admit that Milton is a much more smoky, dirty town than you will ever see in the South.'

'I'm afraid so,' said Mr. Thornton, with the quick gleaming smile. 'Though now Parliament wishes us to swallow our own smoke.'

'I think you told me you had altered your chimneys so as to consume the smoke, did you not?' asked Mr. Hale.

'Mine were altered before Parliament passed the Smoke Nuisance Act; it repays me in the saving of coal. I'm not sure whether I should have done it, if I had waited until the Act was passed. At any rate, I should have waited to be informed against and fined, and would have given all the trouble that I legally could. But I doubt if there

has been a chimney in Milton informed against for five years past, although some are constantly sending out unparliamentary smoke.'

'I only know it is impossible to keep the muslin blinds clean for a week together,' said Mrs. Hale; 'and at Helstone we have had them up for a month without getting dirty.'

'You seem to have a strong objection to all laws affecting your management here at Milton,' said Mr. Hale.

'Yes, I have; and many others have as well. And justly, I think. The whole machinery – I don't mean the iron machinery now – of the cotton trade is so new that it is no wonder if it does not work well in every part all at once. Seventy years ago, what was it? Raw materials came together; men of the same level of education and station took suddenly the different positions of masters and men, owing to the mother-wit of some, which made them foresee the great future that lay concealed in that rude model of Sir Richard Arkwright's. The rapid development of a new trade gave those early masters enormous wealth and power – not merely over the workmen, but over world's market. Why, for instance, an advertisement was inserted not fifty years ago in a Milton paper, that one of the calico-printers would close his warehouse at noon each day; and that therefore all purchasers must come before that hour. Fancy a man dictating in this way the time when he would sell! Now, if a good customer chose to come at midnight, I should get up to receive his orders.'

Margaret's lip curled, but she was compelled to listen.

'I only name such things to show what almost unlimited power the manufacturers had at the beginning of this century. They were made dizzy by it. Such a man's sense of justice was often smothered under the glut of wealth that came down upon him; and they tell strange tales of the wild extravagance of those early cotton-lords. There can be no doubt that they tyrannised over their work-people – crushing them underfoot without remorse. But by-and-by came a reaction. There were more factories; more men were wanted. The power of masters and men became more evenly balanced; and now the battle is pretty fairly waged between us. We will hardly submit to the decision of an umpire, much less to the interference of a meddler with only a smattering of knowledge about the real facts of the case, even though that meddler be called the High Court of Parliament.'

'Need you call it a battle between the two classes?' asked Mr. Hale.

'I believe it indicates the true state of things; and prudent wisdom is always doing battle with ignorance and improvidence. It is one of the great beauties of our system, that a working-man may raise himself into the position of a master by his own exertions and behaviour; that, in fact, everyone who acts decently and attends to his duties, comes over to our ranks; it may not be always as a master, but as an over-looker, a cashier, a book-keeper, or a clerk.'

'You consider all who are unsuccessful in raising themselves in the world, from whatever cause, as your enemies, then, if I understand you rightly,' said Margaret in a clear, cold voice.

'As their own enemies, certainly,' said he quickly, somewhat piqued by her haughty disapproval. But his straightforward honesty made him feel that his words were a poor answer, and that he needed to explain. He could best illustrate what he wanted to say by telling them something of his own life; but was it not too personal a subject to speak about to strangers? Still, it was the most straightforward way of explaining his meaning; so, putting aside the touch of shyness that brought a momentary flush to his cheek, he said:

‘Sixteen years ago, my father died under very miserable circumstances. I was taken from school, and had to become a man (as well as I could) in a few days. I had such a mother as few are blest with; a strong woman of firm resolve. We went to a small country town, where living was cheaper than in Milton, and where I got work in a draper’s shop. Our weekly income was fifteen shillings, out of which three people had to be kept. My mother managed so that I saved three of those shillings regularly. This taught me self-denial. Now that I am able to afford my mother such comforts as her age requires, I thank her silently for the early training she gave me. I feel that in my own case it is not good luck, nor merit, nor talent – but simply the habits of life which taught me to despise indulgence. And I believe that this suffering, which Miss Hale says is shown on the faces of the people of Milton, is but the natural punishment of dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure at some former period of their lives. I do not look on self-indulgent people as worthy of my hatred; I simply look upon them with contempt for their poorness of character.’

‘But you have had the rudiments of a good education,’ remarked Mr. Hale. ‘The quick zest with which you are now reading Homer, shows me that you have read it before, and are recalling your old knowledge.’

‘That is true; at school, I dare say I was considered a pretty fair classical scholar, though my Latin and Greek have slipped away since. But I ask you, what preparation were they for such a life as I had to lead? None at all. On the point of education, any man who can read and write starts fair with me.’

‘Well! I don’t agree with you. Did not the recollection of the heroic simplicity of the Homeric life nerve you up?’

‘Not one bit!’ exclaimed Mr. Thornton, laughing. ‘I was too busy struggling for bread to think about it. Now that I have my mother safe in the peace that rewards her former exertions, I can turn to that old narration and thoroughly enjoy it.’

When Mr. Thornton rose to go, after shaking hands with Mr. and Mrs. Hale he advanced to Margaret to wish her good-bye in a similar manner. It was the custom of the place; but Margaret was not prepared for it. She simply bowed her farewell; although the instant she saw the hand quickly drawn back, she was sorry she had not been aware of his intention.

Mr. Thornton, however, drawing himself up to his full height, walked off, muttering as he left the house—

‘A more proud, disagreeable girl I never saw. Even her great beauty is blotted out of one’s memory by her scornful ways.’

CHAPTER 11

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

‘Margaret!’ said Mr. Hale, as he returned from showing his guest downstairs; ‘I could not help watching your face with some anxiety, when Mr. Thornton confessed to having been a shop-boy. I half expected you to get up and leave the room.’

‘Oh, papa! you don’t mean that you thought me so silly? I really liked that account of himself better than anything else he said. Everything else revolted me, from its hardness; but he spoke about himself so simply – with so little vulgar pretence, and with such tender respect for his mother, that I was less likely to leave the room than when he was boasting about Milton; or quietly professing to despise people for improvidence. He did not seem to think it his duty to try to make them different, to give them any of the training which his mother gave him. No! his statement of having been a shop-boy was the thing I liked best of all.’

‘I am surprised at you, Margaret,’ said her mother. ‘You, who were always accusing people of being shoppy at Helstone! I don’t think, Mr. Hale, you have done quite right in introducing such a person to us without telling us what he had been. I was shocked when he said his father died “in miserable circumstances.” Why, it might have been in the workhouse.’

‘I heard a good deal about his previous life from Mr. Bell,’ replied her husband; ‘so I can tell you that his father speculated wildly, failed, and then killed himself, because he could not bear the disgrace. All his former friends shrunk from the family. No one came forwards to help the mother and this boy. There was another child too, I believe, a younger girl. So they left Milton. I knew he had gone into a shop, and that his earnings supported them. Mr. Bell said they absolutely lived upon water-porridge for years; but long after the creditors had given up hope of receiving any payment of old Mr. Thornton’s debts, this young man returned to Milton, and went quietly round to each creditor, paying him the first instalment of the money owing. It was done very silently, but all was paid at last; helped because one of the creditors, a crabbed old fellow, took in Mr. Thornton as a kind of partner.’

‘That really is fine,’ said Margaret. ‘What a pity such a nature should be tainted by his position as a manufacturer.’

‘How tainted?’ asked her father.

‘Oh, papa, by that testing everything by the standard of wealth. He spoke of mechanical power only as a way of making money. And the poor men around him – they were poor because they were vicious, and had not his iron nature.’

‘Not vicious; he never said that. Improvident and self-indulgent were his words.’

Margaret was about to leave the room and go to bed; but she hesitated. She wanted to say something which she thought would please her father, but which to be true must include a little annoyance. However, out it came.

‘Papa, I do think Mr. Thornton a very remarkable man; but personally I don’t like him at all.’

‘And I do!’ said her father laughing. ‘I don’t set him up for a hero, though. Good night, child. Your mother looks sadly tired tonight.’

Margaret had noticed her mother's appearance with anxiety for some time, and this remark of her father's sent her up to bed with a dim fear weighing on her heart. The life in Milton was so different from what Mrs. Hale had been used to in Helstone, with its fresh and open air, and domestic worries pressed so closely, that she feared that her mother's health might be becoming seriously affected.

There were other signs of something wrong with Mrs. Hale. She and Dixon held mysterious consultations in her bedroom, from which Dixon would come out crying and cross. Once Margaret had gone into the chamber soon after Dixon left it, and found her mother on her knees. As Margaret stole out again, she caught a few words of a prayer for strength to endure severe bodily suffering.

Margaret yearned for the intimate confidence which had been broken by her long residence at her aunt Shaw's, and strove by gentle caresses and soft words to creep into the warmest place in her mother's heart. But though she received caresses and fond words back in plenty, yet she felt that there was a secret withheld from her, and she believed it was about her mother's health.

She lay awake very long this night, planning how to lessen the evil influence of their Milton life on her mother. A servant to help Dixon should be got, if she gave up her whole time to the search; and then, at any rate, her mother might have all the personal attention she required. Visiting agencies and interviewing unlikely people absorbed Margaret's time and thoughts for several days.

One afternoon she met Bessy Higgins in the street, and stopped to speak to her.

'Well, Bessy, how are you? Better, I hope.'

'Better and not better, if yo' know what that means.'

'Not exactly,' replied Margaret, smiling.

'I'm better in not being torn to pieces by coughing o' nights, but I'm weary and tired o' Milton, and longing to get away to heaven; and when I think I'm farther off, my heart sinks, and I'm no better; I'm worse.'

Margaret turned silently to walk alongside the girl in her feeble progress homeward. At last she said in a low voice,

'Bessy, do you wish to die?'

Bessy was silent in her turn for a minute or two. Then she replied,

'If yo'd led the life I have, and gotten as weary of it as I have, and thought "maybe it'll last for fifty or sixty years," and got dizzy and sick, as each of them sixty years seemed to spin about me, and mock me with its endless time – oh, wench! Thou'd been glad enough when th' doctor said he feared thou'd never see another winter.'

'Why, Bessy, what kind of a life has yours been?'

'Nought worse than many others, I reckon.'

'But what was it? You know, I'm a stranger here, so perhaps I'm not so quick at understanding life in Milton.'

'If yo'd ha' come to our house when yo' said yo' would, I could maybe ha' told you. But father says yo're just like th' rest of 'em; out o' sight, out o' mind.'

'I don't know who the rest are; and I've been very busy; and, to tell the truth, I had forgotten my promise—'

'Yo' offered it! we asked none of it.'

'I had forgotten what I said,' continued Margaret quietly. 'I should have remembered it when I was less busy. May I go with you now?'

Bessy gave a quick glance at Margaret's face. The sharpness in her eye turned to a wistful longing as she met Margaret's soft and friendly gaze.

‘If yo’ care yo’ may come.’

So they walked on together in silence. As they turned up into a small court, opening out of a squalid street, Bessy said,

‘Yo’ll not be daunted if father’s at home, and speaks a bit gruffish at first. He took a mind to ye, yo’ see, and he thought a deal o’ your coming to see us; and just because he liked yo’ he were vexed.’

‘Don’t fear, Bessy.’

But Nicholas was not at home when they entered. A slatternly girl, not so old as Bessy, but taller and stronger, was busy at the wash-tub, knocking about the furniture in a rough capable way. Bessy sat down, exhausted, and Margaret asked this sister for a cup of water. While she ran to fetch it (tumbling over a chair in her way), Margaret unloosed Bessy’s bonnet strings, to let her catch her breath.

‘Do you think such life as this is worth caring for?’ gasped Bessy, at last. Margaret did not speak, but held the water to her lips. Bessy took a long drink, and then fell back and shut her eyes. Margaret heard her murmur: ‘They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat.’

Margaret said, ‘Bessy, don’t be impatient with your life. Remember who gave it you, and made it what it is!’ She was startled by hearing Nicholas speak behind her; he had come in without her noticing.

‘Now, I’ll not have my wench preached to. She’s bad enough as it is, with her dreams and her fancies, and her visions of cities with golden gates. If it amuses her I let it be, but I’m not going to have more stuff poured into her.’

‘But surely,’ said Margaret, facing him, ‘you believe that God gave her life, and ordered what kind of life it was to be?’

‘I believe what I see, and no more, young woman. I don’t believe all I hear! For I did hear a young lass make an ado about knowing where we lived, and coming to see us. And my wench here thought a deal about it, and flushed up many a time at the sound of a strange step. But hoo’s come at last – and hoo’s welcome, as long as hoo’ll keep from preaching on what hoo knows nought about.’

Bessy had been watching Margaret’s face; she half sat up, laying her hand on Margaret’s arm. ‘Don’t be vexed wi’ him – there’s many a one thinks like him; and he’s a rare good man, is father – but oh!’ said she, falling back in despair, ‘what he says at times makes me long to die more than ever, for I want to know so many things, and am so tossed about wi’ wonder.’

‘Poor wench – I’m sorry to vex thee, I am; but a man mun speak out for the truth, and when I see the world going all wrong, bothering itself wi’ things it knows nought about, and leaving undone all the things that lie in disorder close at hand – why, I say, leave this talk about religion alone, and set to work on what yo’ see and know. That’s my creed. It’s simple.’

But the girl only pleaded again: ‘Don’t think badly of him – he’s a good man. I sometimes think I shall be moped wi’ sorrow even in the City of God, if father is not there.’ A feverish flame came into her eye. ‘But you will be there, father! you shall! Oh! my heart!’ She put her hand to it, and became ghastly pale.

Margaret held her in her arms, and lifted the thin soft hair from off the temples. Nicholas understood her signs for water with the quickness of love, and even the round-eyed sister moved with laborious gentleness.

Presently the spasm passed away. Bessy roused herself and said, ‘I’ll go to bed – it’s best place; but,’ catching at Margaret’s gown, ‘yo’ll come again – say it!’

‘I will come tomorrow,’ said Margaret.

Bessy leant back against her father, who prepared to carry her upstairs; but first he struggled to say something: 'I could wish there were a God, if only to ask Him to bless thee.'

Margaret went away very sad and thoughtful. She was late for tea at home. At Helstone unpunctuality at meal-times was a great fault in her mother's eyes; but no more, and Margaret almost longed for the old complainings.

'Have you found a servant, dear?'

'No, mamma, not yet.'

'Suppose I try,' said Mr. Hale. 'Everybody else has had their turn. I may be the Cinderella to put on the slipper after all.'

Margaret could hardly smile at this little joke, so oppressed was she by her visit to the Higginses.

'How would you set about it, Papa?'

'Why, I would apply to some good house-mother to recommend me someone.'

'Very good. But we must first catch our house-mother.'

'You have caught her. Or rather, you will catch her tomorrow, if you're skilful.'

'What do you mean, Mr. Hale?' asked his wife curiously.

'Why, my paragon pupil has told me that his mother intends to call on you both tomorrow.'

'Mrs. Thornton!' exclaimed Mrs. Hale. 'I shall like to see her. She must be an uncommon person. Perhaps she may have a relation who might suit us, and be glad of the job.'

'My dear,' said Mr. Hale, alarmed. 'Pray don't think that! I fancy Mrs. Thornton is as haughty and proud in her way, as our little Margaret is in hers, and that she completely ignores that old time of poverty of which her son speaks so openly. I am sure she would not like strangers to know anything about It.'

'Note that *that* is not my kind of haughtiness, papa, if I have any at all; which I don't agree to. Must I stay in to receive this call?' Margaret thought it would prevent her going to see Bessy until late in the day; and then she recollected that her mother must not be left to have the whole weight of entertaining her visitor.

CHAPTER 12

MORNING CALLS

Mr. Thornton had had some difficulty in persuading his mother to visit. She did not often make calls; and when she did, it was with reluctance. Her son had given her a carriage, but she refused to keep horses; they were hired for solemn occasions. Crampton was too far off for her to walk, and she asked her son whether the visit was worth the expense of cab-hire. As she said, 'she saw no use in making friendships with all the teachers in Milton.'

'The Hales are friendless in a strange place, Mother.'

'Oh! you need not speak so hastily. I am going tomorrow.'

'Then I shall order horses.'

'Nonsense, John. One would think you were made of money.'

'The last time you were out in a cab, you came home with a headache from the jolting.'

'I never complained of it, I'm sure.'

'No. You are not given to complaints,' said he, a little proudly. 'But I have to watch over you. Now as for Fanny there, a little hardship would do her good.'

'She is not made of the same stuff as you are, John.' Mrs. Thornton fell silent. She had an unconscious contempt for a weak character; and her daughter Fanny was weak in the very points in which her mother and brother were strong.

Mrs. Thornton was not a woman much given to reasoning; her quick judgment and firm resolution served her instead of any long arguments with herself; she felt instinctively that nothing could strengthen Fanny to endure hardships patiently or bravely. Though she winced as she acknowledged this, it gave her a kind of pitying tenderness towards Fanny, as if she were a sickly child.

A stranger might have considered that Mrs. Thornton showed far more love to Fanny than to John. But this view would be mistaken. The very daringness with which mother and son spoke out unpalatable truths to each other, showed a reliance on the firm centre of each other's souls. Mrs. Thornton's uneasy tenderness to her daughter went side-by-side with shame; she thought to hide her child's poverty in all the grand qualities which she herself possessed, but this shame betrayed the want of a secure resting-place for her affection. She never called her son by any name but John; 'love' and 'dear' were reserved for Fanny. But her heart gave thanks for him day and night; and she was proud of him.

'Fanny, dear, I shall take the carriage today, to go and call on these Hales. Should not you go and see nurse? It's in the same direction, and she's always so glad to see you. You could go on there while I am at Mrs. Hale's.'

'Oh! mamma, it's such a long way, and I am so tired.'

'With what?' asked Mrs. Thornton, her brow contracting.

'I don't know – the weather, I think. Couldn't you bring nurse here, mamma? The carriage could fetch her, and she could spend the day here, which I know she would like.'

Mrs. Thornton laid her work on the table, and seemed to think.

'It will be a long way for her to walk back at night!' she remarked, at last.

'Oh, I will send her home in a cab.'

At this point, Mr. Thornton came in, on his way to the mill. 'Mother! If there is any little thing that could help Mrs. Hale, as an invalid, you will offer it, I'm sure.'

'If I can, I will. But I have never been ill myself, so I am not much up to invalids' fancies.'

'Well! here is Fanny, who is seldom without an ailment. She will be able to suggest something – won't you, Fan?'

'I have not always an ailment,' said Fanny, pettishly; 'and I am not going with mamma. I have a headache today, and I shan't go out.'

Mr. Thornton looked annoyed. His mother's eyes were bent on her needlework.

'Fanny! I wish you to go,' said he, authoritatively. 'It will do you good. You will oblige me by going, without my saying anything more about it.' He went abruptly out of the room.

'John always speaks as if I fancied I was ill,' grumbled Fanny, 'and I am sure I never fancy any such thing. Who are these Hales that he makes such a fuss about?'

'Fanny, don't speak so of your brother. Make haste and put your things on.'

But the little altercation did not make Mrs. Thornton think favourably of 'these Hales.' Her jealous heart repeated her daughter's question, 'Who are they, that we should pay them all this attention?'

Mrs. Thornton was shy. She did not enjoy going into society. She took satisfaction in dinner-giving, and criticising other people's dinners; but going to visit strangers was a very different thing. She was ill at ease, and looked more than usually stern and forbidding as she entered the Hales' little drawing-room.

Margaret was busy embroidering a small article of dress for Edith's expected baby – 'Flimsy, useless work,' as Mrs. Thornton observed to herself. She liked Mrs. Hale's double knitting far better; that was sensible of its kind. The room was full of knick-knacks, which must take a long time to dust. She made these reflections as she was talking in her stately way to Mrs. Hale, and uttering all the commonplaces that most people can say blindfolded.

Mrs. Hale was making more effort to answer, captivated by some old lace which Mrs. Thornton wore, and which, as she afterwards observed to Dixon, 'had not been made for seventy years, and cannot be bought. It must have been an heirloom.' So the owner of the ancestral lace became worthy of greater efforts at conversation. Margaret, racking her brain to talk to Fanny, heard her mother and Mrs. Thornton plunge into the interminable subject of servants.

'I suppose you are not musical,' said Fanny, 'as I see no piano.'

'I am fond of hearing good music; but I cannot play well myself, and we sold our old piano when we came here.'

'I wonder how you can exist without one. It almost seems to me a necessary of life.'

'Fifteen shillings a week, and three saved out of them!' thought Margaret. 'But she must have been very young. She has probably forgotten those days. Yet she must know of them.' Margaret's manner had an extra tinge of coldness when she spoke.

'You have good concerts here, I believe.'

'Oh, yes! Delicious! Too crowded, that is the worst. But one is sure to hear the newest music. I always have a large order to give to Johnson's, the day after a concert.'

'Do you like new music simply for its newness, then?'

'Oh; one knows it is the fashion in London. You have been in London, of course.'

‘Yes,’ said Margaret; ‘I lived there for several years.’

‘Oh! London and the Alhambra are the two places I long to see!’

‘London and the Alhambra!’

‘Yes! ever since I read the *Tales of the Alhambra*. Don’t you know them?’

‘I don’t think I do. But surely, it is a very easy journey to London.’

‘Yes; but somehow,’ said Fanny, lowering her voice, ‘mamma has never been to London, and can’t understand my longing. She is very proud of Milton, dirty and smoky as it is. I believe she admires it for those very qualities.’

‘If it has been Mrs. Thornton’s home for some years, I can understand her loving it,’ said Margaret, in her clear voice.

‘What are you saying about me, Miss Hale? May I inquire?’

Miss Thornton replied: ‘Oh, mamma! we are only trying to account for your being so fond of Milton.’

‘Thank you,’ said Mrs. Thornton. ‘I do not feel that my very natural liking for the place where I was born and brought up requires any accounting for.’

Margaret was vexed. Fanny made it sound as if they had been impertinently discussing Mrs. Thornton’s feelings; but she also resented that lady’s manner.

Mrs. Thornton went on: ‘Do you know anything of Milton, Miss Hale? Have you seen any of our factories? our magnificent warehouses?’

‘No! Not yet,’ said Margaret. Trying to be honest, she went on: ‘I dare say, papa would have taken me before now if I had cared. But I really do not find much pleasure in going over factories.’

‘They are very curious places,’ said Mrs. Hale, ‘but there is so much noise and dirt always.’

‘Very probably,’ said Mrs. Thornton, in a short, displeased manner. ‘I merely thought, that as strangers come to reside in a newly eminent town, you might have cared to visit some of the places where its business is carried on; places unique in the kingdom. If Miss Hale changes her mind and condescends to be curious about the manufactures of Milton, I shall be glad to procure her admission to print-works, or reed-making, or the spinning carried on in my son’s mill. Every improvement of machinery is, I believe, to be seen there in its highest perfection.’

‘I am so glad you don’t like mills and factories,’ said Fanny, in a half-whisper, as she rose to accompany her mother, who was taking leave of Mrs. Hale with rustling dignity.

‘I think I should like to know all about them, if I were you,’ replied Margaret quietly.

‘Fanny!’ said her mother, as they drove away, ‘we will be civil to these Hales: but don’t form one of your hasty friendships with the daughter. She will do you no good. The mother seems a nice, quiet kind of person.’

‘I don’t want to form any friendship with Miss Hale, mamma,’ said Fanny, pouting. ‘I thought I was doing my duty by talking to her.’

‘Well! at any rate, John must be satisfied now.’

CHAPTER 13

A SOFT BREEZE IN A SULTRY PLACE

Margaret flew upstairs as soon as the visitors were gone, and put on her bonnet and shawl, to go and sit with Bessy Higgins before dinner. As she went along the crowded narrow streets, she felt how much more interesting they seemed now that she cared for a dweller in them.

Mary Higgins, the slatternly younger sister, had tried to tidy up the house for the expected visit. The middle of the floor had been scoured, while the flagstones under the chairs and table remained unwashed. Although the day was hot, a large fire burnt in the grate, making the place feel like an oven. Margaret did not understand that the lavishness of coals was a sign of welcome to her, and thought that perhaps the heat was necessary for Bessy.

Bessy herself lay on a sofa under the window. She was very much more feeble than on the previous day, and tired with getting up to look for Margaret coming. Now that Margaret was there, and had taken a chair by her, Bessy lay back silent, content to look at Margaret's face, and touch her dress with childish admiration.

'I never knew why folk in the Bible cared for soft raiment before. But it must be nice to go dressed as yo' do. Most fine folk tire my eyes out wi' their colours; but somehow yours rest me. Where did yo' get this frock?'

'In London,' said Margaret, much amused.

'London! Have yo' been in London?'

'Yes! I lived there for some years. But my home was in a forest; in the country.'

'Tell me about it,' said Bessy. 'I like to hear speak of the country and trees.' She leant back, and shut her eyes.

Margaret had barely spoken of Helstone since she left it, although she saw it in vivid dreams at night, when her memory wandered in its pleasant places. But her heart was opened to this girl.

'Oh, Bessy, I loved my home! I wish you could see it. I cannot tell you half its beauty. There are great trees standing all about, with their branches stretching long and level, and making a deep shade of rest even at noonday. And though every leaf may seem still, there is a continual rushing sound of movement. Then sometimes the turf is as soft and fine as velvet; and sometimes quite lush with the moisture of a little, hidden, tinkling brook. In other parts there are stretches of billowy ferns, some in the green shadow, some with long streaks of golden sunlight lying on them – just like the sea.'

'I have never seen the sea,' murmured Bessy. 'But go on.'

'Then, here and there, there are wide commons, high up as if above the very tops of the trees—'

'I'm glad of that. I felt smothered like down below. When I have gone for an outing, I've always wanted to get high up and see far away. I get smothered enough in Milton, and I think the sound of the trees would send me dazed; it's that made my head ache so in the mill. Now on these commons I reckon there is little noise?'

'No,' said Margaret; 'nothing but larks high in the air. Sometimes I used to hear a farmer speaking sharp and loud; but so far away that it only reminded me pleasantly

that other people were hard at work in some distant place, while I sat on the heather and did nothing.'

'I used to think once that if I could have a day of doing nothing, to rest me, it would maybe set me up. But now I've had many days o' idleness, and I'm just as weary o' them as I was o' my work. Sometimes I'm so tired I think I cannot enjoy heaven without a piece of rest first. I'm rather afeard o' going straight there without getting a good sleep in the grave to set me up.'

'Don't be afraid, Bessy,' said Margaret, laying her hand on the girl's; 'God can give you more perfect rest than any other.'

Bessy moved uneasily; then she said:

'I wish father would not speak as he does. He means well. But yo' see, though I don't believe him by day, yet by night – when I'm in a fever, half-asleep – it comes back upon me – oh! so bad! And I think, if this should be th' end of everything, and if all I've been born for is just to work my heart and my life away i' this dreary place, wi' them mill-noises in my ears for ever, until I could scream out for them to stop and let me have a little quiet – and wi' the fluff filling my lungs, until I long for one deep breath o' clear air – and my mother gone, and I never able to tell her again how I loved her – I think if this life is th' end, and that there's no God to wipe away all tears from all eyes –' She sat up, clutching violently at Margaret's hand. 'I could go mad, and kill yo', I could.' She fell back, worn out with her passion.

Margaret knelt down by her.

'Bessy – we have a Father in Heaven.'

'I know it!' moaned she. 'I've spoken very wickedly. Oh! don't be frightened by me and never come again. I wouldn't harm a hair of your head. And I believe, perhaps, more than yo' do what's to come. I know the book o' Revelations off by heart, and I never doubt, when I'm in my senses, of all the glory I'm to come to.'

'Don't let us talk about when you are feverish. I would rather hear something about what you used to do when you were well.'

'I think I was well when mother died, but I have never been rightly strong since then. I began to work in a carding-room soon after, and the fluff got into my lungs and poisoned me.'

'Fluff?' said Margaret.

'Little bits, as fly off fro' the cotton when they're carding it, and fill the air with fine white dust. They say it winds round the lungs. There's many a one as works in a carding-room, that falls into a waste, coughing and spitting blood, because they're poisoned by the fluff.'

'But can't it be helped?' asked Margaret.

'I dunno. Some folk have a great wheel at one end o' their carding-rooms to make a draught, and carry off th' dust; but that wheel costs a deal o' money – five or six hundred pound, maybe, and brings in no profit; so only a few of th' masters will put 'em up. And I've heard o' men who didn't like working where there was a wheel, because they said it made 'em hungry, after they'd been long used to swallowing fluff, to go without it, and that their wage ought to be raised if they were to work in such places. So between masters and men th' wheels fall through. I wish there'd been a wheel in our place, though.'

'Did your father know about it?' asked Margaret.

'Yes! And he were sorry. But our factory were a good one on the whole; and a steady set o' people; and father was afeard of letting me go to a strange place. And I did na like to be reckoned nesh and weak, and Mary's schooling were to be kept up,

mother said, and father he were always liking to buy books and go to lectures – all which took money – so I just worked on. That’s all.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Nineteen, come July.’

‘I too am nineteen.’ Margaret thought sorrowfully of the contrast between them, and could not speak for a moment or two.

‘About Mary,’ said Bessy. ‘I wanted to ask yo’ to be a friend to her. She’s seventeen, and I don’t want her to go to th’ mill, and yet I dunno what she’s fit for.’

Margaret glanced at the uncleaned corners of the room. ‘She could hardly fill a servant’s place, could she? We have an old faithful servant who wants help, but who is very particular; and it would not be right to plague her with giving her any assistance that would really be an annoyance.’

‘No, I see. I reckon yo’re right. Our Mary’s a good wench; but she’s had no one to teach her what to do about a house. But I wish she could ha’ lived wi’ yo’, for all that.’

‘Even though she may not be exactly fitted to live with us as a servant, I will always try and be a friend to her, Bessy. And now I must go. I will come again as soon as I can; but if it should not be tomorrow, or the next day, or even a week or a fortnight hence, don’t think I’ve forgotten you. I may be busy.’

‘I’ll know yo’ won’t forget me again. I’ll not mistrust yo’ no more. But remember, in a week or a fortnight I may be dead and buried!’

‘I’ll come as soon as I can, Bessy,’ said Margaret, squeezing her hand tight. ‘Let me know if you are worse.’

‘Ay, that will I.’

From that day forwards Mrs. Hale became more and more of a suffering invalid. It was now drawing near to the anniversary of Edith’s marriage; and, looking back upon the year’s troubles, Margaret wondered how they had been borne. And yet day by day had, of itself, been very endurable – small, bright spots of enjoyment having come sparkling into the middle of sorrows.

When she first went to Helstone, and became conscious of her mother’s querulous temper, she would have groaned at the idea of a long illness to be borne in a strange place. But a new patience had sprung up in her mother. She was gentle and quiet in her intense pain, just as much as she had been restless and depressed when there was no real cause for grief.

Mr. Hale’s apprehension took the shape of wilful blindness. When Margaret expressed her anxiety, he was more irritated than she had ever known him.

‘Indeed, Margaret, you are growing fanciful! God knows I should be the first to take alarm if your mother were really ill. But she looks quite pale when she is ill; and now she has a bright healthy colour in her cheeks.’

‘But, papa,’ said Margaret, with hesitation, ‘I think that is the flush of pain.’

‘Nonsense, Margaret. You are the person not well, I think. Send for the doctor tomorrow for yourself; and then, if it will make your mind easier, he can see your mother.’

‘Thank you, dear papa. It will make me happier, indeed.’ And she went up to kiss him. But he pushed her away – gently enough, but still as if she had suggested unpleasant ideas. He walked uneasily up and down the room.

‘Poor Maria!’ said he, half to himself. ‘I wish one could do right without sacrificing others. I shall hate this town, and myself too, if she – Pray, Margaret, does your mother often talk to you of Helstone?’

‘No, papa,’ said Margaret sadly.

‘Then, you see, she can’t be fretting after it, eh? Your mother would never conceal anything seriously affecting her health from me: would she, Margaret? So don’t let me hear these foolish morbid ideas. Come, give me a kiss, and run off to bed.’

But as she lay in bed, she heard him pacing about long afterwards.

CHAPTER 14

THE MUTINY

It was a comfort to Margaret at this time to find that her mother became more tender and intimate towards her than she had done since her childhood. She took her to her heart as a confidential friend – the post Margaret had always longed to fill. Margaret responded to her every call for sympathy, even when only about trifles. For this, she was rewarded.

One evening, Mr. Hale being absent, her mother began to talk about her brother Frederick. This was the very subject about which Margaret had longed to ask questions, and almost the only one on which her timidity overcame her natural openness.

‘Oh, Margaret, it was so windy last night! It came howling down the chimney in our room! I could not sleep. I never can when there is such a terrible wind, ever since poor Frederick went to sea. If I don’t waken, I dream of him in some stormy sea, with great, clear, glass-green walls of waves on either side his ship, higher than her masts, curling over her like some gigantic crested serpent. It is an old dream, but it always comes back on windy nights. Poor Frederick! He is on land now, so wind can do him no harm.’

‘Where is he now, mamma? Our letters are addressed to the care of Messrs. Barbour, at Cadiz, I know; but where is Frederick?’

‘I can’t remember the name of the place, but he is not called Hale. The letters are sent to F. D. He has taken the name of Dickenson. I wanted him to have been called Beresford, but your father thought he had better not. He might be recognised, you know, if he were called by my maiden name.’

‘Mamma,’ said Margaret, ‘I was at Aunt Shaw’s when it all happened; and I was not old enough to be told plainly about it. But I should like to know now – if it does not give you too much pain to speak about it.’

‘Pain! No,’ replied Mrs. Hale, flushing. ‘He did right, Margaret. They may say what they like, but I’ll believe my son sooner than any court-martial on earth. Go to my little Japan cabinet, dear, and in the second left-hand drawer you will find a packet of letters.’

Margaret went. There were the yellow, sea-stained letters, with the peculiar fragrance which ocean letters have. She carried them back to her mother, who untied the silken string with trembling fingers, and gave them to Margaret to read, making hurried, anxious remarks on their contents, almost before her daughter could have understood what they were.

‘You see, Margaret, how from the very first he disliked Captain Reid. He was second lieutenant in the ship – the *Orion* – in which Frederick sailed the very first time. Poor little midshipman! But this Mr. Reid, as he was then, seemed to take a dislike to Frederick from the very beginning. These are the letters he wrote on board the *Russell*. When he found his old enemy Captain Reid in command there, he did mean to bear his tyranny calmly. Look here, Margaret –

“...my father may rely upon me, to bear patiently everything that one officer and gentleman can take from another. But from my former knowledge of my captain, I fear a long course of tyranny on board the *Russell*.” He was the sweetest-tempered

boy, when he was not vexed. Is that the letter in which he speaks of Captain Reid's impatience with the men, for not going through manoeuvres as quickly as the *Avenger*? You see, they had many new hands on board the *Russell*, while the *Avenger* had been three years with nothing to do but work her men, till they ran up and down the rigging like monkeys.'

Margaret slowly read the letter, half illegible through the fading of the ink. It was a statement of Captain Reid's imperiousness, probably exaggerated by the narrator, who had written it while fresh in indignation. Some sailors being aloft in the main-topsail rigging, the captain had ordered them to race down, threatening the last with whipping. He who was the farthest up, dreading the disgrace of the flogging, threw himself desperately down to catch a rope much lower, failed, and fell senseless on deck. He only survived for a few hours afterwards.

'But we did not receive this letter till long, long after we heard of the mutiny. Poor Fred! And then we saw a report in the papers – long before Fred's letter reached us – that an atrocious mutiny had broken out on board the *Russell*, and that the mutineers had taken over the ship, which had gone off to be a pirate; and that Captain Reid was sent adrift in a boat with some officers whose names were given, for they were picked up by a West-Indian steamer.

'Oh, Margaret! how your father and I turned sick over that list, when there was no name of Frederick Hale. We thought it must be some mistake; for poor Fred was such a fine fellow, only perhaps rather too passionate. The next day, papa set off to walk to Southampton to get the papers; and I went to meet him. He was very late, but he came at last, his arms hanging down, his head sunk, and walking heavily, as if every step was a labour. Margaret, I see him now.'

'Don't go on, mamma. I can understand it all,' said Margaret, leaning against her mother's side, and kissing her hand.

'No, you can't, Margaret. No one can who did not see him then. Everything seemed to reel around me. And when I reached him, he did not speak, or seem surprised to see me there, three miles from home; but he put my arm in his, and kept stroking my hand; and when I trembled, he took me in his arms, and stooped down his head, and began to shake and cry in a strange muffled voice, till, in fright, I begged him to tell me what he had heard.

'And then he gave me a wicked newspaper to read, which called our Frederick a "traitor of the blackest dye," "a disgrace to his profession." As soon as I had read it, I tore it up into little bits – oh! I believe, Margaret, I tore it with my teeth. I did not cry, though my eyes burnt in my head. I said it was a lie, and so it was. Months afterwards, this letter came, and you see what provocation Frederick had. It was not for himself that he rebelled; but he would speak his mind to Captain Reid, and so it went on from bad to worse; and most of the sailors stuck by Frederick.

'I think, Margaret,' she continued, after a pause, in an exhausted voice, 'I am glad of it – I am prouder of Frederick standing up against injustice, than if he had been simply a good officer.'

'I am sure I am,' said Margaret firmly. 'Loyalty to wisdom and justice is fine; but it is still finer to defy power used unjustly and cruelly, on behalf of others more helpless.'

'For all that, I wish I could see Frederick once more – just once.' Mrs. Hale spoke wistfully, and almost apologetically, as though the wish were a depreciation of her remaining child. But such an idea never crossed Margaret's mind. She was thinking how her mother's desire could be fulfilled.

‘It is six or seven years ago – would they still prosecute him, mother? If he stood trial, what would be the punishment? Surely he might bring evidence of his provocation.’

‘It would do no good,’ replied Mrs. Hale. ‘Some of the sailors who accompanied Frederick were taken, and court-martialled on board the *Amicia*; I believed all they said in their defence, poor fellows, because it agreed with Frederick’s story – but it was of no use.’ Mrs. Hale began to cry; yet Margaret needed to know the end.

‘What happened to them, mamma?’

‘They were hung at the yard-arm. And the worst was that the court said they had allowed themselves to be led astray by their superior officers.’

They were silent for a long time.

‘And Frederick was in South America for several years, was he not?’

‘Yes. And now he is in Spain, near Cadiz. If he comes to England he will be hung. I shall never see his face again.’

There was no comfort to be given. Mrs. Hale turned to the wall, and took her hand out of Margaret’s with a little impatient movement, as if she would rather be left alone. Margaret saw no promise of brightness on any side of the horizon.

CHAPTER 15

MASTERS AND MEN

‘Margaret,’ said her father, the next day, ‘we must return Mrs. Thornton’s call. Your mother is not very well, and thinks she cannot walk so far; but you and I will go this afternoon.’

As they went, Mr. Hale began talking about his wife’s health, with an anxiety which Margaret was glad to see awakened at last.

‘Did you consult the doctor, Margaret? Did you send for him?’

‘No, papa; but if I only knew of some good doctor, I would ask him to come, for I am sure mamma is seriously indisposed.’

She put the truth thus plainly and strongly because her father had so completely shut his mind against the idea before. But now he answered despondently:

‘Do you think she is really very ill? Has Dixon said anything? Oh, Margaret! I am haunted by the fear that our coming to Milton has killed her. My poor Maria!’

‘Oh, papa! don’t imagine such things,’ said Margaret, shocked. ‘She is not well, that is all.’

‘But has Dixon said anything?’

‘No! You know Dixon enjoys making a mystery out of trifles; and she has been a little mysterious about mamma’s health, which has alarmed me rather, that is all.’

‘We will ask Mrs. Thornton if she can tell us of a good doctor. She lives up this street.’

The street did not look as if it could contain any house large enough to be Mrs. Thornton’s. Margaret had imagined that tall, handsomely dressed Mrs. Thornton must live in a house of the same character as herself. Marlborough Street consisted of long rows of small houses, with a blank wall here and there.

‘It is this street, I’m sure,’ said Mr. Hale, perplexed.

‘There are plenty of people about. Let me ask.’

She accordingly inquired of a passer-by, and was informed that Mr. Thornton lived close to the mill; and had the factory lodge-door pointed out to her, at the end of a long wall.

Beside the lodge-door were great closed gates for the ingress and egress of lorries and wagons. The lodge-keeper admitted them into a large oblong yard; on one side of it were offices, and on the other, an immense many-windowed mill, from which came the continual clank of machinery and the long groaning roar of the steam-engine, enough to deafen those who lived nearby.

Opposite the street was a handsome stone-coped house – blackened by smoke, to be sure, but with paint, windows and steps kept scrupulously clean. It appeared to have been built some fifty or sixty years before, with the stone facings and long, narrow windows of that time. Margaret wondered why people who could afford to live in so good a house did not prefer a dwelling in the country, or even some suburb; not in the continual whirl and din of the factory. She could hardly hear her father’s voice, as they stood on the steps awaiting the opening of the door. The yard, too, made but a dismal view for the windows – as Margaret found when they had mounted the old-fashioned stairs, and been ushered into the drawing-room.

There was no one there. The room seemed uninhabited. The walls were pink and gold; the pattern on the carpet represented bunches of flowers, but it was carefully covered up by a colourless linen drugget. The window-curtains were lace; each chair and sofa had its own veil of netting.

In the middle of the room, under the bagged-up chandelier, was a large circular table, with smartly-bound books arranged at regular intervals round its polished surface, like gaily-coloured spokes of a wheel. Everything reflected light, nothing absorbed it. The whole room had a painfully spangled, speckled look, which impressed Margaret so unpleasantly that she was hardly conscious of the peculiar cleanliness required to keep everything so white and pure in such an atmosphere.

They had time to look around, and to speak to each other in low voices, before Mrs. Thornton appeared. They were talking of what all the world might hear; but in such a room people speak low, as if unwilling to awaken the unused echoes.

At last Mrs. Thornton came in, rustling in handsome black silk. Margaret explained why her mother was not with them; but in her anxiety not to alarm her father, she gave a bungling account, and left the impression on Mrs. Thornton's mind that Mrs. Hale's was some fanciful fine-ladyish illness, which might have been put aside had she really wished. Mrs. Thornton drew up slightly offended, and gave Margaret no sympathy.

'How is Mr. Thornton?' asked Mr. Hale. 'I was afraid he was not well, from his hurried note yesterday.'

'My son is rarely ill; and when he is, he never makes it an excuse for not doing anything. He told me he had no time to read with you last night, sir. He regretted it, I am sure; he values the hours spent with you.'

'They are equally agreeable to me,' said Mr. Hale. 'It makes me feel young again to see his appreciation of fine classical literature.'

'I have no doubt the classics are very desirable for people who have leisure. But it was against my judgment that my son renewed his study of them. Classics may do very well for men who loiter away their lives in the country or in colleges; but Milton men ought to have their thoughts and powers absorbed in the work of today. At least, that is my opinion.'

'But, surely, if the mind is too long directed to one object only, it will get stiff and rigid, and unable to take in many interests,' said Margaret.

'I do not quite understand what you mean. Nor do I admire those whirligig characters that are full of one thing today, only to forget it in their new interest tomorrow. Having many interests does not suit the life of a Milton manufacturer. It ought to be enough for him to have one great desire, and to concentrate on that.'

'And that is?' asked Mr. Hale.

Her sallow cheek flushed, and her eye lightened, as she answered:

'To hold a high, honourable place among the merchants of his country. Such a place my son has earned for himself. Go where you will – not only in England, but in Europe – the name of John Thornton of Milton is respected amongst all men of business. Of course, it is unknown in fashionable circles,' she continued scornfully. 'Idle gentlemen and ladies are not likely to know much of a Milton manufacturer.'

Both Mr. Hale and Margaret had an uneasy, ludicrous consciousness that they had never heard of this great name, until Mr. Bell had written to them about Mr. Thornton. Margaret's face, in spite of all her endeavours to keep it straight, told the sensitive Mrs. Thornton this feeling.

‘You think you never heard of this wonderful son of mine, Miss Hale. You think I’m an old woman whose ideas are bounded by Milton.’

‘No,’ said Margaret, with some spirit. ‘It may be true that I had hardly heard Mr. Thornton’s name before I came here. But since I have come, I have heard enough to make me respect and admire him, and to feel there is much in what you have said.’

‘Who spoke to you of him?’ asked Mrs. Thornton, a little mollified, yet jealous lest anyone else’s words should not have done him full justice.

Margaret hesitated; she did not like this authoritative questioning. Mr. Hale came in, as he thought, to the rescue.

‘It was what Mr. Thornton said himself, that made us know the kind of man he was.’

Mrs. Thornton drew herself up, and said, ‘My son is not one to tell of his own doings. May I again ask you, Miss Hale, who told you of him?’

Margaret replied, ‘It was what Mr. Thornton withheld of that which we had been told of his previous life by Mr. Bell – it was more than what he said, that made us feel what reason you have to be proud of him.’

‘Mr. Bell! What can he know of John? He, living a lazy life in a drowsy college. But I’m obliged to you, Miss Hale. Many a missy young lady would have shrunk from giving an old woman the pleasure of hearing that her son was well spoken of.’

‘Why?’ asked Margaret, looking straight at Mrs. Thornton, in bewilderment.

‘Why! because I suppose they might have felt bashful, in case they had any plans on the son’s heart.’

She smiled a grim smile, for she had been pleased by Margaret’s frankness. But Margaret laughed merrily at this notion. She stopped as soon as she saw Mrs. Thornton’s annoyed look.

‘I beg your pardon, madam. But I am very much obliged to you for exonerating me from making any plans on Mr. Thornton’s heart.’

‘Young ladies have, before now,’ said Mrs. Thornton stiffly.

‘I hope Miss Thornton is well,’ put in Mr. Hale, to change the subject.

‘She is as well as she ever is. She is not strong,’ replied Mrs. Thornton, shortly.

‘And Mr. Thornton? May I hope to see him on Thursday?’

‘I cannot answer for my son’s engagements. There is some uncomfortable work going on; a threatening of a strike. If so, his experience and judgment will make him much consulted by his friends. But I should think he could come on Thursday.’

‘A strike?’ asked Margaret. ‘What for?’

‘For the mastership and ownership of other people’s property,’ said Mrs. Thornton, with a fierce snort. ‘That is what they always strike for. If my son’s work-people strike, they are a pack of ungrateful hounds. But I have no doubt they will.’

‘They want higher wages, I suppose?’ asked Mr. Hale.

‘On the face of it. But the truth is, they want to be masters, and make the masters into slaves. They are always trying it; every five or six years, there comes a struggle between masters and men. But this time, if they turn out, they mayn’t find it so easy to go in again. I believe the masters have an idea or two which will teach the men not to strike again in a hurry.’

‘Does it not make the town very rough?’ asked Margaret.

‘Of course it does. You are not a coward, are you? Milton is not the place for cowards. I have known the time when I have had to thread my way through a crowd of angry men, all swearing they would have Makinson’s blood as soon as he ventured

out of his factory; someone had to go and warn him, and it needed to be a woman – so I went. And when I had got in, I could not get out. It was as much as my life was worth. So I went up to the roof, where there were stones piled ready to drop on the heads of the crowd, if they tried to force the factory doors. And I would have lifted those stones and dropped them, had I not fainted with the heat. If you live in Milton, you must have a brave heart, Miss Hale.'

'I would do my best,' said Margaret, rather pale, 'though I am afraid I should be a coward.'

'South country people are often frightened here. But when you've been ten years among a people who always have a grudge against their betters, and are only waiting for an opportunity to pay it off, you'll know whether you are a coward or not, take my word for it.'

Mr. Thornton came that evening to Mr. Hale's. He was shown into the drawing-room.

'I am come partly to bring you a note from my mother, and partly to apologise for not keeping to my time yesterday. The note contains the address you asked for; Dr. Donaldson.'

'Thank you!' said Margaret, hastily, holding out her hand to take the note, for she did not wish her mother to hear. She was pleased that Mr. Thornton seemed immediately to understand; he gave her the note without another word.

Mr. Hale began to talk about the strike. Mr. Thornton's face assumed a likeness to his mother's worst expression, which immediately repelled Margaret.

'Yes; the fools will strike. Let them. It suits us well enough. They think trade is flourishing as it was last year. We see the storm on the horizon and draw in our sails. But because we don't explain our reasons, they won't believe we're acting reasonably. Henderson tried a dodge with his men, out at Ashley, and failed. He rather wanted a strike; so when the men came to ask for five per cent more, he told 'em he'd think about it, and give them his answer on pay day; knowing all the while what his answer would be. However, they heard something about the bad prospects of trade, so they withdrew their claim, and now he's obliged to go on working. But we Milton masters have decided we won't advance a penny. We tell them we may have to lower wages; but can't afford to raise. So here we stand, waiting for their next attack.'

'And what will that be?' asked Mr. Hale.

'I conjecture, a simultaneous strike.'

'But why could you not explain what good reason you have for expecting bad trade?' asked Margaret.

'Do you give your servants reasons for your expenditure? We have a right to choose what we do with our own money.'

'A human right,' said Margaret, very low.

'I beg your pardon, I did not hear what you said.'

'I would rather not repeat it,' said she; 'it related to a feeling which I do not think you would share.'

'Won't you try me?' pleaded he.

'I said you had a human right. However, there may be religious reasons why you should not do what you like with your own.'

'I know we differ in our religious opinions; but don't you give me credit for having some?'

He was speaking in a subdued voice, as if to her alone. She did not wish to be so exclusively addressed, and replied in her usual tone:

‘I do not mean to consider your special religious opinions in the affair. All I meant to say is, that there is no human law to prevent employers from utterly wasting their money, if they choose; but that there are passages in the Bible which would imply – to me at least – that they neglected their duty as stewards if they did so. However, I know so little about strikes, and capital, and labour, that I had better not talk to a political economist like you.’

‘Nay, the more reason,’ said he, eagerly. ‘I shall only be too glad to explain to you all that may seem mysterious.’

‘Thank you,’ she answered, coldly. ‘Of course, I shall apply to my father first for information, if I get puzzled with living amongst this strange society.’

‘Why strange?’

‘I don’t know – I suppose because I see two classes dependent on each other, yet each thinking the interests of the other are opposed to their own. I never lived in a place before where there were two sets of people always running each other down.’

‘Who have you heard running the masters down? I don’t ask who you have heard abusing the men; for I see you persist in misunderstanding what I said the other day. But who have you heard abusing the masters?’

Margaret reddened; then smiled as she said,

‘I refuse to answer. You must take my word for it, that I have heard one of the workpeople speak as though it were in the interest of the employers to keep them from acquiring money – that it would make them too independent if they had savings.’

‘I dare say it was that man Higgins,’ said Mrs. Hale. Mr. Thornton pretended not to hear what Margaret evidently did not wish him to know.

‘I heard, moreover,’ said Margaret, ‘that it was considered to the advantage of the masters to have ignorant workmen – not hedge-lawyers, as Captain Lennox used to call those men who questioned the reason for every order.’

Who is Captain Lennox? asked Mr. Thornton of himself, with a strange displeasure. Her father took up the conversation.

‘You never were fond of schools, Margaret, or you would have seen and known how much is being done for education in Milton.’

‘No!’ said she, with sudden meekness. ‘I know I do not care enough about schools. But the knowledge and the ignorance of which I was speaking, did not relate to the teaching of children, but rather to ignorance of the wisdom that shall guide men and women. I hardly know what that is. But my informant spoke as if the masters would like their workers to be merely large children – living in the present moment, with blind obedience.’

‘In short, Miss Hale, your informant found a ready listener to all the slander he chose to utter against the masters,’ said Mr. Thornton, in an offended tone.

Margaret, displeased, did not reply, but left the room.

‘I must confess,’ said Mr. Hale, ‘that I am very much struck by the apparent antagonism between the employer and the employed. I even gather this impression from what you yourself have said.’

Mr. Thornton paused awhile before he spoke. The little annoyance between him and Margaret made him more thoughtful, and gave a greater dignity to his reply:

‘My theory is, that my interests are identical with those of my workpeople and vice-versa. Miss Hale, I know, does not like to hear men called “hands,” so I won’t

use that word, though it is the usual term. On some future day – in some Utopia – this unity may come about – just as I can fancy a republic the most perfect form of government.’

‘We will read Plato’s Republic as soon as we have finished Homer.’

‘Well, in the future, we may be fit for a republic: but give me a constitutional monarchy in our present state. In our infancy we require a wise despotism to govern us. Indeed, long past infancy, children and young people are happiest under the laws of a discreet, firm authority. As Miss Hale says, I consider our people to be in the condition of children, but it is not the masters who keep them so. I maintain that despotism is the best kind of government for them; so that in the factory I must be an autocrat. I will try to make wise laws and just decisions, which work for my own good in the first instance, and for theirs in the second; but I will neither be forced to give them my reasons, nor flinch from my resolution. Let them turn out on strike! I shall suffer as well as they: but at the end they will find I have not given way one jot.’

Margaret had re-entered the room and was sitting sewing; but she did not speak. Mr. Hale answered.

‘I dare say I am talking in great ignorance; but I should say that the masses were already passing rapidly into a troublesome adolescence, in the life of the multitude as well as the individual. Now, the error which many parents commit at this time is insisting on the same unreasoning obedience as earlier, when the child’s only duty was to obey the simple laws of “Come when you’re called” and “Do as you’re told!” But a wise parent allows independent action, so as to become a friend and adviser when his rule shall cease.’

Margaret said, ‘I heard a story of a rich man in Nuremberg only three or four years ago. He lived alone in an immense mansion. It was reported that he had a child, but no one knew of it for certain. For forty years this rumour went round. After his death it was found to be true. He had a son – an overgrown man with the unexercised intellect of a child, whom he had brought up in that strange way, to save him from temptation and error. But, of course, when this great child was turned loose into the world, he did not know good from evil. His father had made the blunder of confusing ignorance with innocence; and after fourteen months of riotous living, the city authorities had to take charge of him, to save him from starvation.’

‘Mr. Hale, you said a wise man would allow independent action. Now certainly, the time is not come for the hands to have any independent action during business hours; so I hardly know what you would mean. And I say that the masters would not be justified in interfering too much with the life the hands lead outside the mills. Because they labour ten hours a day for us, I do not see that we have any right to impose leading-strings upon them for the rest of their time. I value my own independence so highly that I would not care to have another man perpetually advising and lecturing me. He might be the wisest of men, but I should rebel and resent his interference. I imagine this is a stronger feeling in the North of England than in the South.’

‘Is not that because there has been no equality of friendship between the adviser and advised classes? Because every man has had to stand in an unchristian and isolated position, apart from and jealous of his brother-man?’

‘I only state the fact. I am sorry to say I have an appointment at eight o’clock, and I must just take facts as I find them tonight.’

‘But,’ said Margaret in a low voice, ‘it seems to me that it makes all the difference in the world—’

Her father made a sign to her to be silent. Mr. Thornton was already standing up and preparing to go, saying,

‘You must grant me this one point. Given a strong feeling of independence in every Darkshire man, have I any right to impose my views of how other men shall act, merely because they have labour to sell and I capital to buy?’

‘Not in the least,’ said Margaret, determined just to say this one thing; ‘not in the least because of your labour and capital positions, whatever they are, but because you are a man, dealing with a set of men over whom you have immense power, with your lives and welfare constantly interwoven. God has made us mutually dependent. We may ignore this, or refuse to acknowledge it; but the thing must be, nevertheless. The most proudly independent man depends on those around him for their influence on his character – his life. And the most isolated of all your Darkshire Egos has dependants clinging to him on all sides; he cannot shake them off, any more than the great rock he resembles can shake off–’

‘Pray don’t go into any more similes, Margaret,’ said her father, smiling, yet uneasy. However, Mr. Thornton did not mind being detained; he rather liked hearing Margaret talk, although what she said irritated him.

‘Just tell me, Miss Hale – if you are ever conscious of being influenced by others, have those others been working directly or indirectly? Have they exhorted you to act rightly, or have they been simply doing their duty unflinchingly? Why, if I were a workman, I should be twenty times more impressed by knowing that my master was honest, punctual, and resolute, than by any amount of interference, however kindly meant. I rely on the straightforward honesty of my hands, and the open nature of their opposition, in contrast to the way in which the turnout will be managed in some mills – because they know I will not take a dishonourable advantage, or do an underhand thing myself. It goes farther than a whole course of lectures on “Honesty is the Best Policy” – life diluted into words. No, no! What the master is, that will the men be.’

‘That is a great admission,’ said Margaret, laughing. ‘When I see men violent and obstinate in pursuit of their rights, I may safely infer that the master is the same: that he is a little ignorant of that spirit which suffereth long, and is kind and selfless.’

‘You are just like all strangers who don’t understand the working of our system, Miss Hale,’ said he, hastily. ‘You suppose that our men are puppets of dough, ready to be moulded into any form we please. You forget we have only to do with them for less than a third of their lives; and you seem not to perceive that the duties of a manufacturer are far larger than those merely of an employer of labour. We have commerce to maintain, which makes us into the great pioneers of civilisation.’

‘It strikes me,’ said Mr. Hale, smiling, ‘that you might pioneer a little at home. They are a rough, heathenish set of fellows, these Milton men of yours.’

‘They are that,’ replied Mr. Thornton. ‘Cromwell would have made a capital mill-owner, Miss Hale. I wish we had him to put down this strike for us.’

‘Cromwell is no hero of mine,’ said she, coldly. ‘But I am trying to reconcile your admiration of despotism with your respect for other men’s independence of character.’

He reddened at her tone. ‘I choose to be the unquestioned master of my hands, during the hours that they labour for me. But after those hours, I respect their independence.’ Vexed, he did not speak again for a minute. But he shook it off, and bade Mr. and Mrs. Hale good night.

To Margaret he said in a lower voice, 'I spoke hastily to you, and I am afraid, rather rudely. But you know I am only an uncouth Milton manufacturer; will you forgive me?'

'Certainly,' said she, smiling. His anxious expression hardly cleared as he met her sweet sunny countenance. But she did not put out her hand to him, and again he felt the omission, and set it down to pride.

CHAPTER 16

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

The next afternoon Dr. Donaldson came to visit Mrs. Hale. Margaret was excluded from the room, though Dixon was admitted. Margaret was not a ready lover, but where she loved she loved passionately, and with no small degree of jealousy.

She paced up and down in the next room, awaiting the doctor's coming out. Every now and then she fancied she heard a moan. She clenched her hands tight, and held her breath. All was still for a few minutes more; and then there was the moving of chairs, and the raised voices of leave-taking.

When she heard the door open, she went quickly to meet him.

'My father is out with a pupil, Dr. Donaldson. May I trouble you to come into his room downstairs?'

She saw and triumphed over all the obstacles which Dixon threw in her way; assuming her position as daughter of the house with a conscious dignity, which gave her an instant's amusement in the midst of her anxiety. She knew, from the surprised expression on Dixon's face, how ridiculously grand she must be looking; and the idea carried her downstairs into the room. But then recollection of the actual business in hand seemed to take away her breath. It was a moment or two before she could speak.

'What is the matter with mamma? Please tell the simple truth.' Seeing the doctor hesitate, she added, 'I am the only child she has here. My father is not alarmed, and if there is any serious cause for fear, it must be broken to him gently. I can do this. I can nurse my mother. Pray speak, sir.'

'My dear young lady, your mother expressly desired that you might not be told.'

'I am sure you are too wise – too experienced to have promised to keep the secret.'

'Well,' said he, half-smiling, though sadly, 'there you are right. I did not promise. In fact, I fear the secret will be known soon enough without my revealing it.'

He paused. Margaret went very white. Dr. Donaldson saw that she would know if one iota of the truth was withheld; and that the withholding would be worse torture than the knowledge.

He spoke two short sentences in a low voice, watching her pupils dilate into a black horror. Then she said:

'I thank you most truly, sir, for your confidence. That dread has haunted me for many weeks. My poor, poor mother!' Her lips began to quiver, and he let her have the relief of tears.

She shed only a few, before she recollected the many questions she longed to ask.

'Will there be much suffering?'

He shook his head. 'That we cannot tell. It depends on a thousand things. But the discoveries of medical science have given us large power of alleviating pain.'

'My father!' said Margaret, trembling.

'I do not know Mr. Hale. But I should say, wait until the fact has become more familiar to you, so that you may be able to comfort your father. I will visit, although I

fear I can do nothing but alleviate; and some symptoms will have awakened his alarm, so that he will be better prepared. My dear – I saw Mr. Thornton, and I honour your father for the sacrifice he has made. Remember, when I come again, I come as a friend. And you must learn to look upon me as such, because getting to know each other at such times as these, is worth years of morning calls.’

Margaret could not speak for crying: but she wrung his hand at parting.

‘That’s what I call a fine girl!’ thought Dr. Donaldson, when he was in his carriage. ‘What a queen she is! With her head thrown back at first, to force me into speaking the truth; and then bent so eagerly forward to listen. Poor thing! I must see she does not overstrain herself. Though that girl’s game to the back-bone. No fainting or hysterics – not she! The very force of her will brought her round. Such a girl as that would win my heart, if I were thirty years younger. It’s too late now. Ah! here we are.’ So out he jumped, ready to attend fully to this next family, as if there were none other in the world.

Meanwhile, Margaret had returned to her father’s study to recover strength before going up to her mother.

‘Oh, my God, my God! but this is terrible. How shall I bear it? Such a deadly disease! no hope! Oh, mamma, I wish I had never been all those precious years away from you! Poor mamma! how much she must have borne! Oh, I pray thee, my God, that her sufferings may not be too dreadful. How shall I bear to see them? How can I bear papa’s agony? He must not be told yet. It would kill him. But I won’t lose another moment of my own dear, precious mother.’

She ran upstairs. Dixon was not in the room. Mrs. Hale lay back in an easy chair, with a soft white shawl wrapped around her. Her face had a little faint colour in it, and her very exhaustion gave it a peaceful look. Margaret was surprised to see her so calm.

‘Why, Margaret, how strange you look! What is the matter?’ And then she added, as if a little displeased, ‘You have not been seeing Dr. Donaldson, and asking him any questions, have you, child?’

Margaret did not reply; only looked wistful. Mrs. Hale became more displeased. ‘He would not, surely, break his word to me!’

‘Mamma, he did. I made him. Blame me.’ She knelt down by her mother’s side, and caught her hand. She would not let it go, though Mrs. Hale tried to pull it away. She kept kissing it, and shed hot tears.

‘Margaret, it was very wrong of you. You knew I did not wish you to know.’ But she left her hand in Margaret’s clasp.

‘Oh, mamma! let me be your nurse. I will learn anything Dixon can teach me.’

‘You don’t know what you are asking,’ said Mrs. Hale, with a shudder.

‘Yes, I do. I know a great deal more than you are aware of. Let me be your nurse. Let me try, at any rate. It will be such a comfort, mamma.’

‘My poor child! Well, you shall try. Do you know, Margaret, Dixon and I thought you would quite shrink from me if you knew—’

‘Dixon thought!’ said Margaret, her lip curling. ‘Dixon could not give me credit for as much love as herself! She thought, I suppose, that I was one of those poor women who like to lie on rose leaves, and be fanned all day. Don’t let Dixon’s fancies come any more between you and me, mamma!’

‘Don’t be angry with Dixon,’ said Mrs. Hale anxiously.

‘No! I won’t. I will try and learn her ways, if you will only let me do all I can for you. I used to fancy you would forget me while I was away at aunt Shaw’s, and cry myself to sleep at nights.’

‘And I used to think, how will Margaret bear our poverty after the luxury in Harley Street? – till I have been more ashamed of your seeing our contrivances at Helstone than of any stranger finding them out.’

‘Oh, mamma! and I did so enjoy them. The wardrobe shelf with handles, that served as a supper-tray on grand occasions! And the old tea-chests stuffed and covered for ottomans! I think the contrivances at dear Helstone were charming.’

‘I shall never see Helstone again, Margaret,’ said Mrs. Hale, the tears welling up into her eyes. ‘While I was there, I was for ever wanting to leave. And now I shall die far away from it. I am rightly punished.’

‘You must not talk so,’ said Margaret. ‘He said you might live for years. Oh, mother! we will have you back at Helstone yet.’

‘No, never! But, Margaret – Frederick!’ She suddenly cried out loud, as in some sharp agony; the thought of him upset all her calm composure. There came wild passionate cry after cry – ‘Frederick! Frederick! Come to me. I am dying. Little first-born child, come to me once again!’

She was in violent hysterics. In terror, Margaret went and called Dixon, who came in a huff, and accused Margaret of over-exciting her mother.

Margaret bore all meekly, and obeyed Dixon’s directions promptly and well, without a word of self-justification. By so doing she mollified her accuser. They put her mother to bed, and Margaret sat by her till she fell asleep. Then Dixon beckoned her out of the room, and with a sour face bade her drink a cup of coffee in the drawing-room, standing over her as she did so.

‘You shouldn’t have been so curious, Miss, and then you wouldn’t have needed to fret. And now, I suppose, you’ll tell master, and a pretty household I shall have!’

‘No, Dixon,’ said Margaret sorrowfully, ‘I will not tell papa. He could not bear it as I can.’ And to prove how well she bore it, she burst into tears.

‘Ay! I knew how it would be. Now you’ll waken your mamma again. Miss Margaret, my dear, I’ve had to keep it down this many a week; and though I don’t pretend I can love her as you do, yet I’ve loved her better than any other but Master Frederick. Ever since Lady Beresford’s maid first took me in to see her, and I ran a needle into my finger, and she tore up her pocket-handkerchief for bandages, I’ve never loved anyone like her. I little thought then that I should live to see her brought so low. I don’t mean no reproach to nobody. Many a one calls you pretty and handsome, and what not, but you’ll never be like your mother for beauty, not if you live to be a hundred.’

‘Mamma is very pretty still. Poor mamma!’

‘Now don’t set off again. Go out and take a walk, and come in something like. Many’s the time I’ve longed to walk it off – the thought of her illness, and how it must all end.’

‘Oh, Dixon!’ said Margaret, ‘how often I’ve been cross with you, not knowing what a terrible secret you had to bear! I’ll try not to be cross again.’

‘Yet when you fire up, you’re the very image of Master Frederick. I’d put you in a passion any day, just to see his stormy look coming like a great cloud over your face. But now you go out, Miss. I’ll watch over missus.’

‘I will go,’ said Margaret. She hung about for a minute, irresolute; then suddenly kissing Dixon, she went quickly out of the room.

‘Bless her!’ said Dixon. ‘There are three people I love: missus, Master Frederick, and her. Just them three. The rest be hanged – I don’t know what they’re in the world for. Master should ha’ made more of her, and not been always reading, reading, thinking, thinking. See what it has brought him to! Many a one who never reads nor thinks gets to be Rector, and Dean, and what not; and I dare say master might, if he’d just minded missus, and let the weary reading and thinking alone. There she goes’ (as she heard the front door shut). ‘Poor young lady! her clothes look so shabby. When she came to Helstone a year ago, she hadn’t a darned stocking in all her wardrobe. And now–!’

CHAPTER 17

WHAT IS A STRIKE?

Margaret went out heavily and unwillingly. But the length of a street cheered her young blood. Her step grew lighter; she began to take notice, instead of having her thoughts turned inward.

She saw unusual loiterers in the streets: men with their hands in their pockets sauntering along; loud-laughing girls clustered together, in high spirits, with a boisterous independence. Discreditable-looking men hung about on the steps of the beer-houses and gin-shops, smoking, and commenting pretty freely on every passer-by. Margaret disliked the prospect of the long walk through these streets, before she came to the fields which she had planned to reach. Instead, she would go and see Bessy Higgins.

Nicholas Higgins was sitting at one side of the fire smoking, as she went in. Bessy was rocking herself on the other side.

Nicholas took the pipe out of his mouth, and standing up, pushed his chair towards Margaret. He leant against the chimney piece, while she asked how Bessy was.

‘Hoo’s rather down i’ th’ mouth, but hoo’s better in health. Hoo doesn’t like this strike. Hoo’s a deal too much set on peace and quietness at any price.’

‘This is th’ third strike I’ve seen,’ said Bessy, sighing, as if that was explanation enough.

‘Well, third time pays for all. See if we don’t dang th’ masters this time. See if they don’t beg us to come back at our own price, that’s all. This time we’n laid our plans desperate deep.’

‘Why do you strike?’ asked Margaret. ‘Excuse my ignorance; where I come from I never heard of a strike.’

‘I wish *I* were there,’ said Bessy, wearily. ‘But this is the last strike I’ll see. Before it’s ended I shall be in the Great City – the Holy Jerusalem.’

‘Hoo’s so full of th’ life to come, hoo cannot think of th’ present. Now I am bound to do the best I can here. So them’s the different views we take on th’ strike question.’

‘But,’ said Margaret, ‘if the people struck, where I come from, as they are mostly field labourers, the seed would not be sown, or the corn reaped. So what would become of the farmers?’

He puffed at his pipe. ‘They’d have either to give up their farms, or to give fair rate of wage.’

‘Suppose they could not do the latter; they could not give up their farms all in a minute, but they would have no corn to sell that year; and where would the money come from to pay the labourers’ wages the next?’

Still puffing away, he said:

‘I know nought of your ways down South. I have heerd they’re a pack of spiritless, down-trodden men; too much dazed wi’ hunger to know when they’re put upon. It’s not so here. We know when we’re put upon; and we won’t stand it. Be danged to ’em, they shan’t put upon us this time!’

‘I wish I lived down South,’ said Bessy.

‘There are sorrows to bear everywhere,’ said Margaret. ‘There is very hard labour to be gone through there, with very little food to give strength.’

‘But it’s out of doors,’ said Bessy. ‘And away from the endless, endless noise, and heat.’

‘It’s sometimes in heavy rain, and sometimes in bitter cold. A young person can stand it; but an old man gets bent and withered before his time; yet he must just work on, or go to the workhouse.’

‘I thought yo’ were so taken wi’ the ways of the South country.’

‘So I am,’ said Margaret, smiling. ‘I only mean, Bessy, there’s good and bad in everything in this world; and I thought it was only fair you should know the bad down there.’

‘And yo’ say they never strike down there?’ asked Nicholas, abruptly.

‘No!’ said Margaret; ‘I think they have too much sense.’

‘An’ I think,’ replied he, dashing the ashes out of his pipe vehemently, ‘that they’ve too little spirit.’

‘O, father!’ said Bessy, ‘what have ye gained by striking? Think of that first strike when mother died – how we all had to clem and go hungry – you the worst of all; and yet many men went in every week at the same wage, and took all the jobs; and some went beggars after.’

‘Ay,’ said he. ‘That there strike was badly managed. It’ll be different this time.’

‘But you’ve not told me what you’re striking for,’ said Margaret.

‘Why, yo’ see, there’s five or six masters who have set themselves against paying the wages they’ve been paying these two years past. Now they say we’re to take less. And we won’t. We’ll just clem them to death first; and see who’ll work for ’em then. They’ll have killed the goose that laid the golden eggs, I reckon.’

‘And so you plan dying, in order to be revenged upon them!’

‘No,’ said he, ‘I dunnot. But I’d die at my post sooner than yield. That’s what folk call fine and honourable in a soldier, and why not in a poor weaver?’

‘But,’ said Margaret, ‘a soldier dies for his country – for others.’

He laughed grimly. ‘My lass,’ said he, ‘do yo’ think I can keep three people – Bessy, and Mary, and me – on sixteen shilling a week? It’s not for mysel’ I’m striking. Yon soldier might die for somebody he never clapt eyes on, while I take up John Boucher’s cause, as lives next door but one, wi’ a sickly wife, and eight childer, even though he’s a poor good-for-nought, as can only manage two looms at a time – but I take up th’ cause o’ justice. Why are we to have less wage now, I ask, than two year ago?’

‘Don’t ask me,’ said Margaret. ‘Ask some of your masters. Surely they will give you a reason.’

‘Much yo’ know about it,’ said he, contemptuously. ‘Ask th’ masters! They’d tell us to mind our own business. Our business being, yo’ understand, to take the smaller wage, and be thankful, and their business to starve us, and swell their profits. That’s what it is.’

‘But,’ said Margaret, determined not to give way, although she saw she was irritating him, ‘the state of trade may be such that they cannot pay you the same wage.’

‘State o’ trade! That’s just a piece o’ masters’ humbug. Th’ masters keep th’ state o’ trade in their own hands; and use it like a bug-a-boo, to frighten naughty children into being good. I tell yo’ they want to beat us down; and we have to stand up and fight hard for justice – not for ourselves alone, but for them round about us.’

We've gotten money laid by; and we're resolved to stand and fall together; not a man on us will go in for less wage than th' Union says is our due. So I say, "hooray for the strike," and let Thornton, Slickson, and Hamper, and the rest look to it!

'Thornton!' said Margaret. 'Mr. Thornton of Marlborough Street?'

'Aye! Thornton o' Marlborough Mill.'

'What sort of a master is he?'

'Did yo' ever see a bulldog? Set a bulldog on hind legs, and dress him up in coat and breeches, and yo'n just gotten John Thornton.'

'Nay,' said Margaret, laughing, 'I deny that. Mr. Thornton is plain enough, but he's not like a bulldog.'

'No! not in looks, I grant yo'. But let John Thornton get hold on a notion, and he'll stick to it like a bulldog. He's worth fighting wi', is John Thornton. As for Slickson, he'll wheedle his men back wi' fair promises, and cheat them as soon as they're in his power again. He's as slippery as an eel, he is. It'll never be an honest up and down fight wi' him, as it will be wi' Thornton. Thornton's as dour as a door-nail.'

'Poor Bessy!' said Margaret, turning to her. 'You sigh over it all. You don't like fighting, do you?'

'No!' said she, heavily. 'I'm sick on it. I've been wearied all my life wi' the clashing and clattering about work and wages.'

'Poor wench! Thou'rt looking a sight better already for a little stir and change. Besides, I shall be home to make it more lively for thee.'

'Tobacco-smoke chokes me!' said she, querulously.

'Then I'll never smoke i' th' house!' he replied tenderly. 'But why didst thou not tell me afore, thou foolish wench?'

She answered so low that only Margaret heard her: 'He'll want a' the comfort he can get out o' either pipe or drink afore he's done.'

Her father went outside to finish his pipe, and Bessy said passionately,

'Now am not I a fool? I knew I ought to keep father at home, and away fro' the folk that are always ready for to tempt a man, in time o' strike, to go drink – and now he'll go off, I know he will, whenever he wants to smoke – and nobody knows where it'll end.'

'But does your father drink?' asked Margaret.

'No – not to say drink,' replied she, still in the same wild tone. 'But there are days when yo're just longing for a bit of a change – a bit of a fillip, as it were. I've longed for to be a man, and to go spreeing. And men have the feeling stronger than me. And what is 'em to do? It's little blame if they do go into th' gin-shop to make their blood flow more lively. But father never was a drunkard, though maybe he's got worse for drink now and then. Only yo' see,' and now her voice took a mournful, pleading tone, 'at times o' strike there's much to knock a man down, for all they start so hopefully; and where's the comfort to come fro'? He'll get angry and mad – they all do – and maybe do things in their passion they'd be glad to forget. Bless your sweet pitiful face! but yo' dunnot know what a strike is yet.'

'Come, Bessy,' said Margaret, 'I won't say you're exaggerating, because I don't know enough about it: but, perhaps, as you're not well, you're only looking on the dark side.'

'It's well enough for yo' to say, who have lived in pleasant green places all your life, and never known want or wickedness.'

‘Take care how you judge,’ said Margaret, flushing. ‘I shall go home to my mother, who is so ill that only death will free her from her great suffering; and yet I must speak cheerfully to my father, who has no notion of her real state. The only person who could help me – who could comfort my mother more than any other – is falsely accused, and would risk death if he came to see her. You must not mention this, Bessy. No other person in Milton knows it. I know anxiety, though I go about well-dressed, and have food enough. Oh, Bessy, God is just, and our lots are well portioned out by Him, although none but He knows the bitterness of our souls.’

‘I ask your pardon,’ replied Bessy humbly. ‘Sometimes, when I’ve thought o’ my life, and the little pleasure I’ve had in it, I think I’m one of them as is prophesied to die in Revelations. Otherwise it seems all for nothing.’

‘Nay, Bessy!’ said Margaret. ‘God does not willingly afflict. Don’t dwell so much on the prophecies, but read the clearer parts of the Bible.’

‘I dare say it would be wiser; but where would I hear such grand words of promise as in Revelations? Many’s the time I’ve repeated the seventh chapter to myself, just for the sound. It’s as good as an organ. It gives me more comfort than any other book i’ the Bible.’

‘Let me come and read you some of my favourite chapters.’

‘Ay,’ said she, greedily, ‘come. Father will maybe hear yo’.’

‘Now I must go. You have done me good, Bessy.’

‘I done you good!’

‘Yes. I came here very sad, and thinking my own cause for grief was the only one in the world. And now I hear what you have had to bear for years, and that makes me stronger.’

‘Bless yo’! I shall get proud if I think I can do yo’ good. Yo’re not like no one I ever seed. I dunno what to make of yo’.’

‘Nor I of myself. Good-bye!’

Bessy gazed after her.

‘I wonder if there are many folk like her down South. She’s like a breath of country air, somehow. Who’d ha’ thought that bright face could have known the sorrow she speaks on? I wonder how she’ll sin. All on us must sin. I think of her a lot, for sure. But father does the same. And Mary even. It’s not often hoo’s stirred up to notice much.’

CHAPTER 18

LIKES AND DISLIKES

On Margaret's return home she found two letters on the table. One was a note for her mother; the other was from her Aunt Shaw, covered with foreign post-marks. She was examining it when her father came in.

'So your mother is tired, and gone to bed early! I'm afraid such a thundery day was not the best for the doctor to see her. What did he say?'

Margaret hesitated.

'He does not think her seriously ill?' asked her father.

'Not at present; she needs care, he says; he was very kind, and said he would call again.'

'He did not recommend change of air? – he did not say this smoky town was doing her any harm, did he, Margaret?'

'Not a word,' she replied, gravely. 'He was anxious, I think.'

'Doctors have that anxious manner; it's professional.'

Margaret saw that the first impression of possible danger was made upon his mind, in spite of his making light of what she told him. He kept recurring to the subject through the evening, with an unwillingness to receive even the slightest unfavourable idea, which made Margaret inexpressibly sad.

'This letter is from Aunt Shaw, papa. She has got to Naples, and finds it too hot. I don't think she likes Italy.'

'He did not say anything about diet, did he?'

'It was to be nourishing. Mamma's appetite is pretty good, I think.'

'Yes! that makes it all the more strange he should have spoken about diet.'

'I asked him, papa.' Margaret went on: 'Aunt Shaw says, she has sent me some coral ornaments, papa; but she's afraid the Milton Dissenters won't appreciate them.'

'If ever you hear that your mother wishes for anything, be sure you let me know. I am afraid she does not always tell me what she would like. Pray, see about that girl Mrs. Thornton named. If we had a good house-servant, Dixon could be constantly with your mother. We could soon set her up. She's been very tired of late, with the hot weather, but a little rest will put her to rights – eh, Margaret?'

'I hope so,' said Margaret sadly. Her father pinched her cheek.

'Come; you must take care of yourself, child, or you'll be wanting the doctor next.'

But he could not settle to anything that evening. He was continually going backwards and forwards, on laborious tiptoe, to see if his wife was still asleep. Margaret's heart ached at his restlessness. He came back at last, somewhat comforted.

'She's awake now, Margaret. She smiled as she saw me – just her old smile. And she says she feels refreshed, and ready for tea. Where's the note for her? She wants to see it.'

The note was a formal invitation from Mrs. Thornton, to dinner on the twenty-first. Margaret was surprised to find an acceptance was contemplated. But so it was. The idea of her husband's and daughter's going to this dinner quite captivated Mrs. Hale's fancy. She clung to the idea of their going, even when Margaret objected.

‘She wouldn’t wish it unless she really felt stronger – would she, Margaret?’ said Mr. Hale anxiously, as she prepared to write the note of acceptance the next day. It seemed cruel to refuse him the comfort he craved for.

‘I do think she is better since last night,’ said she. ‘Her eyes look brighter, and her complexion clearer.’

‘God bless you,’ said her father, earnestly. ‘Yesterday was so sultry everyone felt ill. It was a most unlucky day for Mr. Donaldson to see her.’ So he went away to his day’s duties, which were now increased by some lectures he had promised to deliver on Church Architecture.

‘Well, mother,’ asked Mr. Thornton that night, ‘who have accepted your invitations for the twenty-first?’

‘Fanny, where are the notes? The Slicksons accept, Collingbrooks accept, Stephenses accept, Browns decline. Hales – father and daughter come – mother too great an invalid – Macphersons come, and Mr. Horsfall, and Mr. Young.’

‘Very good. Do you know, I’m really afraid Mrs. Hale is very far from well, from what Dr. Donaldson says.’

‘It’s strange of them to accept a dinner-invitation if she’s very ill,’ said Fanny.

‘I didn’t say very ill,’ said her brother, rather sharply. ‘I only said very far from well. They may not know it either.’ Then he remembered that, from what Dr. Donaldson had told him, Margaret, at any rate, must be aware of the exact state of the case.

‘Very probably they know the great advantage it would be to them, to be introduced to such people as the Stephenses and the Collingbrooks.’

‘I’m sure that motive would not influence them. No! I think I understand how it is.’

‘John!’ said Fanny, laughing in her little, weak, nervous way. ‘How you profess to understand these Hales, and yet make out they are so different to most people.’

She did not mean to vex him; but she could not have done it more thoroughly. He was silent.

‘They do not seem to me out of the common way,’ said Mrs. Thornton. ‘He appears a worthy kind of man enough. She’s a bit of a fine lady, with her invalidism; and as for the girl – she’s the one who puzzles me. She seems to have a great notion of giving herself airs; and I can’t make out why. I could almost fancy she thinks herself too good for her company. And yet they’re not rich.’

‘And she’s not accomplished, mamma. She can’t play.’

‘Go on, Fanny. What else does she want to bring her up to your standard?’

‘Nay! John,’ said his mother, ‘I myself heard Miss Hale say she could not play. If you would let us alone, we could perhaps like her, and see her merits.’

‘I’m sure I never could!’ murmured Fanny. Mr. Thornton heard her, but did not reply. He walked up and down the dining-room, wishing that his mother would order candles, and allow him to read or write, and so end the conversation. But he never thought of interfering in any of the small domestic rules that Mrs. Thornton observed, in remembrance of her old economies.

‘Mother,’ said he, stopping, and bravely speaking out the truth, ‘I wish you would like Miss Hale.’

‘Why?’ asked she, startled by his earnest, yet tender manner. ‘You’re never thinking of marrying her? – a girl without a penny.’

‘She would never have me,’ said he, with a short laugh.

‘No, I don’t think she would,’ answered his mother. ‘She laughed in my face, when I praised her for repeating something Mr. Bell had said in your favour. I liked the girl for doing it so frankly, for it made me sure she had no thought of you; and the next minute she vexed me so by— Well, never mind! But she’s too good an opinion of herself to think of you. The saucy jade! I should like to know where she’d find a better!’

If these words hurt her son, the dusky light prevented him from showing it. He came up quite cheerfully to his mother, and putting one hand on her shoulder, said:

‘Well, as I have no thought of ever asking her to be my wife, you’ll believe that I’m quite disinterested in speaking about her. I foresee trouble for that girl – perhaps want of motherly care. I only wish you to be ready to be a friend to her, if she needs one. Now, Fanny, I trust you understand that I have no other reason for begging you and my mother to be kind to her.’

‘I cannot forgive her pride,’ said his mother. ‘I will befriend her, if there is need, John. I would befriend Jezebel herself if you asked me. But this girl, who turns up her nose at us—’

‘If she does,’ said he, ‘I’m not a lad to be cowed by a proud look from a woman, or to care for her misunderstanding me. I can laugh at it!’

‘I only wonder why you talk so much about her, then,’ said Fanny. ‘I’m sure, I’m tired of the subject.’

‘Well!’ said her brother, with a shade of bitterness. ‘Suppose we find some more agreeable subject – like a strike?’

‘Have the hands actually turned out?’ asked Mrs. Thornton.

‘Hamper’s men are out. Mine are working out their week, through fear of being prosecuted for breach of contract. I’d have had every one of them up for that, if they left their work before time.’

‘The law fees would have been more than the hands themselves were worth – the ungrateful naughts!’ said his mother.

‘To be sure. But I’d have shown them how I keep my word, and how I mean them to keep theirs. They know me. Slickson’s men are off – we’re in for a turn-out, mother.’

‘I hope there are not many orders in hand?’

‘Of course there are. They know that well enough. But they don’t quite understand all, though they think they do.’

‘What do you mean, John?’

Candles had been brought, and Fanny was sewing and yawning in turn; throwing herself back in her chair, from time to time, to gaze at vacancy, and think of nothing.

‘Why,’ said he, ‘the Americans are selling so many yarns, that our only chance is producing them at a lower rate. If we can’t, we may shut up shop at once. Yet these fools go back to the prices paid three years ago – nay, some of their leaders quote Dickinson’s prices now, though they know as well as we do that, what with fines taken out of their wages, and other fees, the real rate of wage paid at Dickinson’s is less than at ours. Upon my word, mother, it is too bad to find that ignorant fools like these are to rule over the fortunes of those with knowledge and experience. The next thing, we shall have to go hat in hand and humbly ask the Spinners’ Union to kindly give us labour at their own price. That’s what they want. They haven’t the sense to see that, if we don’t get enough profit here in England, we can move off to some other country.’

‘Can’t you get hands from Ireland? I wouldn’t keep these fellows a day. I’d teach them that I could employ what servants I liked.’

‘Yes! to be sure, I can; and I will, too, if they go on long. It will be trouble and expense; but I will do it, rather than give in.’

‘If there is to be all this extra expense, I’m sorry we’re giving a dinner just now.’

‘So am I – not because of the expense, but because I shall have much to think about, and many calls on my time. But we owe the dinners.’

He kept on with his restless walk, drawing a deep breath from time to time, as if trying to throw off some annoying thought. Fanny was not sorry when, at ten o’clock, the servants filed in to prayers, which her mother read.

When prayers were ended, his mother wished him goodnight, with a long steady look which conveyed none of the tenderness in her heart, but yet had the intensity of a blessing. Mr. Thornton continued his walk. All his business plans had received a check from this approaching turn-out. The forethought of many anxious hours was thrown away, utterly wasted by their insane folly, which would injure themselves even more than him.

And these were the men who thought themselves fitted to direct the masters in the use of their money! Hamper had said that if he were ruined by the strike, he would start again, comforted by the conviction that the strikers were in a worse predicament – for he had head as well as hands, while they had only hands, and could turn to nothing else.

But this thought was no consolation to Mr. Thornton. It might be that revenge gave him no pleasure; it might be that he felt keenly that all his efforts were endangered by the folly of others – so keenly that he had no thoughts to spare for what would happen to them. He paced up and down until the clock struck two. The candles were flickering in their sockets. He muttered to himself:

‘Once for all, they shall know whom they have got to deal with. I can give them a fortnight. If they don’t see their madness before the end of that time, I must have hands from Ireland.’

CHAPTER 19

ANGEL VISITS

Mrs. Hale was curiously interested by the idea of the Thornton dinner party. She kept wondering about the details, with the simplicity of a child. But the monotonous life led by invalids often makes them like children, who think their own world is so much greater than anything beyond. Besides, Mrs. Hale liked to think of seeing Margaret dressed for a party, and discussed what she should wear with an anxiety that amused Margaret, who had become more accustomed to society in Harley Street than her mother had in five and twenty years of Helstone.

‘Are you sure your white silk will fit? It’s nearly a year since Edith was married!’

‘Oh yes, mamma! I don’t think I’ve altered in the least.’

‘Hadn’t you better let Dixon see it? It may have gone yellow.’

‘If you like, mamma. But if the worst comes to the worst, I’ve a very nice pink gauze which aunt Shaw gave me, only two or three months before Edith was married. That can’t have gone yellow.’

‘No! but it may have faded.’

‘Well! then I’ve a green silk.’

‘I wish I knew what you ought to wear,’ said Mrs. Hale nervously.

‘Shall I go and put them on, mamma, and then you could see which you liked most?’

‘Yes! perhaps that will be best.’

So off Margaret went. When dressed up, she was inclined to play the fool; but finding that her pranks annoyed her mother, she became grave and sedate. What had possessed the world to fidget so about her dress, she could not understand. That very afternoon, on her mentioning the matter to Bessy Higgins, Bessy quite roused up at the news.

‘Are you going to dine at Thornton’s at Marlborough Mills?’

‘Yes, Bessy. Why are you so surprised?’

‘Oh, I dunno. But they visit wi’ all th’ first folk in Milton.’

‘And you don’t think we’re quite the first folk in Milton, eh, Bessy?’

Bessy’s cheeks flushed a little. ‘Well, they thinken a deal o’ money here, and I reckon yo’ve not gotten much.’

‘No,’ said Margaret, ‘that’s very true. But we are educated people. Is there anything so strange in our being asked out to dinner by a man who comes to my father to learn? I don’t mean to blame Mr. Thornton. Few drapers’ assistants, as he was once, could have made themselves what he is.’

‘But can yo’ give dinners back, in your small house?’

‘Well, I think we could manage to give Mr. Thornton a dinner back. Perhaps not in such a large room, nor with so many people.’

‘I never thought yo’d be dining with Thorntons,’ repeated Bessy. ‘Why, the mayor hissel’ dines there. And them ladies dress so grand!’ She gave an anxious look at Margaret’s print gown, which her Milton eyes appraised at sevenpence a yard.

Margaret's face dimpled up into a merry laugh. 'Thank you, Bessy, for your concern! But I've plenty of grand gowns. I shall put on my very best gown, you may be sure.'

'What will yo' wear?' asked Bessy, somewhat relieved.

'White silk,' said Margaret. 'A gown I had for a cousin's wedding. I'll be fine enough.'

'I wish I could see you dressed up,' said Bessy. 'I reckon, you're not what folk would call pretty. But yo' know, I ha' dreamt of yo', long afore ever I seed yo'.'

'Nonsense, Bessy!'

'Ay, but I did. Your very face – looking wi' your clear steadfast eyes out o' th' darkness, wi' your hair blown off from your brow, and going out like rays round your forehead – and yo' always came to give me strength, which I seemed to gather out o' your deep comforting eyes – and yo' were drest in shining raiment – just as you're going to be drest. So, yo' see, it was yo'!'

'Nay, Bessy,' said Margaret, gently, 'it was but a dream.'

'Did not many a one i' the Bible dream, and see visions too? Why, even father thinks a deal o' dreams! I tell yo' again, I saw yo' coming swiftly towards me, wi' your hair blown back, and the white shining dress on. Let me come and see yo' in it, and touch yo' as yo' were in my dream.'

'My dear Bessy, it is quite a fancy of yours.'

'Fancy or no fancy – yo've come, as I knew yo' would, when I saw yo' in my dream – and when yo're here I feel easier in my mind, and comforted, just as a fire comforts one on a dree day. Please God, if I'm spared, I'll come and see yo'.'

'Oh Bessy! you may come and welcome; but don't talk so – it really makes me sorry.'

'Then I'll keep it to mysel'. But it's true for all that.'

Margaret was silent. At last she said,

'Let us talk about it sometime, if you think it true. But not now. Tell me, has your father turned out on strike?'

'Ay!' said Bessy, more heavily. 'He and many another. Th' women are as bad as th' men, in their savageness. Food is dear, and they must have food for their childer. Suppose Thorntons sent 'em their dinner out – th' same money, spent on potatoes and flour, would keep many a crying babby quiet, and hush up its mother's heart for a bit!'

'Don't speak so!' said Margaret. 'You'll make me feel wicked and guilty in going to this dinner.'

'No!' said Bessy. 'Some's pre-elected to sumptuous feasts, like you. Others toil and moil all their lives – and the very dogs are not pitiful in our days, as they were in the days of Lazarus. But if yo' ask, I'll come across the great gulf to yo' just for th' thought o' what yo've been to me here.'

'Bessy! you're very feverish! On that judgement day, it won't matter that some of us have been beggars here, and some of us have been rich – we shall not be judged by that, but by our faithful following of Christ.' Margaret got up, and soaking her handkerchief in water, she laid it on Bessy's forehead. Bessy shut her eyes, and allowed herself to be soothed. At last she said,

'Yo'd ha' been deaved out o' your five wits, as well as me, if yo'd heard father's friends telling their tales. Some spoke o' deadly hatred, and made my blood run cold wi' the terrible things they said o' th' masters – but the women kept plaining,

plaining (wi' the tears running down their cheeks) of the price o' meat, and how their childer could na sleep at nights for th' hunger.'

'And do they think the strike will mend this?' asked Margaret.

'They say so,' replied Bessy. 'They do say trade has been good for long, and the masters has made no end o' money; and, as is natural, they want their share o' th' profits, now that food is getting dear; and th' Union says they should make the masters give 'em their share. But masters has gotten th' upper hand somehow. It's like th' great battle o' Armageddon, the way they keep on, grinning and fighting at each other, till even while they fight, they are picked off into the pit.'

Just then, Nicholas Higgins came in. He caught his daughter's last words.

'Ay! and I'll fight on too. It'll not take long to make 'em give in, for they've gotten a pretty lot of orders; and they'll soon find out they'd better give us our five per cent than lose their profit. Aha, my masters! I know who'll win.'

Margaret fancied from his excited manner that he must have been drinking; and she was confirmed in this idea by Bessy's anxiety for her to depart. Bessy said:

'I may come and see yo' dressed for Thornton's on th' twenty-first. What time is your dinner?'

Higgins broke out, 'Thornton's! Ar't' going to dine at Thornton's? Ask him to drink to the success of his orders. By th' twenty-first he'll be potted in his brains how to get 'em done in time. Tell him, as soon as he gives the five per cent, there's seven hundred men'll come marching into Marlborough Mills, and will help him through his contract. Eh! yo'll have a lot of prize mill-owners at Thornton's! I should like to talk to 'em, after dinner when they could na run. I'd tell 'em my mind about th' hard way they're driving on us!'

'Good-bye!' said Margaret hastily. 'Good-bye, Bessy! I shall see you on the twenty-first.'

The medicines which Dr. Donaldson had ordered for Mrs. Hale did her so much good at first that not only she herself, but Margaret, began to hope that he might have been mistaken, and that she could recover permanently. As for Mr. Hale, he triumphed over their fears with relief. Only Dixon croaked like the raven. However, Margaret had hope.

They needed this gleam of brightness indoors, for out-of-doors there was a gloomy, brooding discontent. Mr. Hale had acquaintances among the working men, and was depressed with their tales of suffering. Mr. Hale laid these grievances before Mr. Thornton, for him to explain their origin; which he did, on sound economical principles, showing that in trade there must always be a waxing and waning of commercial prosperity; and that in the waning a certain number of masters, as well as of men, must go down into ruin.

He spoke as if this consequence were so entirely logical, that no one had any right to complain if it became their fate. He had no sympathy for the masters who might get trampled down, nor for the workmen who would fain lie down and die, but felt as if they could never rest in their graves for the cries of the beloved and helpless they would leave behind.

Margaret's whole soul rose up against him while he reasoned in this way – as if commerce were everything and humanity nothing. She could hardly thank him for the kindness and delicacy which had brought him that evening to offer her every convenience for illness which Mrs. Hale might require. His presence, his speech – his bringing before her the doom which she was trying to persuade herself might yet be averted from her mother – all set Margaret's teeth on edge.

What business had he to be admitted to the awful secret? She held it shut up in the most dark and sacred recess of her heart – not daring to look at it – the secret that, some day soon, she should cry aloud for her mother, and no answer would come out of the darkness.

Yet he knew all. She saw it in his pitying eyes. She heard it in his grave voice. How reconcile those eyes, that voice, with the hard, dry, merciless way in which he laid down axioms of trade, and their consequences? The discord jarred upon her – the more because of the gathering woe of which she heard from Bessy.

To be sure, Nicholas Higgins spoke differently. He had been appointed a committee-man, and said that he knew secrets. He said this expressly on the day before Mrs. Thornton's dinner-party, when Margaret, going to see Bessy, found him arguing with Boucher, the neighbour whom she had frequently heard him mention as an unskilful workman with a large family.

Higgins was in a passion when Margaret entered. Boucher stood swaying a little and looking wildly into the fire, with a despair that irritated Higgins, even while it went to his heart. Bessy was rocking herself violently backwards and forwards, as was her wont (Margaret knew by this time) when she was agitated. Her sister Mary was clumsily tying on her bonnet to go to her work of fustian-cutting, blubbing out loud, and evidently longing to be away from a scene that distressed her.

Margaret stood for a moment at the door – then she stole to a seat near Bessy. Nicholas saw her, and greeted her with a gruff, but not unfriendly nod. Mary hurried out of the house, crying. John Boucher took no notice of who came in and who went out.

'It's no use, Higgins. Hoo cannot live long. Hoo's just sinking away – not for want o' meat hersel' – but because hoo cannot stand th' sight o' the little ones clemming. Ay, clemming! Five shilling a week may do well enough for thee, wi' only two mouths to fill. But it's clemming to us. An' I tell thee plain – if hoo dies afore we've gotten th' five per cent, I'll fling th' money back i' th' master's face, and say, "Be domned to yo'; that could na leave me th' best wife that ever bore childer to a man!" An' look thee, lad, I'll hate thee, and th' Union – I will, lad! if yo're leading me astray. Thou saidst, Nicholas, near two weeks ago, that afore a fortnight we'd ha' the masters begging us to come back, at our own wage. Time's nearly up – and there's our Jack lying a-bed, too weak to cry – I tell thee, lad! Hoo loves him as if he were her very life – our lile Jack, who wakened me each morn wi' putting his sweet little lips to kiss my great rough face – an' he lies clemming.'

Here deep sobs choked the poor man, and Nicholas looked up, with eyes brimful of tears.

'Hold up, man. Thy lile Jack shall na' clem. I have brass, and we'll go buy the chap a sup o' milk an' a loaf this very minute. What's mine is thine. Only, dunnot lose heart, man!' continued he, fumbling in a tea-pot for money. 'Just one more week, and yo'll see how th' masters'll come round, praying us to come back to our mills. An' th' Union – that's to say, I will take care yo've enough for th' childer and th' missus.'

The man turned a face so white, and gaunt, and tear-furrowed, and hopeless, that its very calm forced Margaret to weep. 'Yo' know well that the Union's a worsen tyrant than th' masters. It says "Clem to death, before yo' dare go against th' Union." Yo' know it well, Nicholas. Yo' may be kind hearts separately; but banded together, yo've no more pity than a wolf.'

‘So help me God!’ said Nicholas, ‘I think I’m doing best for thee. If I’m going wrong when I think I’m going right, it’s their sin, who ha’ left me in ignorance. I ha’ thought till my brains ached. An’ I say again, there’s no help for us but having faith i’ th’ Union. They’ll win the day, see if they dunnot!’

They both went out. Not one word had Margaret or Bessy spoken. At last Bessy said,

‘I never thought to hear father call on God again. But yo’ heard him say, “So help me God!”’

‘Yes,’ said Margaret. ‘Let me bring you what money I can spare, and some food for that poor man’s children. Don’t let them know it comes from anyone but your father.’

Bessy lay back, her breath quivering. ‘My heart’s drained dry o’ tears,’ she said. ‘Boucher’s been a telling me of his fears and troubles. He’s but a weak chap, I know, but he’s a man for a’ that; and tho’ I’ve been angry many a time wi’ him an’ his wife, as knew no more than him how to manage – yet, yo’ see, all folks isn’t wise, yet God lets ’em live – ay, an’ gives ’em some one to love, and be loved by, just as good as Solomon. An’ if sorrow comes to them they love, it hurts ’em as sore as it did Solomon. Perhaps it’s as well Boucher has th’ Union to see after him. But I’d just like for to see th’ Union men face to face wi’ Boucher. I reckon they’d tell him he might go back to work.’

Margaret sat silent. How was she to go away into comfort and forget that man’s agonised voice? She took out her purse; what little money she had, she put into Bessy’s hand.

‘Thank yo’. There’s many on ’em gets no more, and is not so bad off. Yo’ see, Boucher’s been pulled down wi’ his childer – and her being so cranky, and all they could pawn has gone. You’re not to think we’d let ’em clem; if neighbours doesn’t see after neighbours, I dunno who will.’ Bessy seemed almost afraid lest Margaret should think they had not the will and the power of helping Boucher. ‘Besides,’ she went on, ‘father is sure the masters must give in soon – they canna hould on much longer. But I thank yo’ all the same; it just makes my heart warm to yo’ more and more.’

As she finished speaking, Bessy looked so faint and exhausted that Margaret became alarmed.

‘It’s nout,’ said Bessy. ‘It’s not death yet. I had a fearfu’ night wi’ dreams – or somewhat like dreams, for I were wide awake – and I’m all in a daze today, only yon poor chap made me alive again. No! it’s not death yet, but death is not far off. I’ll maybe sleep, if th’ cough will let me. Good night.’

CHAPTER 20

MEN AND GENTLEMEN

Margaret went home so painfully occupied with what she had heard that she could hardly keep up a flow of cheerful conversation for her mother, who, now that she was unable to go out, always looked to Margaret to bring some news.

‘And can your factory friend come on Thursday to see you dressed?’

‘She was so ill I never thought of asking her,’ said Margaret, dolefully.

‘Dear! Everybody is ill now, I think,’ said Mrs. Hale, with a little of the jealousy which one invalid is apt to feel of another. ‘But it must be very sad to be ill in one of those little back streets.’ (Her kindly nature prevailing.) ‘Mr. Thornton has sent me some old port wine. Would a bottle of that do her good, think you?’

‘No, mamma. I don’t believe they are *very* poor; and Bessy’s illness is consumption – she won’t want wine. Perhaps I might take her a little fruit preserve. No! there’s another family to whom I should like to give – Oh mamma! how am I to dress up in my finery, and go to smart parties, after the sorrow I have seen today?’ exclaimed Margaret, bursting the bounds she had set for herself, and telling her mother about John Boucher.

It distressed Mrs. Hale excessively. She told Margaret to pack up a basket, to be sent there and then to the family; and was almost angry with her for saying that it would wait till morning, as she knew Higgins had provided for their immediate wants, and she herself had left money with Bessy. Mrs. Hale called her unfeeling, and ordered the basket to be sent out of the house. Then she said:

‘After all, we may have been doing wrong. Mr. Thornton said, those were no true friends who helped to prolong the struggle by assisting the turn-outs. And this Boucher-man was a turn-out, was he not?’

She asked this of Mr. Hale when he came upstairs, after giving a lesson to Mr. Thornton. Mr. Hale listened, and tried to judge calmly; he recalled all that had seemed so clear not half-an-hour before, as it came out of Mr. Thornton’s lips; and then he made an unsatisfactory compromise. He did not see how his wife and daughter could have done otherwise. Nevertheless, it was very true what Mr. Thornton said; that the strike, if prolonged, must end in the masters’ bringing hands from a distance, so the kindest thing was to refuse all help which might bolster them up in their folly. But, as to this Boucher, he would go and see him first thing in the morning, and try and find out what could be done for him.

Mr. Hale went the next morning. He did not find Boucher at home, but he had a long talk with his wife; promised to ask for an Infirmary order for her; and, seeing the plenty provided by Mrs. Hale, and somewhat lavishly used by the children, who were masters in their father’s absence, he came back with a more cheerful account than Margaret had hoped for.

‘But I will go again, and see the man himself,’ said Mr. Hale. ‘I hardly know how to compare these houses with our Helstone cottages. I see furniture here which our labourers would never have thought of buying, and food which they would consider luxuries; yet for these very families there seems no other resource, now that their wages are stopped, but the pawn-shop. One needs to measure by a different standard, up here in Milton.’

Bessy, too, was rather better this day; although still so weak that she seemed to have entirely forgotten her wish to see Margaret dressed up.

Margaret could not help comparing this strange dressing of hers – her heart heavy with anxieties – with the old, merry preparations that she and Edith had performed scarcely more than a year ago. Her only pleasure now in decking herself out was in thinking that her mother would take delight in seeing her dressed. She blushed when Dixon admired her.

‘Miss Hale looks well, ma’am, doesn’t she? Mrs. Shaw’s coral gives the right touch of colour. Otherwise, Miss Margaret, you would have been too pale.’

Margaret’s black hair was too thick to be plaited; it needed rather to be twisted round into massive silky coils, that encircled her head like a crown, and then were gathered into a spiral knot behind. She kept its weight together by two large coral pins. On her neck, just below her curved white throat, there lay heavy coral beads.

‘Oh, Margaret! how I should like to be going with you to one of the old Barrington assemblies.’

Margaret kissed her mother, but said, ‘I would rather stay at home with you, mamma.’

‘Nonsense, darling! Be sure you take note of the dinner. I shall like to hear how they manage these things in Milton.’

Mrs. Hale would have been astonished if she had seen the sumptuousness of the dinner-table. Margaret felt the number of delicacies to be oppressive; half would have been enough, and the effect more elegant. But it was one of Mrs. Thornton’s rigorous laws of hospitality that enough should be provided of each separate dainty for all the guests to partake, if they wished. Abstemious herself, it was part of her pride to set a feast before her guests.

Her son shared this feeling. He had never known any kind of society but that which depended on an exchange of superb meals; and even though he was denying himself any unnecessary personal expense, and had regretted that the invitations for this dinner had been sent out, still he was glad to see the old magnificence.

Mr. Hale was anxiously punctual, and Margaret and her father were the first to arrive. There was no one in the drawing-room but Mrs. Thornton and Fanny. The covers were taken off, and the apartment blazed forth in yellow silk damask and a brilliantly-flowered carpet. Every corner seemed filled up with ornament, until it wearied the eye, and presented a strange contrast to the bald ugliness of the view into the great mill-yard, where the gates were thrown open to admit carriages. The mill loomed high on the left, casting a long shadow which darkened the summer evening.

‘My son will be here directly, Mr. Hale. May I beg you to take a seat?’

Mr. Hale was standing at one of the windows as Mrs. Thornton spoke. He turned away, saying,

‘Don’t you find such close neighbourhood to the mill rather unpleasant at times?’

She drew herself up. ‘Never. I am not become so fine as to desire to forget the source of my son’s wealth and power. Besides, there is not another such factory in Milton. One room alone is two hundred and twenty square yards.’

‘I meant that the smoke and the noise – the constant going in and out of people, might be annoying.’

‘I agree with you, Mr. Hale!’ said Fanny. ‘There is a continual smell of steam and oil – and the noise is perfectly deafening.’

‘I have heard noise that was called music far more deafening. The engine-room is at the other end of the factory; we hardly hear it, except when all the windows are open. As for the work-people, they disturb me no more than the humming of a hive of bees. Just now, there are no sounds from the mill; the hands have been ungrateful enough to turn out, as perhaps you have heard. But my son is going to make them learn their place.’ The expression on her face, always stern, deepened into dark anger as she said this. Nor did it clear when Mr. Thornton entered the room; for she saw, in an instant, the weight of care which he could not shake off, although his guests received a cheerful greeting.

He shook hands with Margaret. He knew it was the first time their hands had met, though she was perfectly unconscious of the fact. He inquired after Mrs. Hale, and heard Mr. Hale’s hopeful account; and glancing at Margaret, he saw that no dissenting shadow crossed her face.

As he looked, he was struck anew with her great beauty. He had never seen her in such dress before; her elegant attire befitted her noble figure and serene face. She was talking to Fanny; about what, he could not hear. He saw his sister’s restless way of constantly re-arranging her gown, her eyes wandering without any purpose; and he contrasted them uneasily with the large soft eyes that looked steadily at one object; the curving red lips, just parted in listening – the head a little bent forwards, so as to make a long sweeping line from the glossy raven hair to the smooth ivory tip of the shoulder; the round white arms, and hands laid lightly across each other. Mr. Thornton sighed as he took in all this with a sudden comprehensive glance. And then he turned his back on the young ladies, and threw himself, with an effort, into a conversation with Mr. Hale.

More people came. Fanny left Margaret’s side, and helped her mother to receive her guests. Mr. Thornton felt that no one was speaking to Margaret, and was restless; but he did not look at her. Only, he knew what she was doing better than he knew the movements of anyone else in the room.

Margaret was so unconscious of herself, and so much amused by watching other people, that she never thought whether she was left unnoticed. Somebody took her down to dinner; she did not catch the name; nor did he seem much inclined to talk to her. There was a very animated conversation going on among the gentlemen; Margaret grew interested and listened attentively. Mr. Horsfall, a stranger to the town, was asking about Milton’s trade and manufactures; and the rest of the gentlemen were giving him answers and explanations. Some dispute arose, and was referred to Mr. Thornton, who had hardly spoken; but who now gave an opinion so clearly that the opponents yielded.

His whole manner as master of the house, and entertainer of his friends, was so straightforward, yet simple and modest, as to be thoroughly dignified. Margaret thought she had never seen him to so much advantage. When he had come to their house, there had been always some over-eagerness or vexed annoyance which seemed ready to pre-suppose that he was unjustly judged. But now, among his fellows, there was no uncertainty as to his position. He was regarded by them as a man of great force of character; of power in many ways. He had their respect, and he knew it; and the security of this gave a fine grand quietness to his voice and manner.

Margaret was surprised at how much she enjoyed this dinner. She knew enough now to understand many local interests – even some of the technical words used by the eager mill-owners. They talked in desperate earnest, not in the used-up style that wearied her so in the old London parties.

She wondered that no one mentioned the strike. She did not yet know how coolly such things were taken by the masters, as having only one possible end. To be sure, the men were cutting their own throats; but if they would be fools, they must take the consequence. One or two thought Thornton looked out of spirits; of course, he must lose by this turn-out. But Thornton could manage a strike, for he was as iron a chap as any in Milton. And they chuckled inwardly at the idea of the workmen's discomfiture and defeat, in their attempt to alter one iota of what Thornton had decreed.

It was rather dull for Margaret after dinner. She was glad when the gentlemen came, because she could listen to something larger than the petty interests which the ladies had been talking about. She liked the exultation in the sense of power which these Milton men had. It might savour of boasting; but still they seemed to defy the old limits of possibility, in a kind of fine intoxication caused by what had been achieved, and what yet should be. If she might not approve of their spirit in all things, still there was much to admire in their forgetfulness of themselves and the present, in their anticipated triumphs over all inanimate matter at some future time. She was rather startled when Mr. Thornton spoke to her, close at her elbow:

'I could see you were on our side in our discussion at dinner – were you not, Miss Hale?'

'Certainly. But then I know so little about it. I was surprised, however, to find from what Mr. Horsfall said, that there were others who thought so differently, like the Mr. Morison he mentioned. He cannot be a gentleman – is he?'

'I cannot decide on another's gentlemanliness, Miss Hale. I mean, I don't quite understand your application of the word. But I should say that this Morison is no true man. I don't know him; I merely judge him from Mr. Horsfall's account.'

'I suspect my "gentleman" includes your "true man."'

'And a great deal more, you would imply. I differ from you. A man is to me a higher and a completer being than a gentleman.'

'What do you mean?' asked Margaret.

'I take it that "gentleman" is a term that only describes a person in his relation to others; but when we speak of him as "a man," we consider him not merely with regard to his fellow-men, but in relation to himself – to life – to eternity. I am rather weary of this word "gentlemanly," which seems to me to be often inappropriately used, and with much distortion of meaning, while the full simplicity of "man" and "manly" are unacknowledged.'

Margaret thought a moment – but before she could speak, he was called away by the eager manufacturers. Although she could not hear their questions, she could guess at them by the short, firm answers Mr. Thornton gave. They were evidently talking of the turn-out, and suggesting what course to take. She heard Mr. Thornton say:

'That has been done. All those arrangements have been made.'

Some doubts were implied by Mr. Slickson, who took hold of Mr. Thornton's arm. Mr. Thornton moved slightly away, lifted his eyebrows, and replied:

'I take the risk. You need not join in it unless you choose. I'm not afraid; I can protect myself from any violence. And I will assuredly protect all others who come to me for work. They know my determination by this time.'

Mr. Horsfall took him on one side. Margaret assumed it was to ask him some question about the strike; but, in truth, it was to inquire who she herself was – so quiet, so stately, and so beautiful.

‘A Milton lady?’ asked he.

‘No! from the south – Hampshire, I believe,’ was the cold, indifferent answer.

Mrs. Slickson was questioning Fanny on the same subject. ‘Who is that fine distinguished-looking girl?’

‘Oh! Mr. Hale there is her father. He gives lessons; my brother John goes to him twice a week, and so he begged mamma to ask them here, in hopes of getting him known.’

‘Does Mr. Thornton really find time to read with a tutor, in the midst of all his business – and this abominable strike as well?’

Fanny was not sure, from Mrs. Slickson’s manner, whether she ought to be proud or ashamed of her brother; she was inclined to blush. Her shame was interrupted by the dispersion of the guests.

CHAPTER 21

THE DARK NIGHT

Margaret and her father walked home. The night was fine, and with her pretty white silk hitched up, she was ready to dance along with the excitement of the cool, fresh night air.

‘I rather think Thornton is not easy in his mind about this strike,’ said Mr. Hale. ‘He seemed very anxious tonight.’

‘I should wonder if he were not. But he spoke with his usual coolness.’

‘It would take a good deal to stir him from his cool manner; but his face strikes me as anxious.’

‘He must know of the growing anger and hatred of his workpeople, who look upon him as what the Bible calls a “hard man” – not so much unjust as unfeeling; standing upon his “rights” as no human being ought to stand, considering what our petty rights are in the sight of the Almighty. I am glad you think he looks anxious. When I remember Boucher’s half mad words, I cannot bear to think how coolly Mr. Thornton spoke.’

‘I am not so convinced about that man Boucher’s utter distress. For the moment, he was badly off, I don’t doubt. But there is always a mysterious supply of money from these Unions; and it was evident the man was of a passionate nature, and gave strong expression to all he felt.’

‘Oh, papa!’

‘Well! I only want you to do justice to Mr. Thornton, who is, I suspect, exactly opposite – a man too proud to show his feelings. I should have thought you would admire that, Margaret.’

‘So I do; but I don’t feel quite so sure as you do of the existence of those feelings. He is a man of great strength of character – of unusual intellect, considering the few advantages he has had.’

‘Not so few. He has led a practical life from a very early age; has been called upon to exercise judgment and self-control. To be sure, he needs some knowledge of the past, which gives the truest basis for conjecture as to the future; but he perceives this need. You are quite prejudiced against Mr. Thornton, Margaret.’

‘He is the first specimen of a manufacturer that I had ever the opportunity of studying, papa. He is my first olive: let me make a face while I swallow it. I know he is good of his kind, and by and by I shall like the kind. I think I am already beginning to do so. I was very much interested by what the gentlemen were talking about, although I did not understand half of it. I was quite sorry when Miss Thornton took me to the other end of the room, saying she was sure I was uncomfortable at being the only lady among so many gentlemen. I had never thought about it, I was so busy listening; and the ladies were so dull, papa! Yet clever too, at seeing how many nouns they could put into a sentence.’

‘What do you mean, child?’ asked Mr. Hale.

‘Why, they took nouns that indicated wealth: housekeepers, under-gardeners, glass, lace, diamonds, and so on; and brought them all into their speeches, in the prettiest accidental manner possible.’

‘You will be as proud of your one servant when you get her.’

‘To be sure, I shall. I felt like a great hypocrite tonight, sitting idle in my white silk gown, when I remembered all the house-work I had done today. They took me for a fine lady, I’m sure.’

‘Even I thought you looked like a lady, my dear,’ said Mr. Hale, smiling.

But smiles were changed to white and trembling looks, when they saw Dixon’s face as she opened the door.

‘Oh, master! – Oh, Miss Margaret! Thank God you are come! Dr. Donaldson is here. She’s better now; but, oh, sir! I thought she’d have died an hour ago.’

Mr. Hale caught Margaret’s arm to steady himself. He looked at her face, and saw upon it surprise and extreme sorrow, but not the agony of terror that contracted his own heart. She knew more than he did.

‘Oh! I should not have left her – wicked daughter that I am!’ she moaned as she supported her trembling father’s steps. Dr. Donaldson met them on the landing.

‘She is better now,’ he whispered. ‘The opiate has taken effect. The spasms were very bad; but she’ll rally this time.’

‘This time! Let me go to her!’ Mr. Hale tottered as if he were seventy. Dr. Donaldson took his arm, and led him into the bedroom. Margaret followed.

There lay her mother, with an unmistakable look on her face. She was sleeping, but Death had signed her for his own, and it was clear that before long he would return to take possession. Mr. Hale looked at her for some time without a word. Then he began to shake all over, and, turning away from Dr. Donaldson, he groped blindly for the door. He staggered into the drawing-room, where Dr. Donaldson brought him a chair and felt his pulse.

‘Speak to him, Miss Hale. We must rouse him.’

‘Papa!’ said Margaret, her voice wild with pain. ‘Papa! Speak to me!’

He made a great effort. ‘Margaret, did you know of this? Oh, it was cruel of you!’

‘No, sir, it was not cruel!’ replied Dr. Donaldson quickly. ‘Miss Hale acted under my directions. Your wife will be a different creature tomorrow, I trust. She has had spasms, as I anticipated, though I did not tell Miss Hale of my apprehensions. She will have a good long sleep; and tomorrow, that alarming look will have passed.’

‘But not the disease?’

Dr. Donaldson glanced at Margaret. Her bent head showed him that she thought it better that the whole truth should be told.

‘Not the disease. We cannot touch the disease. We can only delay its progress and alleviate the pain. Be a man, sir – be a Christian. Have faith in the immortality of the soul, which no disease can touch!’

‘You have never been married, Dr. Donaldson; you do not know what it is.’ Deep, manly sobs went through the stillness of the night like heavy pulses of agony. Margaret knelt by her father, caressing him tearfully. At last Mr. Hale spoke again.

‘What must we do? Tell us both. Margaret is my right hand.’

Dr. Donaldson gave his clear, sensible directions. No fear for tonight – nay, even peace for many days yet. But no enduring hope of recovery. He advised Mr. Hale to go to bed, and leave only one person to watch the slumber, which he hoped would be undisturbed. He promised to come again early in the morning. And with a kindly shake of the hand, he left them.

They spoke but few words; they were too exhausted by their terror to do more than decide upon the immediate course of action. Mr. Hale was resolved to sit up through the night, and all that Margaret could do was to persuade him to rest on the

drawing-room sofa. Dixon stoutly refused to go to bed; and, as for Margaret, it was simply impossible that she should leave her mother.

So Dixon sat, and stared, and drooped, and picked herself up again with a jerk, and finally gave up and fairly snored. Margaret, who had exchanged her gown for her dressing-gown, felt as if she never could sleep again; as if her senses were doubly keen. Every sight and sound touched some nerve to the very quick. She heard her father's restless movements in the next room, coming to the door of her mother's chamber, and pausing to listen, till she opened it to tell him how all went on.

At last he, too, fell asleep, and the house was still. Margaret sat thinking. Only thirty-six hours ago, her heart was wrung for Bessy and for Boucher; now, that was like a dreaming memory of some former life. Even Harley Street appeared more distinct; she remembered, as if it were yesterday, how she had pleased herself with tracing out her mother's features in her Aunt Shaw's face – and the letters that had come from home.

Helstone itself was in the dim past. She would fain have caught at the skirts of that departing time, and prayed it to return, and give her back what she had too little valued while she had it. What a vain show Life seemed! How unsubstantial, and flickering!

And when the morning dawned, cool and grey, like many a happier morning before – when Margaret looked at the sleepers, it seemed as if the terrible night were as unreal as a dream; it, too, was a shadow. It, too, was past.

Mrs. Hale herself was not aware, when she awoke, of how ill she had been the night before. She was rather surprised at Dr. Donaldson's early visit, and perplexed by the anxious faces of husband and child. She consented to remain in bed, saying she certainly was tired; but the next day, she insisted on getting up; and Dr. Donaldson allowed her to return into the drawing-room. She was restless and uncomfortable, and before night she became very feverish. Mr. Hale was utterly listless, and incapable of deciding on anything.

'What can we do to spare mamma such another night?' Margaret asked the doctor on the third day.

'It is, to some degree, the reaction after the powerful opiates I have been obliged to use. It is more painful for you to see than for her to bear, I believe. But, I think, if we could get a water-bed it might be a good thing. Though she will be better tomorrow; pretty much like herself again. Still, I should like her to have a water-bed. Mrs. Thornton has one, I know, made of rubber-coated canvas. I'll try and call there this afternoon. Stay,' said he, seeing Margaret's pale face. 'I'm not sure whether I can go; I've a long round to take. It would do you no harm to have a brisk walk to Marlborough Street, and ask Mrs. Thornton if she can spare it.'

'Certainly,' said Margaret.

That afternoon Mrs. Hale seemed to shake off the consequences of her attack, and looked brighter and better than Margaret had hoped to see her again. Her daughter left her after dinner, sitting in her easy chair beside her husband, who looked more worn and suffering than she. Still, he could smile now – if only faintly.

It was about two miles to Marlborough Street. It was too hot to walk very quickly; an August sun beat down. At first Margaret went along without noticing anything very different from usual; she was absorbed in her own thoughts. But, by and by, she was struck with an unusual heaving among the mass of people in the crowded road. They did not appear to be moving on, so much as talking, and listening, and buzzing with excitement, without stirring from the spot.

Still, since they made way for her, and she was wrapped in her errand and so less observant than she might have been, she had got into Marlborough Street before she realised that there was a restless, oppressive sense of irritation among the people; a thunderous atmosphere around her.

From every narrow lane opening on to the street came a low distant roar of fierce indignant voices. The inhabitants of each squalid dwelling were gathered at the doors, or standing in the middle of the lane – all looking towards Marlborough Street with intense interest in their eyes; some fierce with anger, some threatening, some dilated with fear, or imploring.

As Margaret reached the small side-entrance in the great dead wall of the mill-yard and waited for the porter to answer the bell, she looked round and heard the first long roll of the tempest; – saw the first slow-surfing wave of the dark crowd come and then retreat, at the far end of the street, which now seemed ominously still.

Although Margaret noticed all these things, she was still pre-occupied. She did not know what they meant; while she did know and feel the keen sharp pressure of the knife that was soon to stab her through by leaving her motherless. She was trying to realise that, so that she might be ready to comfort her father.

The porter opened the door cautiously.

‘It’s you, is it, ma’am?’ said he, drawing a long breath, and widening the entrance a little. Margaret went in. He hastily bolted it behind her.

‘Th’ folk are all coming up here, I reckon?’ asked he.

‘I don’t know. Something unusual seemed to be going on; but this street is quite empty, I think.’

She went across the yard to the house door. There was no beat and pant of the steam-engine – no click of machinery; but far away, the ominous gathering roar.

CHAPTER 22

A BLOW AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Margaret was shown into the drawing-room. It had returned into its normal state of bag and covering. The windows were half open because of the heat, and Venetian blinds covered the glass, giving the light a green tinge that made her face in the mirrors look ghastly and wan. She sat and waited; no one came. Every now and then, the distant multitudinous sound drew nearer; and then died away into profound stillness.

Fanny came in at last.

‘Mamma will come directly, Miss Hale. She desired me to apologise to you. Perhaps you know my brother has imported hands from Ireland, and it has irritated the Milton people excessively – as if he hadn’t a right to get labour where he could; and now they’ve frightened these poor Irish starvelings so with their threats, that we daren’t let them out. They’re huddled in that top room in the mill – and they’re to sleep there, to keep them safe from those brutes. Mamma is seeing about their food, and John is speaking to them. Ah! here’s mamma!’

Mrs. Thornton came in with a look of black sternness on her face, which made Margaret feel she had arrived at a bad time to trouble her. However, Mrs. Thornton had expressed the wish that she would ask for whatever they might need for her mother; though her brow contracted while Margaret spoke with gentle modesty of her mother’s restlessness, and Dr. Donaldson’s wish that she should have a water-bed.

Mrs. Thornton did not reply immediately. Then she started up and exclaimed:

‘They’re at the gates! Call John from the mill, Fanny! They’re at the gates! They’ll batter them in!’

And the gathering tramp – to which she had been listening, instead of Margaret’s words – was heard right outside the wall. An increasing din of angry voices raged behind the gates, which shook as if the unseen maddened crowd made battering-rams of their bodies, with a steady rhythm which made the strong gates quiver.

The women, servants and all, gathered round the windows, fascinated and terrified. Fanny had returned, screaming as if pursued at every step, and had thrown herself in hysterical sobbing on the sofa. Mrs. Thornton watched for her son, who was still in the mill. He came out, looked up at the pale cluster of faces – and smiled good courage to them, before he locked the factory-door. Then he called for someone to come down and undo his own door, which Fanny had fastened behind her in her mad flight. Mrs. Thornton went.

The sound of his well-known and commanding voice seemed to infuriate the mob outside. Hitherto they had been voiceless, needing all their breath for their efforts to break down the gates. But now, hearing him speak inside, they set up such a fierce unearthly groan, that even Mrs. Thornton was white with fear as she preceded him into the room. He came in a little flushed, but with his eyes gleaming, and a proud and noble look of defiance on his face.

Margaret had always dreaded lest her courage should fail her in any emergency, and she should be proved a coward. But now, in this real nearness of terror, she forgot herself, and felt only an intense sympathy in the interests of the moment.

Mr. Thornton came forwards. 'I'm sorry, Miss Hale, you have visited us at this unfortunate moment, when I fear you may be at risk. Mother! hadn't you better go into the back rooms? I'm not sure whether they have got into the stable-yard; but if not, you will be safer there than here.'

'I stop here!' said his mother. 'Where you are, I stay.' And indeed, retreat into the back rooms was useless; the crowd had surrounded the outbuildings, and were sending forth their awful threatening roar. The servants retreated up into the garrets, with many a cry. Mr. Thornton smiled scornfully as he heard them. He glanced at Margaret, standing at the window. Her eyes glittered; her colour was deepened. As if she felt his look, she turned to him and asked:

'Where are the poor imported work-people? In the factory there?'

'Yes! I left them cowering in a small room, at the top of a back flight of stairs; bidding them escape down there, if they heard any attack made on the mill-doors. But it is me they want.'

'When can the soldiers be here?' asked his mother, in a low but steady voice.

He took out his watch with measured composure. 'Supposing Williams managed to get straight off when I told him – it must be twenty minutes yet.'

'Twenty minutes!' said his mother, her voice showing her terror for the first time.

'Shut down the windows, mother. The gates won't bear such another shock. Shut down that window, Miss Hale.'

Margaret shut down her window, and went to assist Mrs. Thornton's trembling fingers.

There was a pause of several minutes in the unseen street. Mrs. Thornton looked with wild anxiety at her son's face, which was set into rigid lines of contemptuous defiance. Neither hope nor fear could be read there.

Fanny raised herself up. 'Are they gone?' she whispered.

'Listen!'

She listened. They all could hear the great straining breath; the creak of wood slowly yielding; the wrench of iron; the mighty fall of the gates. Fanny stood up tottering – and fell into her mother's arms in a fainting fit. Mrs. Thornton lifted her up with a strength that was as much that of the will as of the body, and carried her away.

'Thank God!' said Mr. Thornton, as he watched her out. 'Had you not better go upstairs, Miss Hale?'

Margaret's lips formed a 'No!' – but he could not hear her speak for the tramp of many steps right under the wall of the house, and the fierce growl of deep angry voices that had a ferocious murmur of satisfaction in them.

'I am very sorry you have been entrapped into all this alarm; but it cannot last long now; a few minutes more, and the soldiers will be here.'

'Oh, God!' cried Margaret, suddenly; 'there is Boucher. He is livid with rage, and fighting to get to the front – look! look!'

'Who is Boucher?' asked Mr. Thornton coolly, coming close to the window to see. As soon as the men saw him, they set up a yell like the demoniac desire of some terrible wild beast for the food that is withheld from his ravening. Even he drew back for a moment, dismayed at the intensity of hatred he had provoked.

'Let them yell!' said he. 'I only hope my poor Irishmen are not terrified out of their wits. Keep up your courage for five minutes, Miss Hale.'

'Don't worry about me,' she said hastily. 'But what in five minutes? Can you do nothing to soothe these poor creatures? It is awful to see them.'

‘The soldiers will be here directly, and that will bring them to reason.’

‘To reason!’ said Margaret, quickly. ‘What kind of reason?’

‘The only reason that works with men that make themselves into wild beasts. By heaven! they’ve turned to the mill-door!’

‘Mr. Thornton,’ said Margaret, shaking all over with passion, ‘go down this instant, if you are not a coward. Go down and face them like a man. Speak to your workmen as if they were human beings. Speak to them kindly. Don’t let the soldiers come in and cut down poor creatures who are driven mad. I see one there who is. If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man.’

He turned and looked at her, a dark cloud coming over his face. He set his teeth as he listened.

‘I will go. Perhaps I may ask you to accompany me downstairs, and bar the door behind me, for my family’s protection.’

‘Oh! Mr. Thornton! I do not know – I may be wrong – only—’

But he was gone downstairs; he had unbarred the front door; all she could do was to follow him quickly, and fasten it behind him, and clamber up the stairs again with a sick heart. Again she took her place by the window. He was on the steps below; she knew that by the direction of a thousand angry eyes; but she could neither see nor hear anything except the savage, rolling murmur.

She threw the window wide open. Many in the crowd were mere boys, cruel and thoughtless – cruel because they were thoughtless; some were men, gaunt as wolves, and mad for prey. She knew they were like Boucher, with starving children at home, enraged at discovering that Irishmen were brought in to rob their little ones of bread. Margaret knew it all; she read it in Boucher’s desperate face. If Mr. Thornton would only speak to them – it would be better than the stony silence that gave them no word, even of anger or reproach.

But perhaps he was speaking now; there was a momentary hush. She bent forwards to hear, but she could only see Mr. Thornton standing with his arms folded, still as a statue, his face pale with repressed excitement. They were trying to intimidate him – to make him flinch; each was urging the other on to some act of personal violence.

Margaret felt intuitively that in an instant all would be uproar. The first touch would cause an explosion, in which even Mr. Thornton’s life would be unsafe – in another instant, the stormy passions would have passed their bounds, and swept away all barriers of reason. Even while she looked, she saw lads at the back stooping to take off their heavy wooden clogs – the readiest missiles they could find. She saw it was the spark to the gunpowder, and with a cry, she rushed out of the room, down the stairs – had lifted the great iron bar of the door with imperious force – had thrown the door open – and was there, facing that angry sea of men, her eyes smiting them with reproach.

The clogs were arrested in the hands that held them. The faces looked irresolute, as if asking what this meant. For she stood between them and their enemy. She could not speak, but held out her arms towards them till she could recover breath.

‘Oh, do not use violence! He is one man, and you are many’; but her words died away, for her voice was only a hoarse whisper. Mr. Thornton moved away from behind her, as if jealous of anything that should come between him and danger.

‘Go!’ said she, once more (and now her voice was like a cry). ‘The soldiers are sent for – are coming. Go peaceably. You shall have relief from your complaints, whatever they are.’

‘Shall them Irish blackguards be packed back again?’ asked one of the crowd fiercely.

‘Never, for your bidding!’ exclaimed Mr. Thornton.

Instantly the storm broke. Hootings rose and filled the air, but Margaret did not hear them. Her eye was on the lads who had armed themselves with their clogs. She saw their gesture – she knew its meaning – she read their aim. Another moment, and Mr. Thornton might be smitten down – he whom she had urged to come to this perilous place.

She only thought how she could save him. She threw her arms around him; she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond. Still, with his arms folded, he shook her off.

‘Go away,’ said he, in his deep voice. ‘This is no place for you.’

‘It is!’ said she. ‘You did not see what I saw.’ If she thought her sex would be a protection, and that the men would slink away, then she was wrong. Their reckless passion had carried them too far to stop – at least had carried some of them too far; for it is always the reckless savage lads, with their love of cruel excitement, who head the riot. A clog whizzed through the air. Margaret’s fascinated eyes watched; it missed its aim, and she turned sick with fright, but did not move, only hid her face on Mr. Thornton’s arm. Then she turned and spoke again, trying to make her voice distinct:

‘For God’s sake! do not damage your cause by this violence. You do not know what you are doing.’

A sharp pebble flew by her, grazing forehead and cheek, and drawing a blinding sheet of light before her eyes. She lay like one dead on Mr. Thornton’s shoulder. Then he unfolded his arms, and held her encircled in one for an instant:

‘You do well!’ said he. ‘You fall – you hundreds – on one man; and when a woman comes before you, to ask you for your own sakes to be reasonable, your cowardly wrath falls upon *her*! You do well!’

They were silent, watching – open-eyed and open-mouthed – the thread of dark-red blood which wakened them from their trance of passion. Those nearest the gate stole out ashamed; there was a retreating movement through all the crowd. Only one voice cried out:

‘Th’ stone were meant for thee; but thou wert sheltered behind a woman!’

Mr. Thornton quivered with rage. Margaret was dimly conscious. He placed her gently on the door-step, her head leaning against the frame.

‘Can you rest there?’ he asked. But without waiting for her answer, he went slowly down the steps right into the middle of the crowd. ‘Now kill me, if you wish. There is no woman to shield me here. You may beat me to death – but you will never move me from what I have determined upon!’ He stood amongst them with his arms folded, in precisely the same attitude as he had been in on the steps.

But the withdrawal towards the gate had begun. Perhaps it was the idea of the soldiers’ approach; perhaps the sight of that pale, upturned face, with closed eyes, though the tears welled beneath the long eyelashes; and, heavier, slower than tears, came the drip of blood from her wound. Even the most desperate faltered, scowled, and finally went off, muttering curses on the master, who stood in his unchanging attitude. The moment the retreat had changed into a flight, he darted up the steps to Margaret. She tried to rise.

‘It is nothing,’ she said, with a sickly smile. ‘The skin is grazed, and I was stunned for the moment. Oh, I am so thankful they are gone!’ And she cried without restraint.

He could not sympathise with her. His anger had not abated; it was rather rising as the immediate danger passed. The distant clank of the soldiers was heard, five minutes too late to make this vanished mob feel the power of authority. He hoped they would see the troops, and be quelled by the thought of their narrow escape.

While these thoughts crossed his mind, Margaret clung to the doorpost to steady herself: but a film came over her eyes – he was only just in time to catch her.

‘Mother!’ cried he; ‘Come down – they are gone, and Miss Hale is hurt!’ He bore her into the dining-room, and laid her on the sofa there. Looking on her pure white face, the sense of what she was to him came upon him so keenly that he spoke it out in his pain:

‘Oh, my Margaret – my Margaret! no one can tell what you are to me! Cold as you lie there, you are the only woman I ever loved!’ Inarticulately as he spoke, kneeling by her, he started up, ashamed of himself, as his mother came in. She saw nothing but her son, a little paler and sterner than usual.

‘Miss Hale is hurt, mother. A stone has grazed her temple. She has lost a good deal of blood, I’m afraid.’

‘She looks very seriously hurt,’ said Mrs. Thornton, alarmed.

‘It is only a fainting-fit. She has spoken to me since.’ But all the blood in his body seemed to rush inwards to his heart as he spoke, and he trembled.

‘Go and call Jane,’ she said, ‘and you go to your Irish people, who are crying and shouting, mad with fright.’

He went away as if weights were tied to every limb. He called the servant, and his sister. Margaret should have womanly care. But every pulse beat in him as he remembered how she had placed herself in foremost danger – could it be to save him? At the time, he had pushed her aside, and spoken gruffly; he had seen nothing but the unnecessary danger she had placed herself in.

He went to his Irish people, with every nerve in his body thrilling at the thought of her, and found it difficult to understand enough of what they were saying to soothe away their fears. They declared they would not stay; they wanted to be sent back. And so he had to think, and talk, and reason.

Mrs. Thornton bathed Margaret’s temples with eau de Cologne. As it touched the wound, which till then neither Mrs. Thornton nor Jane had perceived, Margaret opened her eyes; but it was evident she did not know where she was, nor who they were. The lips quivered, and she became insensible once more.

‘She has had a terrible blow,’ said Mrs. Thornton. ‘Is there anyone who will go for a doctor?’

‘Not me, ma’am, if you please,’ said Jane, shrinking back. ‘Them rabble may be all about; I don’t think the cut is so deep as it looks.’

‘I will not run the chance. She was hurt in our house. If you are a coward, Jane, I will go. You will not be afraid to stay in this house,’ Mrs. Thornton asked contemptuously, ‘and go on bathing Miss Hale’s forehead, shall you?’

She went first to the room in which she had left Fanny on the bed. Fanny started up as her mother entered.

‘Oh, mamma, how you terrified me! I thought you were a man that had got into the house.’

‘Nonsense! The men are all gone away. There are soldiers everywhere, now it is too late. Miss Hale is lying on the dining-room sofa badly hurt. I am going for the doctor.’

‘Oh! don’t, mamma! they’ll murder you.’ She clung to her mother’s gown. Mrs. Thornton wrenched it away.

‘That girl must not bleed to death.’

‘Bleed! oh, how horrid! How has she got hurt?’

‘I don’t know; I have no time to ask. Go down to her, Fanny, and do try to make yourself of use. Jane is with her; and I trust it looks worse than it is. Jane has refused to leave the house, cowardly woman! So I am going myself.’

‘Oh, dear!’ said Fanny, crying with the thought of wounds and bloodshed in the house.

‘Oh, Jane!’ said she, creeping into the dining-room, ‘how did she get hurt? How white she looks! Did they throw stones into the drawing-room?’

Margaret did indeed look white and wan, although her senses were beginning to return. But she still felt sick and faint. She was conscious of movement around her, and of the eau de Cologne; but when they stopped bathing her head, she could neither move her eyes nor speak.

Jane answered Miss Thornton.

‘She’d have been safe enough, miss, if she’d stayed in the drawing-room; we were in the front garret, and could see it all.’

‘Where was she, then?’ said Fanny.

‘Just before the front door – with master!’ said Jane, significantly.

‘With John! How did she get there?’

‘Nay, miss, that’s not for me to say,’ answered Jane, with a slight toss of her head. ‘Sarah did—’

‘Sarah what?’ said Fanny, with impatient curiosity, and then more sharply.

‘Sarah what? Don’t speak in these half sentences.’

‘Well, miss, Sarah says that she saw Miss Hale with her arms about master’s neck, hugging him before all the people.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ said Fanny. ‘I know she cares for my brother; any one can see that; and I dare say, she’d give her eyes if he’d marry her – which he never will, I can tell her. But I don’t believe she’d be so bold as to put her arms round his neck.’

‘Poor young lady! she’s paid for it dearly if she did. It’s my belief that she won’t recover. She looks like a corpse.’

‘Oh, I wish mamma would come!’ said Fanny, wringing her hands. ‘I never was in the room with a dead person before.’

‘Stay, miss! She’s not dead: her eyelids are quivering, and here’s tears a-coming down her cheeks. Speak to her, Miss Fanny!’

‘Are you better now?’ asked Fanny, in a quavering voice.

No answer; no sign of recognition; but a faint pink colour returned to her lips, although the rest of her face was ashen pale.

Mrs. Thornton came hurriedly in, with the nearest surgeon she could find. ‘How is she? Are you better, my dear?’ Margaret opened her filmy eyes, and gazed dreamily at her. ‘Here is Mr. Lowe come to see you.’ Mrs. Thornton spoke loudly and distinctly, as to a deaf person.

Margaret tried to rise, and drew her ruffled hair instinctively over the cut.

'I am better now,' said she, in a very low voice. 'I was a little sick.' She let the doctor take her hand and feel her pulse. When he asked to examine the wound in her forehead, she shrank from the inspection.

'It is not much, I think. I am better now. I must go home.'

'Not until I have applied some strips of plaster; and you have rested a little.'

She sat down, and allowed it to be bound up. 'Now, if you please,' said she, 'I must go. Mamma will not see it, I think. It is under the hair, is it not?'

'Quite; no one could tell.'

'But you are not fit to go,' said Mrs. Thornton.

'I must,' said Margaret, decidedly. 'Think of mamma. If they should hear – I cannot stay here. May I ask for a cab?'

'You are quite flushed and feverish,' observed Mr. Lowe.

'It is only because I do so want to go. The air would do me more good than anything.'

Mr. Lowe spoke to Mrs. Thornton. 'If her mother is so ill as you told me on the way here, it may be very serious if she hears of this riot, and does not see her daughter back at the time she expects. The injury is not deep. I will fetch a cab.'

'Oh, thank you!' said Margaret. She leant back on the sofa, and closed her eyes.

Fanny beckoned her mother out of the room, and told her something that made her equally anxious for Margaret to leave. Not that she fully believed Fanny's statement; but she believed enough to make her manner to Margaret appear very much constrained.

Mr. Lowe returned with the cab, saying, 'If you will allow me, I will see you home, Miss Hale. The streets are not quiet yet.'

Margaret thought only of getting home without alarming her father and mother. Beyond that aim she would not look. That ugly dream of insolent words spoken about herself could be put aside till she was stronger – for, oh! she was very weak; and her mind sought for some fact to steady itself upon, and keep it from utterly losing consciousness in another hideous, sickly swoon.

CHAPTER 23

MISTAKES

Margaret had not been gone five minutes when Mr. Thornton came in, his face aglow.

‘I could not come sooner: the superintendent would – where is she?’ He looked round the dining-room, and then almost fiercely at his mother. ‘Where is Miss Hale?’

‘Gone home,’ said she, rather shortly.

‘Gone home!’

‘Yes. She was a great deal better. Indeed, I don’t believe it was much of a hurt; only some people faint at the least thing.’

‘I am sorry she is gone home,’ said he, uneasily. ‘She could not have been fit for it.’

‘She said she was; and Mr. Lowe said she was. I went for him myself.’

‘Thank you, mother.’

‘What have you done with your Irish people?’

‘Sent to the Dragon for a good meal for them, poor wretches. And I’ve asked Father Grady in to speak to them, and dissuade them from going off. How did Miss Hale go home? I’m sure she could not walk.’

‘She had a cab. Let us talk of something else. She has caused disturbance enough.’

‘I don’t know where I should have been but for her.’

‘Are you become so helpless as to have to be defended by a girl?’ asked Mrs. Thornton, scornfully.

He reddened. ‘Not many girls would have taken the blows on herself which were meant for me.’

‘A girl in love will do a good deal,’ replied Mrs. Thornton.

‘Mother!’ He made a step forwards; stood still; heaved with passion.

She was a little startled at the evident force he used to keep himself calm. She was not sure of the nature of the emotions she had provoked. Anger? His eyes glowed, his breath came thick and fast. It was a mixture of joy, anger, pride, of glad surprise, of panting doubt; but she could not read it. Still it made her uneasy. She went to the sideboard, keeping her back turned to her son much longer than was necessary; and when she spoke, her voice seemed unusual and constrained.

‘You have taken some steps about the rioters, I suppose? Where were the police? Never at hand when they’re wanted!’

‘On the contrary, I saw three or four of them, when the gates gave way, beating about in fine fashion; and more came running up just when the yard was clearing.’

‘But won’t the rioters come back tonight?’

‘I’m going to see about a guard for the premises. I am to meet Captain Hanbury in half an hour.’

‘You must have some tea first.’

‘Tea! Yes, I suppose I must. I may be out for some time. Don’t sit up for me, mother.’

‘You expect me to go to bed before I have seen you safe, do you?’

‘Well, perhaps not.’ He hesitated for a moment. ‘But if I’ve time, I shall go round by Crampton, after I’ve arranged with the police and seen Hamper and Clarkson.’ Their eyes met. Then she asked:

‘Why are you going round by Crampton?’

‘To ask after Miss Hale.’

‘I will send a servant. Williams must take the water-bed she came to ask for. He shall inquire how she is.’

‘I must go myself. I want to thank her for the way in which she stood between me and the mob.’

‘What made you go down at all? It was putting your head into the lion’s mouth!’

He glanced sharply at her; saw that she did not know what had passed between him and Margaret in the drawing-room; and replied with another question:

‘Shall you be afraid to be left without me until the police arrive, or had we better send Williams for them now? There’s no time to be lost. I must be off in a quarter of an hour.’

Mrs. Thornton left the room. Her servants wondered at her directions, usually so sharply-cut and decided, now confused and uncertain.

Mr. Thornton remained in the dining-room, thinking of Margaret. Everything seemed dim and vague beyond the touch of her arms round his neck – the soft clinging which made the dark colour come and go in his cheek as he thought of it.

The tea would have been very silent, but for Fanny’s perpetual description of her own feelings; how she had been alarmed – and thought they were gone – and then felt sick and faint and trembling.

‘That’s enough,’ said her brother, rising from the table. ‘The reality was enough for me.’ He was going to leave the room, when his mother stopped him.

‘You will come back here before you go to the Hales’,’ said she, in a low voice.

‘I know what I know,’ said Fanny to herself.

‘Why?’

‘John, come back to me this evening. It will be late for Mrs. Hale. But that is not it. Come back tonight, John!’ She had seldom pleaded with her son at all; she was too proud.

‘I will return straight here after I have done my business,’ said he. ‘You will be sure to inquire after them? – after her?’

Mrs. Thornton was by no means a talkative companion to Fanny that day, nor a good listener. But on her son’s return, she was keen to hear him list the steps he had taken to secure himself from any repetition of the day’s outrages. He clearly saw his object. Punishment and suffering were the natural consequences to the rioters. That was necessary, in order that property should be protected, and that the will of the proprietor might cut as clean and sharp as a sword.

‘Mother! You know what I have got to say to Miss Hale, tomorrow?’

She looked up at him. ‘Yes, I do. You can hardly do otherwise.’

‘Do otherwise! I don’t understand you.’

‘I mean that, after allowing her feelings so to overcome her, I consider you bound in honour—’

‘Bound in honour,’ said he, scornfully. ‘I’m afraid honour has nothing to do with it. “Her feelings overcome her!” What feelings do you mean?’

‘John, there is no need to be angry. Did she not rush down, and cling to you to save you from danger?’

‘She did! But, mother,’ continued he, stopping in front of her, ‘I dare not hope. I never was fainthearted before; but I cannot believe such a creature cares for me.’

‘Don’t be foolish, John. Why, she might be a duke’s daughter, to hear you speak. And what proof more would you have of her caring for you? I can believe she felt herself too aristocratic for you; but I like her the better for seeing clearly at last. It is a good deal for me to say,’ said Mrs. Thornton, smiling slowly, with tears in her eyes; ‘for after tonight, I stand second with you. It was to have you to myself for a few hours longer, that I begged you not to go till tomorrow!’

‘Dearest mother! But I know she does not care for me. I shall put myself at her feet – I must. If it were but one chance in a thousand – or a million – I should do it.’

‘Don’t fear!’ said his mother, crushing down her mortification at the little notice he had taken of her rare outburst of maternal feeling. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ she said, coldly. ‘As far as love goes she may be worthy of you. It must have taken a good deal to overcome her pride.’

Kissing him, she wished him good-night, and went slowly and majestically out of the room. But once in her own room, she locked the door, and sat down to cry unwonted tears.

Margaret, on arriving home, had entered looking very pale and white. She came close up to her parents before she could trust herself to speak.

‘Mrs. Thornton will send the water-bed, mamma.’

‘Dear, how tired you look! Is it very hot, Margaret?’

‘Very hot, and the streets are rather rough with the strike.’

‘There has been a message from Bessy Higgins, asking you to go to her,’ said Mrs. Hale. ‘But I’m sure you look too tired.’

‘Yes!’ said Margaret. ‘I am tired, I cannot go.’

She was very silent and trembling while she made tea. She was thankful to see her father so much occupied with her mother as not to notice her looks. When her mother went to bed, he undertook to read her to sleep. Margaret was alone.

‘Now I will think of it – now I will remember it all. I could not before – I dared not.’ She sat still in her chair, her hands clasped on her knees, her eyes fixed as one who sees a vision. She drew a deep breath.

‘I, who hate scenes – who have despised people for showing emotion – who have thought them wanting in self-control – I must needs throw myself into the melee, like a romantic fool! Did I do any good? They would have gone away without me, I dare say.’ But this was over-leaping the rational conclusion, as in an instant her well-poised judgement felt.

‘No, perhaps they would not. I did some good. But what possessed me to defend that man as if he were a helpless child! Ah!’ said she, clenching her hands together, ‘it is no wonder those people thought I was in love with him, after disgracing myself in that way. I, in love – and with him too!’ Her pale cheeks suddenly became one flame of fire; and she covered her face with her hands. When she took them away, her palms were wet with tears.

‘Oh, how low I am fallen that they should say that of me! I could be so brave for him, just because he was so utterly indifferent to me – if, indeed, I do not positively dislike him. It made me anxious that there should be fair play on each side; and it was not fair,’ said she, vehemently, ‘that he should stand there awaiting the soldiers, who might catch those poor maddened creatures as in a trap – without any effort on his part to bring them to reason. And it was worse than unfair for them to

attack him. I would do it again. If I saved one blow, one cruel, angry action, I did a woman's work. Let them insult me as they will – I walk pure before God!

She looked up, and a noble peace seemed to calm her face.

Dixon came in. 'If you please, Miss Margaret, here's the water-bed from Mrs. Thornton's. It's too late for tonight, I'm afraid, for missus is nearly asleep: but it will do nicely for tomorrow.'

'You must send our best thanks.'

'If you please, Miss Margaret, he says he's to ask particular how you are. I think he must mean missus; but he says to ask how Miss Hale was.'

'Me!' said Margaret, drawing herself up. 'Tell him I am perfectly well.' But her complexion was as white as her handkerchief; and her head ached intensely.

Mr. Hale now came in. He had left his sleeping wife; and wanted, as Margaret saw, to be amused. With sweet patience she bore her pain, without a word of complaint, and rummaged up numberless small subjects for conversation – all except the riot, for it turned her sick to think of it.

'Good-night, Margaret. You are looking very pale. Do go to bed and sleep like a top; for I'm sure you need it, poor child!'

'Good-night, papa.'

She let the forced smile fade away, releasing her strong will from its laborious task. She lay down and never stirred. To move hand or foot, or even one finger, would have been beyond her power. She was so tired, so stunned, that she thought she never slept at all; her feverish thoughts passed and repassed the boundary between sleeping and waking, and kept their own miserable identity. A cloud of faces looked up at her, giving her a deep sense of shame – a sense so acute that she would fain have burrowed into the earth to hide herself, and yet she could not escape that unwinking glare of many eyes.

CHAPTER 24

MISTAKES CLEARED UP

The next morning, Margaret dragged herself up, thankful that the night was over – unrefreshed, yet rested. A little breeze was stirring in the hot air, and she knew how, somewhere or other, in thick green woods, there would be a pleasant, murmuring, dancing sound; the thought was an echo of distant gladness in her heart.

She sat at her work in Mrs. Hale's room. As soon as her mother's morning slumber was over, she would help her to dress; after dinner, she would go and see Bessy Higgins. She would banish all recollection of the Thornton family. But, of course, the effort not to think of them brought them only the more strongly before her; and from time to time, the hot flush came over her pale face, sweeping it into colour, like a sunbeam swiftly moving over the sea.

Dixon opened the door softly.

'Mr. Thornton, Miss Margaret. He is in the drawing-room.'

Margaret dropped her sewing.

'Did he ask for me? Isn't papa in?'

'He asked for you, miss; and master is out.'

'Very well, I will come,' said Margaret, quietly. But she lingered.

Mr. Thornton stood by one of the windows, apparently absorbed in watching something in the street. In truth, he was afraid of himself. His heart beat thick at the thought of her coming. He could not forget the touch of her arms around his neck, impatient as he had been at the time; but now the recollection of her clinging defence seemed to thrill him through and through – to melt away all power of self-control, like wax before a fire. He dreaded lest he should go forwards to meet her with his arms held out in mute entreaty. His heart throbbed loud and quick. Strong man as he was, he trembled at the anticipation of what he had to say, and how it might be received. She might flush, and flutter to his arms, as to her natural home. Or she might respond with a passionate rejection, the very idea of which withered up his future with so deadly a blight that he refused to think of it.

He was startled by the sense of a presence in the room. She had come in so gently that he had never heard her.

She stood by the table. Her eyelids were dropped half over her eyes; her lips were just parted, allowing the white line of teeth to be seen between their curve. The fine-grained skin, the oval cheek, the rich outline of her mouth, its corners deep set in dimples – all were wan and pale today, under the heavy shadow of the dark hair, brought down to hide all sign of the blow she had received. Her head was thrown a little back, in the old proud attitude. Her long arms hung motionless. Altogether she looked like some prisoner, falsely accused of a crime that she despised.

Mr. Thornton made a hasty step or two forwards; recovered himself, and went with quiet firmness to the door and shut it. Then he stood opposite to her for a moment, receiving the general impression of her beautiful presence, before he dared to disturb it, perhaps to repel it, by what he had to say.

'Miss Hale, I was very ungrateful yesterday—'

‘You had nothing to be grateful for,’ said she, raising her eyes, and looking full and straight at him. ‘You mean, I suppose, that you believe you ought to thank me for what I did.’ In spite of her anger, the blushes burnt her face; but her eyes kept their grave and steady look. ‘It was only a natural instinct; any woman would have done the same. I ought rather to apologise to you, for having said thoughtless words which sent you down into the danger.’

‘It was not your words; it was the truth they conveyed. But you shall not so escape the expression of my deep gratitude, my—’ he was on the verge now; yet he would not speak in the haste of his hot passion; he would weigh each word. He stopped in mid career.

‘I do not try to escape from anything,’ said she. ‘I simply say, that you owe me no gratitude; and I do not feel that I deserve it. Still, if it will relieve you from even a fancied obligation, speak on.’

‘I do not want to be relieved from any obligation,’ said he, goaded by her calm manner. ‘I choose to believe that I owe my very life to you – aye, smile, and think it an exaggeration if you will. I believe it, because it adds a value to that life to think – oh, Miss Hale!’ His voice held such a tender intensity of passion that she shivered. ‘Henceforward, I may say to myself, “All this gladness in life, all honest pride in doing my work in the world, all this keen sense of being, I owe to her!” And it doubles the gladness, it makes the pride glow, it sharpens the sense of existence till I hardly know if it is pain or pleasure, to think that I owe it to one – nay, you must, you shall hear – to one whom I love, as I do not believe man ever loved woman before.’

He held her hand tight in his, listening for what should come – and threw the hand away with indignation, as he heard her icy tone. For icy it was, though the words came faltering.

‘Your way of speaking shocks me. It is blasphemous. I cannot help it, if that is my first feeling. It might not be so, I dare say, if I understood the kind of feeling you describe. I do not want to vex you; and we must speak gently, for mamma is asleep; but your whole manner offends me—’

‘How!’ exclaimed he. ‘Offends you!’

‘Yes!’ said she, with recovered dignity. ‘I do feel offended; and, I think, justly. You seem to fancy that my conduct of yesterday’ – again the deep blush, but this time with eyes kindling with indignation rather than shame – ‘was a personal act; and that you may come and thank me for it, instead of perceiving, as a gentleman would, that any woman worthy of the name of woman would come forward and use her helplessness to shield a man in danger from the violence of a mob.’

‘And the gentleman is forbidden the relief of thanks!’ he broke in contemptuously. ‘I am a man. I claim the right of expressing my feelings.’

‘And I yielded to the right,’ she replied, proudly. ‘But you seem to have imagined, that I was not merely guided by womanly instinct, but’ – and here the passionate tears came up at last into her eyes, and choked her voice – ‘but that I was prompted by some particular feeling for you – for you! Why, there was not a poor desperate man in all that crowd for whom I had not more sympathy.’

‘Miss Hale, I am aware of all these misplaced sympathies of yours. I now believe that it was only your innate sense of oppression (yes; I, though a master, may be oppressed) that made you act so nobly as you did. I know you despise me; but it is because you do not understand me.’

‘I do not care to understand,’ she replied, taking hold of the table to steady herself; for she thought him cruel, and she was weak with indignation.

‘No, I see you do not. You are unfair and unjust.’

Margaret compressed her lips. She would not speak in answer. But, for all his savage words, he could have thrown himself at her feet. She did not speak; she did not move. Her tears of wounded pride fell hot and fast. He waited awhile, longing for her to say something, even a taunt, to which he might reply. But she was silent. He took up his hat.

‘One word more. You look as if you thought it tainted you to be loved by me. I cannot cleanse you from it. But I would not, if I could. I have never loved any woman before: my life has been too busy, my thoughts too much absorbed. Now I love, and will love. But do not be afraid of too much expression on my part.’

‘I am not afraid,’ she replied, lifting herself straight up. ‘No one yet has ever dared to be impertinent to me, and no one ever shall. But, Mr. Thornton, you have been very kind to my father,’ said she, changing her whole tone to a most womanly softness. ‘Don’t let us go on making each other angry. Pray don’t!’

He took no notice of her words: he occupied himself in smoothing his hat with his coat-sleeve; and then, rejecting her offered hand, and acting as if he did not see her grave look of regret, he turned abruptly away, and left the room. Margaret caught one glance at his face before he went.

She thought she had seen the gleam of unshed tears in his eyes; and that turned her proud dislike into something different and kinder: self-reproach for having caused such pain.

‘But how could I help it?’ she asked herself. ‘I never liked him. I was civil; but I did not conceal my indifference to him. About yesterday, he might mistake. But that is his fault, not mine. I would do it again, if need were, though it does lead me into all this shame and trouble.’

CHAPTER 25

FREDERICK

Margaret began to wonder whether all offers were as unexpected and distressing as the two she had had. She compared Mr. Lennox and Mr. Thornton in her mind. When Mr. Lennox proposed, her main feeling had been regret that he had expressed a feeling other than friendship. She had not felt so stunned – so impressed as she did now, when echoes of Mr. Thornton's voice yet lingered about the room.

In Lennox's case, he seemed for a moment to have slid over the boundary between friendship and love; and the instant afterwards, to regret it nearly as much as she did. In Mr. Thornton's case there was no stage of friendship, only opposition. Their opinions clashed; and indeed, she had never perceived that he had cared for her opinions. He seemed to throw them off with contempt, until she felt weary of the exertion of making useless protests; and now he had come, in this strange wild passionate way, to make known his love.

For, although at first it had struck her that his offer was forced out of him by sharp compassion for the exposure she had made of herself – which he, like others, might misunderstand – yet five minutes after, the clear conviction dawned upon her that he *did* love her. And she shrank and shuddered as under the fascination of some great power, repugnant to her whole previous life. She crept away and hid from the idea, but in vain.

She disliked him the more for having mastered her inner will. How dared he say that he would love her still, even though she shook him off? She wished she had spoken more strongly. Sharp, decisive speeches came into her mind, now that it was too late to say them. The deep impression made by the interview was like that of a horror in a dream, that will not leave when we waken. It is there, cowering with fixed ghastly eyes, in some corner of the room, listening to hear whether we dare to breathe of its presence to anyone. And we dare not!

And so she shuddered away from the threat of his enduring love. What did he mean? Had she not the power to daunt him? She would see. Did he base his vow upon yesterday? If need were, she would do the same tomorrow, for a crippled beggar, or for him, in spite of his deductions; because it was right to try to save where she could save.

Hitherto she had not stirred. Nothing had roused her out of the trance of thought in which she had been plunged by his words, and the look of his deep intent passionate eyes. Now she went to the window, and threw it open, and opened the door, with an impetuous wish to shake off the recollection of the past hour. But all was profoundly hushed in the noonday stillness of the invalid's house. Margaret did not wish to be alone. What should she do?

'Go and see Bessy Higgins, of course,' thought she; and away she went.

When she got there, she found Bessy lying on the settle close to the fire, though the day was warm and oppressive. She was laid down flat, as if resting after some paroxysm of pain. Margaret felt sure she would breathe more easily in a sitting posture; and she raised her up, and arranged the pillows, until Bessy was more at ease, though very languid.

'I thought I should na' ha' seen yo' again,' said she, wistfully.

'I'm afraid you're much worse. But I could not come yesterday, my mother was so ill – and other reasons,' said Margaret, colouring.

'Yo' may think I went beyond my place in sending Mary for yo'. But the wranglin' and the loud voices had just torn me to pieces, and when father left, I thought oh! if I could just hear her voice, reading me some words o' peace, I could die away into the silence o' God, like a babby is hushed to sleep by its mother's lullaby.'

'Shall I read you a chapter, now?'

'Ay, do! Happen I shan't listen to th' sense, at first; but when yo' come to th' comforting texts, it'll seem close in my ear, and going through me as it were.'

Margaret began. Bessy tossed to and fro. If she attended for one moment, she was convulsed into restlessness the next. At last, she burst out:

'Don't go on reading. It's no use. I'm blaspheming all the time in my mind, thinking angrily on what canna be helped. Yo' heard of th' riot yesterday at Marlborough Mills?'

'Your father was not there, was he?' said Margaret, colouring deeply.

'Not he. He'd ha' given his right hand if it had never come to pass. It's that that's fretting me. He's fairly knocked down in his mind by it. It's no use telling him, fools will always break out o' bounds. Yo' never saw a man so down-hearted.'

'But why?' asked Margaret.

'Yo' see, he's a committee-man on this strike. Th' Union appointed him because he's reckoned true to th' back-bone. And he and t'other committee-men laid their plans, to hold together through thick and thin; what the major part thought, t'others were to think, whether they would or no. And above all there was to be no going again the law of the land. Folk would go with them if they saw them striving patiently; but if there was any fighting, all was up, as they knew from many a time before. The Committee charged all members o' th' Union not to strike a blow; they didn't want to have right mixed up wi' wrong.

'Well, yo' just think what it must be for father to have his work undone, and by such a fool as Boucher, who must needs go right again the orders of Committee, and ruin th' strike as if he meant to be a Judas. Eh! but father giv'd it him last night! He even said he'd go and tell police where they might find th' ringleader; he'd give him up to th' mill-owners to do what they would wi' him. He'd show the world that th' real leaders o' the strike were not such as Boucher, but steady thoughtful men; good hands, and good citizens, who would uphold order; who only wanted their right wages, and would ne'er injure property or life. For they do say, that Boucher threw a stone at Thornton's sister, that nearly killed her.'

'That's not true,' said Margaret, flushing. 'It was not Boucher that threw the stone.'

'Yo'd be there then, were yo'?' asked Bessy languidly.

'Yes. Never mind. Go on. What did Boucher answer to your father?'

'He did na' speak. He were all in such a tremble, I could na' bear to look at him. I heard his breath coming quick, and at one time I thought he were sobbing. But when father said he'd give him up to the police, he gave a great cry, and struck father on th' face wi' his fist, and be off like lightning. Father were stunned wi' the blow at first. He sat down, and put his hand afore his eyes; and then made for th' door. I dunno' where I got strength, but I threw mysel' off th' settle and clung to him.

'Father, father!' said I. 'Thou'll never go tell on that poor clemmed man. I'll never leave go, till thou sayst thou wunnot.' 'Dunnot be a fool,' says he. 'I never thought

o' telling th' police on him; though by G—, he deserves it. But if ever he gets well o'er this clemming, he and I'll have a fight." And father shook me off, and his face was all clay white, where it weren't bloody, and turned me sick to look at.

'And I know not if I slept or waked, or were in a dead swoon, till Mary come in; and I telled her to fetch yo'. And now dunnot talk to me, but just read. I'm easier in my mind for having spit it out; but I want some thoughts of the world that's far away to take the weary taste of it out o' my mouth. Read me a story chapter; read about the New Heavens, and the New Earth; and 'appen I'll forget this.'

Margaret read in her soft low voice. Though Bessy's eyes were shut, she was listening, for tears gathered heavy on her eyelashes. At last she slept, with many starts, and muttered pleadings. Margaret covered her up, and left her, uneasily aware that she might be wanted at home; and yet it seemed cruel to leave the dying girl.

Mrs. Hale was in the drawing-room on her daughter's return. It was one of her better days, and she was full of praises of the water-bed. It was like the feather-beds of her youth at Sir John Beresford's.

'Margaret,' she said, 'are the beds today comfortable? Don't you toss about, and try in vain to find an easy position, and waken in the morning as tired as when you went to bed?'

Margaret laughed. 'To tell the truth, mamma, I've never thought about my bed at all. If I lie down anywhere, I go to sleep directly. But then, you know, I never tried Sir John Beresford's beds. I never was at Oxenham.'

'Were not you? Oh, no! to be sure. It was poor darling Fred I took with me to your Aunt Shaw's wedding. But poor baby Fred was taken ill at Oxenham, with his teething, and Dixon had charge of him; and it made her so fond of him that she was proud when he would turn away from everyone and cling to her. Poor Fred! Everybody loved him. He was born with the gift of winning hearts. It makes me think very badly of Captain Reid when I know that he disliked my own dear boy. It proves he had a bad heart. Ah! Your poor father has left the room, Margaret. He can't bear to hear Fred spoken of.'

'I love to hear about him, mamma. Tell me what he was like as a baby.'

'Why, Margaret, you must not be hurt, but he was much prettier than you were. I remember, when I first saw you in Dixon's arms, I said, "Dear, what an ugly little thing!" And she said, "It's not every child that's like Master Fred, bless him!" How well I remember it. I could have had Fred in my arms every minute of the day, and his cot was by my bed; and now – I don't know where my boy is, and sometimes I think I shall never see him again.'

Margaret sat down by her mother, and softly took her hand, caressing and kissing it. Mrs. Hale cried without restraint. At last she sat up, and said with tearful earnestness, 'Margaret, if I can get better, it must be through seeing Frederick once more.'

She paused to gather strength; as she went on, her voice was choked and quavering.

'And, Margaret, if I am to die – I must see my child first. I cannot think how it may be managed; but, Margaret, bring him to me so that I may bless him. Only for five minutes. There could be no danger in five minutes. Oh, Margaret, let me see him before I die!'

We do not look for reason or logic in the passionate entreaties of the dying; if they ask us for the future happiness of our lives, we lay it at their feet. But this wish of Mrs. Hale's was so natural, so just, that Margaret felt as if she ought to overlook

any danger, and pledge to do everything in her power to fulfil it. The large, pleading eyes were fixed upon her wistfully, and the poor white lips quivered like a child's. Margaret gently rose up and faced her frail mother with calm steadiness.

'Mamma, I will write tonight, and tell Frederick what you say. I am sure that he will come directly to us.'

'You will write tonight? Oh, Margaret! the post goes at five – I have so few hours left. Don't lose a single post.'

'But, mamma, papa is gone out.'

'What of it? Do you mean that he would deny me this last wish, Margaret? Why, I should not be ill if he had not taken me away from Helstone, to this unhealthy, smoky place.'

'Oh, mamma!'

'Yes; it is so, indeed. He knows it; he has said so many a time. He would do anything for me; he would not refuse me this last wish. Indeed, Margaret, I cannot pray till I have this one thing. Don't lose time, dear Margaret. Write by this very next post. Then he may be here in twenty-two days! For he is sure to come. In twenty-two days I shall see my boy.' She fell back, and for a short time took no notice of Margaret.

'You are not writing!' she said at last. 'Bring me pens and paper; I will try and write myself.' She sat up, trembling with feverish eagerness. Margaret looked at her sadly.

'Only wait till papa comes in. Let us ask him how best to do it.'

'You promised, Margaret – you said he should come.'

'And so he shall; don't cry, my own dear mother. I'll write here, now – you shall see me write – and it shall go by this very post. If papa thinks fit, he can write again when he comes in; it is only a day's delay. Oh, mamma, don't cry so – it cuts me to the heart.'

In truth, Mrs. Hale made no effort to control her tears, but rather called up all the pictures of the happy past, and the sad future – when she might lie a corpse, with her son weeping over her – till she was melted by self-pity into a state of sobbing exhaustion. But at last she was calm, and greedily watched her daughter as she wrote the letter, and sealed it up hurriedly.

Margaret took it herself to the post-office. She was coming home when her father overtook her.

'And where have you been, my pretty maid?' asked he.

'To the post-office with a letter; a letter to Frederick. Oh, papa, perhaps I have done wrong: but mamma so longed to see him – she said it would make her well again – and she said that she must see him before she died. Did I do wrong?'

Mr. Hale did not reply at first. Then he said: 'I don't know. She ought to see him if she wishes it so much, for I believe it would do her more good than all the doctor's medicine; but the danger to him, I'm afraid, is very great.'

'All these years since the mutiny, papa?'

'Yes; the government must uphold authority in the navy, and avenge any injuries to its officers. Ah! it's no matter to them how far their authorities have tyrannised; they spare no expense, they scour the seas to lay hold of the offenders. The lapse of years does not wash out the memory of the offence. It is a fresh and vivid crime on the Admiralty books till it is blotted out by blood.'

'Oh, papa, what have I done! And yet it seemed so right at the time. I'm sure Frederick himself would run the risk.'

‘So he would! Nay, Margaret, I’m glad it is done. I would have hesitated myself, till, perhaps, it might have been too late. Dear Margaret, you have done what is right; and the end is beyond our control.’

It was all very well; but her father’s words made Margaret shiver. If she had decoyed her brother home to pay for his error by his blood! She saw her father was anxious. She took his arm and walked home pensively and wearily by his side.

CHAPTER 26

MOTHER AND SON

When Mr. Thornton had left the Hales' house that morning he was almost blinded by his baffled passion. He was as dizzy as if Margaret, instead of speaking like a tender graceful woman, had been a sturdy fish-wife, and given him a sound blow with her fists. He had a violent headache, and a throbbing pulse. He could not bear the noise, the garish light, the rumble and movement of the street. He called himself a fool for suffering so; and yet it would have been a relief if he could have sat down and cried on a door-step beside a little child who was raging and storming there.

He said to himself that he hated Margaret – but a wild, sharp sensation of love cleft his thunderous feeling like lightning, even as he shaped the words. His greatest comfort was in thinking that though she might despise him and treat him with proud indifference, he did not change one whit. She could not make him change. He loved her, and would love her; and defy her, and this miserable pain.

He stood still for a moment, to make this resolution firm and clear. There was an omnibus passing; the conductor thought he wished to get on, and stopped. It was too much trouble to apologise and explain, so he mounted upon it, and was borne away – past long rows of houses – then past detached villas with trim gardens, till they came to real country hedge-rows, and a small country town. Then everybody got down; and so did Mr. Thornton, and because they walked away he did so too.

He went into the fields, walking briskly to relieve his mind. He remembered the pitiful figure he must have cut; the absurd way in which he had gone and done the very thing he had told himself would be the most foolish thing in the world; and had met with exactly the result which he might have expected.

Was he bewitched by those beautiful eyes, that soft, half-open, sighing mouth which lay so close upon his shoulder only yesterday? He could not even shake off the recollection that she had been there; that her arms had been round him, once – if never again. He only caught glimpses of her nature; he did not understand her altogether. At one time she was so brave, and at another so timid; now so tender, and then so haughty. And then he thought over every time he had ever seen her, by way of finally forgetting her. Even this morning, how magnificent she had looked – her eyes flashing at the idea that she cared for him!

If Mr. Thornton was a fool in the morning, as he told himself twenty times, he did not grow much wiser in the afternoon. All that he gained in return for his omnibus ride was a conviction that there never could be anyone like Margaret; that she did not love him; but that she should never prevent him from loving her. And so he returned to the little market-place, and remounted the omnibus to Milton.

It was late in the afternoon when he was set down near his warehouse. He knew he had much work to do, after the commotion of the day before. He had to see his brother magistrates; he had to complete arrangements for the safety of his new Irish hands; he had to ensure they could not communicate with the discontented work-people of Milton. Last of all, he had to go home and meet his mother.

Mrs. Thornton had sat in the dining-room all day, every moment expecting the news of her son's acceptance by Miss Hale. She had braced herself up many a time, at some sudden noise; had caught up the half-dropped work, and begun to ply her needle

diligently, though unsteadily. Many times had the door opened, and somebody entered on some insignificant errand. Then her rigid face had relaxed into despondency.

She wrenched herself away from contemplating all the dreary changes that her son's marriage would bring; she forced her thoughts into the accustomed household grooves. The newly-married couple-to-be would need fresh stocks of linen; so Mrs. Thornton had clothes-baskets full of table-cloths and napkins brought in, and began to reckon up the store. Some were hers, and marked G. H. T. (for George and Hannah Thornton), and some were her son's, marked with his initials. Her own were old Dutch damask, exquisitely fine; they had been her pride when she was first married. Mrs. Thornton knit her brows, and pinched her lips tight, and carefully unpicked the G. H.

Still her son did not come. Doubtless he was with Miss Hale. The new love was displacing her already. A terrible pang of vain jealousy shot through her, forcing her to sit down; but in a moment, she was up again as straight as ever – a grim smile upon her face, ready for the door opening. Her triumphant son should never know the sore regret his mother felt at his marriage.

In all this, there was little thought of the future daughter-in-law as an individual. She was to be John's wife. She would take Mrs. Thornton's place as mistress of the house; all household plenty and comfort, all purple and fine linen, honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, would come as naturally as jewels on a king's robe. To be chosen by John would separate a kitchen-wench from the rest of the world.

And Miss Hale was not so bad. If she had been a Milton lass, Mrs. Thornton would have positively liked her. She had taste, and spirit, and flavour. True, she was sadly prejudiced, and very ignorant; but that was to be expected from her southern breeding. A strange sort of mortified comparison of Fanny with her, went on in Mrs. Thornton's mind; and for once she spoke harshly to her daughter. Then, by way of penance, she took up Henry's Bible Commentaries, and tried to fix her attention on it.

His step at last! Her quickened sense could interpret every sound: now he was at the hat-stand – now at the very room-door. Why did he pause?

Yet her head was still down over the book. He came close to the table, and stood there, waiting till she should have finished her paragraph. With an effort she looked up.

'Well, John?'

He had steeled himself. He longed to reply with a jest; the bitterness of his heart could have uttered one, but his mother deserved better of him. He came round behind her, so that she could not see his looks, and, bending back her grey, stony face, he kissed it, murmuring:

'No one loves me – no one cares for me, but you, mother.'

He turned away and stood leaning his head against the mantel-piece, tears forcing themselves into his manly eyes. She stood up – she tottered, for the first time in her life. She put her hands on his shoulders and looked into his face; she made him look at her.

'Mother's love is given by God, John. It holds fast for ever and ever. A girl's love is like a puff of smoke – it changes with every wind. And she would not have you, my own lad, would not she?' She set her teeth, showing them like a dog.

'I am not fit for her, mother; I knew I was not.'

She ground out words between her closed teeth. And yet her heart leapt up light, to know he was her own again.

‘Mother!’ said he. ‘I cannot hear a word against her. Spare my sore heart – I love her yet; I love her more than ever.’

‘And I hate her,’ said Mrs. Thornton, in a low fierce voice. ‘I tried not to hate her, because – I said to myself – she will make him happy. But now, I hate her for your misery’s sake. I am the mother that bore you, and your sorrow is my agony; and if you don’t hate her, I do.’

‘Then, mother, you make me love her more. She is unjustly treated by you, and I must make the balance even. But why do we talk of love or hatred? She does not care for me, and that is enough – too much. Let us never name the subject again.’

‘With all my heart. I only wish that she, and all belonging to her, were swept back to the place they came from.’

He stood still, gazing into the fire for a minute or two longer. Her dim eyes filled with unwonted tears as she looked at him; but she seemed just as grim as usual when he next spoke.

‘Warrants are out against three men for conspiracy, mother. The riot yesterday helped to knock up the strike.’

And Margaret’s name was no more mentioned. They fell back into their usual mode of talk – about facts, not opinions or feelings. Their voices were calm and cold; a stranger might have thought that he had never seen such frigid indifference between such near relations.

CHAPTER 27

FRUIT-PIECE

Mr. Thornton went straight and clear into all the interests of the following day. There was a slight demand for goods; he took advantage of it, and drove hard bargains. He met his brother magistrates, aiding them with his strong sense, and his power of seeing consequences at a glance, and so coming to a rapid decision. Older men of long standing and far greater wealth looked to him for ready wisdom and leadership. And he cared nothing for their unconscious deference. He was not aware of the silent respect paid to him. If he had been, he would have felt it as an obstacle to all he wished to accomplish alone.

He swept off his business right and left that day. It seemed as though his deep mortification of yesterday, and the stunned purposeless hours afterwards, had cleared away the mists from his intellect. He felt his power and revelled in it. He could almost defy his heart, and vow that he did not care for anybody.

The evidence against Boucher, and the ringleaders of the riot, was taken before him, as a magistrate. The evidence against others, for conspiracy, failed; but he sternly charged the police to be on the watch for any fault that they could prove. And then he left the hot reeking room of the borough court, and went out into the sultry street.

It seemed as though he gave way all at once. He could not control his thoughts; they would wander to her; they would bring back the scene of the riot, when she clung to him. He went along the crowded streets mechanically, winding amongst people without seeing them – almost sick with longing for that one brief space of time when her heart beat against his.

‘Why, Mr. Thornton! How is Mrs. Thornton? Brave weather this! We doctors don’t like it, I can tell you.’

‘I beg your pardon, Dr. Donaldson. I didn’t see you. My mother’s quite well, thank you. It is a good day for the harvest, I hope. If the wheat is well got in, we shall have a brisk trade next year, whatever you doctors have.’

‘Ay, ay. Each man for himself. Your bad times are my good ones. When trade is bad, there’s more undermining of health going on among you Milton men than you’re aware of.’

‘Not with me, Doctor. I’m made of iron. This strike, which affects me more than anyone else in Milton, harms neither my pulse nor my appetite. You must go elsewhere for a patient.’

‘By the way, you’ve recommended me a good patient, poor lady! Not to go on talking in this heartless way, I seriously believe that Mrs. Hale hasn’t many weeks to live. I never had any hope of cure, as I told you; but I’ve seen her today, and she is very ill.’

Mr. Thornton was silent. The vaunted steadiness of pulse failed him for an instant.

‘Can I do anything, Doctor?’ he asked, in an altered voice. ‘You will have seen that money is not very plentiful; are there any comforts or dainties she ought to have?’

‘She craves for fruit – she has a constant fever; but pears will do as well as anything, and there are quantities of them in the market.’

‘You will tell me, if there is anything I can do, I’m sure,’ replied Mr. Thornton.

‘Oh! never fear! I know your purse is deep enough. I wish you’d give me carte-blanche for all my patients’ wants.’

However, Mr. Thornton had no general benevolence. But he went straight to the best fruit-shop in Milton, and chose the most perfect bunch of purple grapes – the richest-coloured peaches – the freshest vine-leaves. They were packed into a basket.

‘Where shall we send them to, sir?’ the shopman asked. ‘To Marlborough Mills?’

‘No!’ Mr. Thornton said. ‘Give the basket to me.’

It took both his hands to carry it; and he had to pass through the busiest shopping streets of the town. Many a young lady he knew turned to look after him, on seeing him occupied like an errand-boy.

He was thinking, ‘I will not be daunted from doing as I choose by the thought of her. I like to take this fruit to the poor mother, and it is right that I should. She shall never scorn me out of doing what I please. A pretty joke, indeed, if, for fear of a haughty girl, I failed in doing a kindness to a man I liked! I do it for Mr. Hale; I do it in defiance of her.’

He went at an unusual pace, and was soon at Crampton. He went upstairs two steps at a time, and entered the drawing-room before Dixon could announce him – his face flushed, his eyes shining with kindly earnestness.

Mrs. Hale lay on the sofa. Mr. Hale was reading aloud. Margaret was sewing on a low stool by her mother’s side. Her heart fluttered; but he took no notice of her. He went straight with his basket to Mrs. Hale, and said, in that subdued and gentle tone, which is so touching when used by a robust man speaking to an invalid:

‘I met Dr. Donaldson, ma’am, and as he said fruit would be good for you, I have taken the great liberty of bringing you some.’

Mrs. Hale was excessively surprised and pleased; Mr. Hale expressed deep gratitude.

‘Fetch a plate, Margaret.’

Margaret stood up, half afraid of moving or causing any noise to make Mr. Thornton aware that she was in the room. She thought it would be awkward for both; and fancied that, from her being on a low seat behind her father, he had overlooked her in his haste. As if he did not feel the consciousness of her presence all over!

‘I must go,’ said he. ‘I cannot stay. If you will forgive this liberty – my rough ways – too abrupt, I fear – I will be more gentle next time. You will allow me the pleasure of bringing you some fruit again, if I should see any that is tempting. Good afternoon, Mr. Hale. Good-bye, ma’am.’

He was gone. Not one word: not one look to Margaret. She believed that he had not seen her. She went for a plate in silence, and lifted the fruit out tenderly, with her delicate fingers. It was good of him to bring it; and after yesterday too!

‘Oh! it is so delicious!’ said Mrs. Hale, in a feeble voice. ‘Margaret love, only taste these grapes! Was it not good of him?’

‘Yes,’ said Margaret, quietly.

‘Margaret!’ said Mrs. Hale, rather querulously, ‘you won’t like anything Mr. Thornton does. I never saw anybody so prejudiced.’

Mr. Hale peeled a peach for his wife; and, cutting off a small piece for himself, he said:

‘I have not tasted such fruit since I was a boy; and to boys, I fancy, all fruit is good. I remember eating sloes and crab-apples with relish. Do you remember the currant bushes, Margaret, in the garden at home?’

Did she not? Did she not remember every weather-stain on the old stone wall; the grey and yellow lichens that marked it like a map; the little crane’s-bill that grew in the crevices? She had been shaken by the events of the last two days; and, somehow, these careless words of her father’s, about the sunny times of old, made her start up.

Dropping her sewing, she went hastily out of the room into her own little chamber. She had hardly given way to the first choking sob, when she became aware of Dixon standing at her chest of drawers, searching for something.

‘Bless me, miss! How you startled me! Missus is not worse, is she? Is anything the matter?’

‘No, nothing. Only I’m silly, Dixon, and want a glass of water. What are you looking for? I keep my muslins in that drawer.’

Dixon did not speak, but went on rummaging. The scent of lavender came out and perfumed the room.

At last Dixon found what she wanted; what it was, Margaret could not see. Dixon tuned, and spoke to her:

‘Now I don’t like telling you what I wanted, because you’re fretting enough, and I know you’ll fret about this. I meant to have kept it from you till night.’

‘What is the matter? Pray, tell me.’

‘That young woman you go to see – Higgins, I mean.’

‘Well?’

‘Well! she died this morning, and her sister is here – come to beg a strange thing. It seems the young woman had a fancy for being buried in something of yours, and so the sister’s come to ask for it; and I was looking for a night-cap that wasn’t too good to give away.’

‘Oh! let me find one,’ said Margaret, in the midst of her tears. ‘Poor Bessy! I never thought I should not see her again.’

‘Why, that’s another thing. This girl downstairs wanted me to ask you if you would like to see her.’

‘But she’s dead!’ said Margaret, turning a little pale. ‘I never saw a dead person. No! I would rather not.’

‘I told her you wouldn’t.’

‘I will go down and speak to her,’ said Margaret. Taking the cap in her hand, she went to the kitchen. Mary’s face was swollen with crying, and she burst out afresh when she saw Margaret.

‘Oh, ma’am, she loved yo’, she loved yo’, she did indeed!’ And for a long time, Margaret could not get her to say anything more than this.

At last, she learned a few facts. Nicholas Higgins had gone out in the morning, leaving Bessy as well as on the day before. But in an hour she was taken worse; a neighbour ran to the room where Mary was working; they did not know where to find her father. Mary had only come in a few minutes before she died.

‘It were a day or two ago she axed to be buried in somewhat o’ yourn. She were never tired o’ talking o’ yo’. She used to say yo’ were the prettiest thing she’d ever clapped eyes on. She loved yo’ dearly. Her last words were, “Give her my affectionate respects; and keep father fro’ drink.” Yo’ll come and see her, ma’am. She would ha’ thought it a great compliment, I know.’

Margaret shrank a little from answering. 'Yes, I will. I'll come before tea. But where's your father, Mary?'

Mary shook her head, and stood up to go.

'Miss Hale,' said Dixon, in a low voice, 'where's the use o' your going to see the poor thing laid out? I'd never say a word against it, if it could do the girl any good; but I'd go myself, if that would satisfy her. They've just a notion, these folks, of its being a respect to the departed. Here,' said she, turning sharply, 'I'll come and see your sister. Miss Hale is busy.'

The girl looked wistfully at Margaret. Dixon's coming might be a compliment, but it was not the same thing to the poor sister, who had had her little pangs of jealousy at the intimacy between Bessy and the young lady.

'No, Dixon!' said Margaret with decision. 'Mary, I will come this afternoon.' And for fear of her own cowardice, she went away, so that she could not change her mind.

CHAPTER 28

COMFORT IN SORROW

That afternoon she walked swiftly to the Higginses' house. Mary was looking out for her, with a half-distrustful face. They passed quickly through the house, and upstairs into the quiet presence of the dead.

Then Margaret was glad that she had come. The face, often so restless and weary with pain, had now the faint soft smile of eternal rest. The tears gathered in Margaret's eyes, but a deep calm entered her soul. And that was death! It looked more peaceful than life. The beautiful scriptures came into her mind: 'They rest from their labours.' 'He giveth His beloved sleep.'

Slowly she turned away from the bed. Mary was sobbing in the background. They went downstairs without a word.

Nicholas Higgins stood by the table. He had just heard the news. His eyes were dry and fierce; he was studying the reality of her death; bringing himself to understand that she was gone. For she had been dying so long that he had persuaded himself that she would pull through.

Margaret felt as if she had no business to be there. She tried to steal past his abstracted gaze, and to leave him in the solemn circle of his household misery.

Mary sat down, and throwing her apron over her head, began to cry. The noise roused him. He took sudden hold of Margaret's arm; his words came up thick, and choked, and hoarse:

'Were yo' with her? Did yo' see her die?'

'No,' replied Margaret. It was some time before he spoke again, but he kept his hold on her arm.

'All men must die,' said he at last, with a strange gravity, which suggested to Margaret that he had been drinking, just enough to make his thoughts bewildered. 'But she were younger than me.' He pondered, and then suddenly looked up at Margaret with wild inquiry. 'Yo're sure she's dead – not in a faint? She's been so before, often.'

'She is dead,' replied Margaret.

He gave her that searching look, until it seemed to fade out of his eyes. Then he let go of her, and throwing his body half across the table, he shook it with his violent sobs. Mary came trembling towards him.

'Get thee gone! – get thee gone!' he cried, striking blindly at her. 'What do I care for thee?' Margaret took her hand, and held it softly. He tore his hair, he beat his head against the wood, then lay exhausted and stupid. His daughter and Margaret did not move. Mary trembled from head to foot.

At last he lifted himself up. His eyes were swollen and bloodshot, and he seemed to have forgotten the watchers; he scowled when he saw them. Shaking himself heavily, he gave them one more sullen look, and made for the door.

'Oh, father, father!' said Mary, throwing herself upon his arm – 'not tonight! Any night but tonight. Oh, help me! he's going out to drink again! Father, she told me last of all to keep yo' fro' drink!'

He shook her off violently so that she fell against a chair. But Margaret stood in the doorway, silent yet commanding.

‘It’s my own house. Stand out o’ the way, wench, or I’ll make yo’!’ He looked ready to strike her. But she never moved – never took her deep, serious eyes off him. He stared back fiercely. If she had stirred, he would have thrust her aside with even more violence than he had used on his daughter, whose face was bleeding from her fall.

‘Why are yo’ looking at me in that way?’ asked he at last. ‘If yo’ think for to keep me from going where I choose – and in my own house, where I never asked yo’ to come, yo’re mistaken. It’s very hard upon a man that he can’t go to the only comfort left.’

Margaret felt that he acknowledged her power. What could she do next? He sat on a chair near the door; half-conquered, half-resenting; intending to go out as soon as she moved. Margaret laid her hand on his arm.

‘Come with me,’ she said. ‘Come and see her!’

Her voice was low and solemn; but there was no fear or doubt in it. He sullenly rose up, with dogged irresolution upon his face. She waited. He had a strange pleasure in making her wait; but at last he moved towards the stairs.

They stood by the corpse.

‘Her last words to Mary were, “Keep my father fro’ drink.”’

‘It canna hurt her now,’ muttered he. ‘Nought can hurt her now.’ Then, in a wail, he went on: ‘We may quarrel – we may make peace – we may clem to skin and bone – and nought will ever touch her more. What wi’ hard work and sickness, hoo’s led the life of a dog. And to die without knowing one joy in all her days! Nay, wench, whatever hoo said, hoo can know nought about it now, and I must ha’ a drink just to steady me.’

‘No,’ said Margaret gently. ‘You shall not. If her life has been what you say, at any rate she did not fear death. Oh, you should have heard her speak of the life to come – the life hidden with God, that she is now gone to.’

He shook his head. His pale, haggard face struck her painfully.

‘You are sorely tired. Where have you been all day – not at work?’

‘No,’ said he, with a short, grim laugh. ‘Not at what you call work. I were at the Committee, till I were sickened wi’ trying to make fools hear reason. I were fetched to Boucher’s wife afore seven this morning. She’s bed-fast, but she were raving to know where her dunder-headed brute of a chap was – as if he were ruled by me. The d__d fool, who has put his foot in all our plans! And I never knew hoo lay a-dying here.’

‘It was quite sudden,’ said Margaret. ‘But now you do know; you do see her lying there; you hear what she said with her last breath. You will not go?’

No answer. Where was he to look for comfort?

‘Come home with me,’ said she at last, boldly, yet half trembling. ‘At least you shall have some good food, which I’m sure you need.’

‘Your father’s a parson?’

‘He was,’ said Margaret, shortly.

‘I’ll go and take a dish o’ tea with him, since yo’ve asked me. I’ve many a thing I often wished to say to a parson.’

Margaret was perplexed; his drinking tea with her father, who would be totally unprepared for his visitor – her mother so ill – seemed out of the question; yet if she drew back now, it would be sure to drive him to the gin-shop. But if she could only get him to their house, it would be a great step gained.

‘Goodbye, ou’d wench! Thou’st been a blessin’ to thy father ever sin’ thou wert born. Bless thy white lips, lass – they’ve a smile on ’em now! and I’m glad to see it, though I’m forlorn for evermore.’

He stooped down and fondly kissed his daughter; covered up her face, and turned to follow Margaret. She had hastily gone downstairs to tell Mary of the arrangement, and to urge her come too, for her heart smote her at the idea of leaving the poor girl alone. But Mary had friends among the neighbours, she said, who would come and sit with her.

When Nicholas joined them, he had shaken off his emotion; and had even assumed a sort of bitter mirth. ‘I’m going to take my tea wi’ her father, I am!’

But he slouched his cap low over his brow as he went out into the street, and looked neither to right nor to left, lest he should see sympathising neighbours. They walked in silence.

As they drew near her home, he looked down at his clothes, his hands, and shoes.

‘I should ’appen ha’ cleaned mysel’ first?’

Margaret assured him he might go into the yard, and have soap and towel provided; she could not let him slip out of her hands just then.

While he followed the house-servant along the passage, stepping cautiously on every dark mark in the pattern of the oil-cloth, to conceal his dirty foot-prints, Margaret ran upstairs to find Dixon.

‘How is mamma? Where is papa?’

Missus was tired, and had wanted to go to bed, but Dixon had persuaded her to lie down on the sofa in her room, and have her tea brought to her there.

So far, so good. But where was Mr. Hale? In the drawing-room. Margaret went in half breathless with her hurried story. Her father was rather taken aback by the idea of the drunken weaver awaiting him in his quiet study, with whom he was expected to drink tea. The meek, kind-hearted Mr. Hale would have readily tried to console him in his grief, but unluckily, Margaret dwelt on the fact of his having been drinking, and said she had brought him home with her as a last resort to keep him from the gin-shop. She was hardly conscious of what she had done, till she saw the look of repugnance on her father’s face.

‘Oh, papa! he really is a man you will not dislike.’

‘But, Margaret, to bring a drunken man home – and your mother so ill!’

Her face fell. ‘I am sorry, papa. He is very quiet – not tipsy at all. He was only rather strange at first, but that might be the shock of poor Bessy’s death.’ Margaret’s eyes filled with tears. Mr. Hale took her sweet pleading face in both his hands, and kissed her forehead.

‘It is all right, dear. I’ll go and make him as comfortable as I can, and you attend to your mother. Only, if you can come and make a third in the study, I shall be glad.’

‘Oh, yes – thank you.’ But as Mr. Hale was leaving the room, she ran after him: ‘Papa – you must not wonder at what he says: he’s an – I mean he does not believe in much of what we do.’

‘Oh dear! a drunken infidel weaver!’ thought Mr. Hale, in dismay. But to Margaret he only said, ‘If your mother goes to sleep, be sure you come directly.’

Margaret went into her mother’s room. Mrs. Hale lifted herself up from a doze.

‘When did you write to Frederick, Margaret? Yesterday, or the day before?’

‘Yesterday, mamma.’

‘And the letter went?’

‘Yes. I took it myself.’

‘Oh, Margaret, I’m so afraid of his coming! If he should be recognised and taken! If he should be executed! I keep dreaming that he is caught and being tried.’

‘Mamma, don’t be afraid. There will be some risk, no doubt; but very little! At Helstone, there would be a hundred times as much. Everybody would remember him, and if a stranger stayed in the house, they would guess it was Frederick; while here, nobody knows or cares enough to notice. Dixon will keep the door like a dragon – and he need not go out, except in the dusk, poor fellow!’

‘Poor fellow!’ echoed Mrs. Hale. ‘But I almost wish you had not written. Would it be too late to stop him if you wrote again, Margaret?’

‘I’m afraid it would, mamma,’ said Margaret, remembering the urgency with which she had begged him to come directly.

‘I always dislike doing things in such a hurry,’ said Mrs. Hale. Margaret was silent.

‘Come now, ma’am,’ said Dixon, with cheerful authority, ‘you know seeing Master Frederick is the very thing of all others you’re longing for! And I’m glad Miss Margaret wrote off straight, without shilly-shallying. We’ll keep him snug, depend upon it. There’s only Martha in the house that does not know him; and I’ve been thinking she might go and see her mother just at that very time, as she’s been asking to. So take your tea, ma’am, and trust to me.’

Mrs. Hale did trust in Dixon more than in Margaret. Dixon’s words quieted her for the time. Margaret poured out the tea in silence, trying to think of something agreeable to say; but the more she tried to think of something besides the danger to which Frederick would be exposed, the more her imagination clung to the unfortunate idea. Her mother was one of those who throw out terrible possibilities as a rocket throws out sparks; but if the sparks alight on something combustible, they smoulder, and then burst into a frightful flame. Margaret was glad when she could go down into the study. She wondered how her father and Higgins had got on.

There, the kind-hearted, simple, old-fashioned gentleman had unconsciously called out, by his own courteous manner, all the latent courtesy in the other.

Mr. Hale treated all his fellow-creatures alike: it never entered into his head to make any difference because of their rank. He placed a chair for Nicholas to sit on, and called him ‘Mr. Higgins,’ instead of the curt ‘Nicholas’ or ‘Higgins,’ to which the ‘drunken infidel weaver’ had been accustomed.

But Nicholas was neither an habitual drunkard nor a thorough infidel. He drank only to drown care: and he was infidel so far as he had never yet found any form of faith to which he could attach himself.

Margaret was a little surprised, and very much pleased, when she found her father and Higgins in earnest conversation – each speaking with gentle politeness, however their opinions might clash. Nicholas, clean and quiet spoken, was a new creature to her. He had slicked his hair down with water; he had adjusted his neckerchief, and polished his clogs; and there he sat, giving some opinion, with a strong Darkshire accent, it is true, but with a lowered voice, and earnest composure on his face.

Her father was interested in what his companion was saying. He looked round as she came in, smiled, and quietly gave her his chair, with a little bow of apology to his guest for the interruption. Higgins nodded in greeting; and she got out her sewing, and prepared to listen.

‘As I was a-sayin, sir, I reckon yo’d not ha’ much belief if yo’ lived here. I ax your pardon if I use wrong words; but what I mean by belief, is a-thinking on sayings and promises made by folk yo’ never saw, about the things and the life yo’ never saw. Now, yo’ say these are true things, and true sayings. I just say, where’s the proof? There’s many a one wiser and better learned than I am – folk who’ve had time to think on these things. Well, I sees these people. They don’t believe i’ the Bible – not they. They may say they do, for form’s sake; but Lord, sir, d’ye think their first cry i’ th’ morning is, “What shall I do to get eternal life?” or “What shall I do to fill my purse this blessed day? What bargains shall I strike?” The purse and the gold is real things; them’s realities; and eternal life is all talk.

‘I’ll just ax yo another question, sir, and I dunnot want yo to answer it, only to think about it afore yo’ set us down as fools and noddies. If salvation, and life to come, was true – dun yo’ not think they’d din us wi’ it as they do wi’ political ’conomy? They’re mighty anxious to come round us wi’ that piece o’ wisdom; but t’other would be a greater convarision, if it were true.’

‘But the masters have nothing to do with your religion. All that they are concerned with is trade – so they think – and all that concerns them, therefore, is to tell you the science of trade.’

‘I’m glad, sir,’ said Higgins, ‘that yo’ put in, “so they think.” I’d ha’ thought yo’ a hypocrite if yo’ hadn’t. Yo’ see, if yo’d spoken o’ religion as a thing that, if it was true, it didn’t concern all men to press on all men’s attention, I should ha’ thought yo’ a knave for to be a parson; and I’d rather think yo’ a fool than a knave. No offence, I hope, sir.’

‘None at all. You consider me mistaken, and I consider you far more fatally mistaken. I don’t expect to convince you in a day; but let us know each other, and speak freely to each other about these things, and the truth will prevail. I should not believe in God if I did not believe that. Mr. Higgins, I trust, whatever else you have given up, you believe in Him.’

Nicholas Higgins suddenly stood straight up. At last he found words:

‘Man! I could fell yo’ to the ground for tempting me. What business have yo’ to try me wi’ your doubts? Think o’ her lying there, after the life hoo’s led, and think then how yo’d deny me the one sole comfort left – that there is a God, and that He set her life. I dunnot believe she’ll ever live again,’ said he, sitting down drearily. ‘I dunnot believe in any other life than this, in which she had such never-ending care; and I cannot bear to think it were all a set o’ chances. There’s many a time when I’ve thought I didna believe in God, but I’ve never put it fair out in words. And today, when I’m left desolate, I wunnot listen to your questions, and your doubts. There’s but one thing steady and quiet i’ all this reeling world, and, reason or no reason, I’ll cling to that.’

Margaret touched his arm very softly. ‘Nicholas, you misunderstand my father. We do not reason – we believe; and so do you. It is the only comfort in such times.’

He turned round and caught her hand. ‘Ay! it is, it is – (brushing away tears with the back of his hand). ‘But yo’ know, she’s lying dead at home and I’m dazed wi’ sorrow, and hardly know what I’m saying. Th’ strike’s failed as well; dun yo’ know that, miss? I were coming home to ask for a bit o’ comfort i’ that trouble; and I were knocked down by one who telled me she were dead.’

Mr. Hale blew his nose, and got up to snuff the candles. ‘He’s not an infidel, Margaret; how could you say so?’ he muttered. ‘I’ve a good mind to read him the fourteenth chapter of Job.’

‘Not yet, papa. Let us ask him about the strike, and give him all the sympathy he needs.’

So they questioned and listened. The workmen’s calculations were based on false premises. They had made no allowance for passions getting the better of reason, as in the case of Boucher and the rioters. They were surprised and indignant that the poor Irish, rather than sympathising with them, had allowed themselves to be brought over to take their places. This indignation was tempered, in some degree, by contempt and pleasure at the idea of the bungling way in which the Irishmen would work, and perplex their new masters with their ignorance and stupidity – exaggerated stories of which were already spreading. But the most cruel cut was that of the Milton workmen, who had disobeyed the Union’s commands to keep the peace; who had made discord in the camp, and caused the law to be arrayed against them.

‘And so the strike is at an end,’ said Margaret.

‘Ay, miss. Th’ factory doors will open wide tomorrow to let in all who’ll be axing for work.’

‘You’ll get work, won’t you?’ she asked.

‘Hamper’ll cut off his right hand before he lets me work at his mill,’ said Nicholas quietly. Margaret was silenced and sad.

‘About the wages,’ said Mr. Hale. ‘You’ll not be offended, but I think you make some mistakes. I should like to read to you from a book I have.’ He went to his book-shelves.

‘Yo’ needn’t trouble yoursel’, sir,’ said Nicholas. ‘Their book-stuff goes in at one ear and out at t’other. I can make nought on’t. Afore Hamper and me had this split, th’ overlooker telled him I were stirring up the men to ask for higher wages; and Hamper met me one day in th’ yard, with a thin book i’ his hand. “Higgins,” says he, “I’m told you’re one of those damned fools that think you can get higher wages for asking for ’em. Now, here’s a book written by a friend o’ mine, and in it yo’ll see how wages find their own level, without either masters or men having aught to do with them; unless the men cut their own throats wi’ striking, like the confounded noodles they are.”

‘Well, now, sir, I put it to yo’, having been in th’ preaching line – did yo’ begin by calling people fools, or didn’t yo’ rayther give ’em some kind words at first, to make ’em ready for to listen? And in your preaching, did yo’ stop and say, “But you’re such a pack o’ fools, that it’s no use my trying to put sense into yo’?” I were vexed, I’ll own; but I thought, “Come, I’ll see what these chaps has got to say, and try if it’s them or me as is th’ noodle.” So I took th’ book and tugged at it; but, Lord bless yo’, it went on about capital and labour, and labour and capital, till it fair sent me off to sleep. What I wanted for to know were the rights o’ men, whether rich or poor.’

‘But for all that,’ said Mr. Hale, ‘and granting to the full the unchristian offensiveness and folly of Mr. Hamper’s way of speaking to you, yet if that book told you that wages find their own level, and that the most successful strike can only force them up temporarily, it would have told you the truth.’

‘Well, sir,’ said Higgins, rather doggedly; ‘it might, or it might not. But suppose it was truth double strong, it were no truth to me if I couldna take it in. I daresay there’s truth in yon Latin book on your shelves; but it’s gibberish to me, unless I know the meaning o’ the words. If yo’, sir, or any other knowledgable, patient man can teach me what the words mean, and not blow me up if I’m a bit stupid – why, in time I may get to see the truth of it; or I may not. I’m not one who thinks truth can be shaped all neat and clean, as th’ men at th’ foundry cut out sheet-iron. Same bones

won't go down wi' everyone. It'll stick here i' this man's throat, and there i' t'other's. And folk who sets up to doctor th' world wi' their truth must be a bit tender in th' way of giving it too. Now Hamper gives me a box on my ear, and then he throws his words at me like a pill, and says he reckons it'll do me no good, I'm such a fool, but there it is.'

'I wish some of the kindest and wisest of the masters would meet some of you men, and have a good talk on these things. It would, surely, be the best way of getting over your difficulties, which I believe arise from your ignorance – excuse me, Mr. Higgins – on subjects which both masters and men need to understand. I wonder' (half to his daughter), 'if Mr. Thornton might not be induced to do such a thing?'

'Remember, papa,' said she in a very low voice, 'what he said once – about governments, you know.'

Higgins had caught Mr. Thornton's name.

'Thornton! He's the chap as wrote off at once for these Irishers; and led to th' riot that ruined th' strike. Even Hamper, wi' all his bullying, would ha' waited – but it's a word and a blow wi' Thornton. And now it's Thornton who steps forrard and coolly says that, as th' strike's at an end, he doesn't want to press charges against the rioters. I thought he'd had more pluck. I thought he'd want his revenge; but says he, "they are well known; they will find their punishment in the difficulty of getting employment. That will be severe enough." I only wish they'd cotched Boucher, and had him up before Hamper. I see th' oud tiger setting on him! would he ha' let him off? Not he!'

'Mr. Thornton was right,' said Margaret. 'You are angry with Boucher, Nicholas; or else you would see that where the natural punishment is severe, any farther punishment would be merely revenge.'

'My daughter is no great friend of Mr. Thornton's,' said Mr. Hale, smiling at Margaret; while she, turning red, began to sew with double diligence, 'but I believe she says the truth. I like him for it.'

'Well, sir, yo'll not wonder if I'm a bit put out wi' seeing the strike fail, just for a few men who would na suffer in silence.'

'You forget!' said Margaret. 'When I saw Boucher it was not his own sufferings he spoke of, but those of his sick wife and little children.'

'True! but he'd ha' cried out for his own sorrows next. He were not one to bear them.'

'How came he into the Union?' asked Margaret innocently. 'You don't seem to have much respect for him; nor gained much good from having him in.'

Higgins's brow clouded. He said shortly:

'It's not for me to speak o' th' Union. What they does, they does. Them of the same trade must hang together; and if they're not willing to, th' Union has ways and means.'

'And what are the Union's ways and means?'

He looked up at her, reluctant to answer. But her calm, patient face compelled him.

'Well! If a man doesn't belong to th' Union, them as works next looms has orders not to speak to him. He's out o' bounds; he's none o' us; he works among us, but he's none o' us. In some places them's fined who speaks to him. Yo' try that, miss; try living a year or two among them as looks away if yo' look at 'em; to whom yo' can never say nought even when you're in trouble, because they'll ne'er take notice on your sad looks. Just yo' try that, miss, and yo'll know what th' Union is.'

‘Why!’ said Margaret, ‘what tyranny! Nay, Higgins, I don’t care one straw for your anger. I never read of a more slow, lingering torture than this. And you talk of the tyranny of the masters!’

‘Nay,’ said Higgins, ‘the dead stand between yo and every angry word o’ mine. And it’s th’ masters as has made us sin, if th’ Union *is* a sin. Not this generation maybe, but their fathers. Their fathers ground our fathers to the very dust! In those days of sore oppression th’ Unions began; it were a necessity. It’s a necessity now. It’s a withstanding of injustice, past, present, or to come. It may be like war; crimes come along wi’ it, but I think it were a greater crime to let it alone. Our only chance is binding men together in one common interest; and if some are cowards or fools, they must join the great march, whose only strength is in numbers.’

‘Oh!’ said Mr. Hale, sighing, ‘your Union would be glorious – it would be Christianity itself – if it were only for an end which affected the good of all, instead of that of merely one class as opposed to another.’

‘I reckon it’s time for me to be going, sir,’ said Higgins, as the clock struck ten.

‘Home?’ said Margaret very softly. He understood her, and took her offered hand. ‘Home, miss. Yo’ may trust me, tho’ I am one o’ th’ Union.’

‘I do trust you, Nicholas.’

‘Wait!’ said Mr. Hale. ‘Mr. Higgins! I’m sure you’ll join us in family prayer?’

Higgins looked at Margaret doubtfully. Her grave sweet eyes met his; there was no compulsion, only deep interest in them. He did not speak, but he kept his place.

Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel, knelt down together. It did them no harm.

CHAPTER 29

A RAY OF SUNSHINE

The next morning brought a letter from Edith. It was affectionate and inconsequent like the writer. But the affection was charming to Margaret; and she had grown up with the inconsequence, so she did not perceive it. It was as follows:

‘Oh, Margaret, you should see my boy! He is a superb little fellow, especially in his caps, and most especially in the one you sent him, you good, dainty-fingered little lady! Having made all the mothers here envious, I want to show him to somebody new – I do want you so much to come here, Margaret! I’m sure it would be the very best thing for Aunt Hale’s health; everybody here is young and well, and our skies are always blue, and our sun always shines, and the band plays deliciously from morning till night; and my baby always smiles. I think I love him a great deal better than my husband, who is getting stout, and grumpy – what he calls “busy.” No! he is not. He has just come in with news of a charming picnic, given by the officers of the Hazard, at anchor in the bay below; so I retract all I said just now. Cosmo is quite as great a darling as baby, and not a bit stout, and as un-grumpy as ever husband was; only, sometimes he is very busy.

‘Where was I? Oh, yes – Dearest Margaret! – you must come and see me. Get the doctor to order it for your mother. Tell him that it’s the smoke of Milton that does her harm. This delicious climate – all sunshine, and grapes as common as blackberries, would quite cure her. I don’t ask my uncle, because I dare say he disapproves of war, and soldiers, and military bands; but if he would like to come, Cosmo and I will do our best to make him happy; and I’ll hide Cosmo’s red coat and sword, and make the band play all sorts of grave, solemn things in double slow time. Tell Aunt Hale not to bring many warm clothes. You have no idea of the heat here! I tried to wear my great Indian shawl at a picnic, but I was like mamma’s little dog Tiny with an elephant’s trappings on, smothered with my finery; so I made it into a capital carpet for us all to sit upon. Pack up your things as soon as you get this letter, and come straight off to see us!’

Margaret did long for a day of Edith’s life – her freedom from care, her cheerful home, her sunny skies. If a wish could have transported her, she would have gone off, just for one day. She yearned for the strength which such a change would give – even for a few hours in the midst of that bright life, to feel young again. Not yet twenty! She felt quite old. Then she read Edith’s letter again, and, forgetting herself, was laughing merrily over it when Mrs. Hale came into the drawing-room, leaning feebly on Dixon’s arm.

‘What were you laughing at, Margaret?’ asked she.

‘A letter from Edith.’ She read it aloud, and for a time it seemed to interest her mother, who kept wondering what name Edith had given to her boy.

Into the midst of these wonders Mr. Thornton came, bringing more fruit for Mrs. Hale. He could not – or would not – deny himself the chance of the pleasure of seeing Margaret. It was the sturdy wilfulness of a man usually reasonable and self-controlled.

He entered the room, taking in at a glance the fact of Margaret's presence; but after the first cold distant bow, he did not look at her. He only stayed to present his peaches – to speak some gentle kindly words – and then his cold offended eyes met Margaret's with a grave farewell, as he left the room. She sat down silent and pale.

'Do you know, Margaret, I really begin quite to like Mr. Thornton.'

Margaret forced out an icy 'Do you?'

'Yes! I think he is really getting quite polished in his manners.'

Margaret's voice was more in order now. She replied, 'He is very kind and attentive.'

'I wonder Mrs. Thornton never calls. She must know I am ill, because of the water-bed. I should like to see her. You have so few friends here, Margaret.'

Margaret felt what was in her mother's thoughts – a craving to ask for the kindness of some woman towards the daughter that might so soon be motherless. She could not speak.

'Do you think,' said Mrs. Hale, 'that you could go and ask Mrs. Thornton to come and see me? Only once. I don't want to be troublesome.'

'If you wish it, mamma – but when Frederick comes—'

'Ah, to be sure! we must let no one in. I hardly know whether I wish him to come or not. Sometimes I have such frightful dreams about him.'

'Oh, mamma! we'll take good care. Trust me; I will watch over him like a lioness over her young.'

'When can we hear from him?'

'Not for a week yet, perhaps more.'

'We must send Martha away in good time.'

'Dixon is sure to remind us of that. I was thinking that if we wanted any help in the house while he is here, we could perhaps get Mary Higgins. She is very slack of work, and is a good girl, and would do her best, I am sure, and would sleep at home, and need never come upstairs.'

'As you and Dixon please. But, Margaret, don't use these horrid Milton words. "Slack of work!" What will your aunt Shaw say, if she hears you on her return?'

'Oh, mamma!' said Margaret, laughing. 'Edith picked up all sorts of military slang from Captain Lennox, and aunt Shaw never took any notice.'

'But yours is factory slang.'

'I live in a factory town. Why, mamma, I could astonish you with a great many words you never heard in your life. Do you know what a knobstick is? It means a strike-breaker.'

'I don't want to hear you using such words. I don't like this Milton,' said Mrs. Hale. 'Edith is right enough in saying it's the smoke that has made me so ill.'

Margaret started up as her mother said this. Her father had just entered the room, and she was most anxious that he should not hear. She began speaking hurriedly of other things, unaware that Mr. Thornton was following him.

'Mamma is accusing me of having picked up a great deal of vulgarity since we came to Milton.'

By 'vulgarity' Margaret referred purely to the use of local words. But Mr. Thornton's brow darkened; and Margaret suddenly felt she might be misunderstood by him; so, in the natural sweet desire to avoid giving unnecessary pain, she forced herself to go forwards with a little greeting, and continue what she was saying.

‘Now, Mr. Thornton, though “knobstick” has not a very pretty sound, is it not expressive? If using local words is vulgar, I was very vulgar in the Forest – was I not, mamma?’

It was unusual with Margaret to obtrude her own subject of conversation on others; but, in this case, she was so anxious to prevent Mr. Thornton from feeling annoyed at her words, that after speaking she coloured all over; especially as Mr. Thornton seemed hardly to understand what she was saying, but passed her by, with a cold ceremonious movement, to speak to Mrs. Hale.

Margaret, sitting in burning silence, was vexed and ashamed of her difficulty in keeping calm when Mr. Thornton was by. She heard her mother’s slow entreaty that Mrs. Thornton would come and see her soon; tomorrow, if possible. Mr. Thornton promised that she should – conversed a little, and then left; and Margaret’s movements and voice seemed at once released from invisible chains.

He never looked at her; and yet the careful avoidance of his eyes showed that he knew exactly where she was. If she spoke, he gave no sign of attention, and yet his next speech to anyone else was modified by what she had said; sometimes with an answer to what she had remarked, but given to another person. It was not the bad manners of ignorance; it was the wilful bad manners arising from deep offence. He repented of it afterwards.

But no deep plan, no careful cunning could have stood him in such good stead. Margaret thought about him more than she had ever done before; not with any love, but with regret that she had wounded him so deeply; and with a gentle, patient striving to return to their former position of antagonistic friendship. There was a pretty humility in her behaviour to him, as if mutely apologising for the over-strong words which had been the reaction from the day of the riot.

But he resented those words bitterly. They rung in his ears; and he was proud of the sense of justice which made him offer every kindness he could to her parents. He exulted in the power he showed in compelling himself to face her. He thought that he disliked seeing one who had mortified him so keenly; but he was mistaken. It was a stinging pleasure to be in the room with her, and feel her presence. But he was no great analyser of his own motives.

CHAPTER 30

HOME AT LAST

Mrs. Thornton came to see Mrs. Hale the next morning. She was much worse. A sudden change – a great visible stride towards death had been taken in the night, and her own family were startled by the grey sunken look of her features. Mrs. Thornton – who had not seen her for weeks – was softened at once.

She had come because her son asked her, but with proud bitter feelings against Margaret's family. She doubted the reality of Mrs. Hale's illness; she told her son that she wished they had never come near the place; that he had never got acquainted with them. He bore all this silently; but when she had ended her invective, he quietly repeated his curt, decided wish that she should go and see Mrs. Hale. Mrs. Thornton submitted with a bad grace, yet liked her son the better for it, and exaggerated in her own mind his extraordinary goodness in keeping up with the Hales.

Her contempt for Mr. and Mrs. Hale, and positive dislike of Margaret, occupied Mrs. Thornton, till she stood under the dark shadow of the wings of the angel of death. There lay Mrs. Hale – a mother like herself, though younger – without any hope that she might ever rise again. When Mrs. Thornton, strong and prosperous with life, came in, Mrs. Hale lay still, although she seemed conscious of who it was. But she did not even open her eyes for a minute. Then, with heavy tears on her eye-lashes, her hand groping feebly over the bed-clothes to find Mrs. Thornton's large firm fingers, she said faintly:

'You have a daughter – my sister is in Italy. My child will be without a mother – in a strange place – if I die – will you–'

And her filmy wandering eyes fixed themselves wistfully on Mrs. Thornton's face. That face was stern and unmoved; if the sick woman's eyes had not grown dim, she might have seen a dark cloud cross the cold features. And it was no thought of her son, or of her living daughter Fanny, that stirred Mrs. Thornton's heart at last; but a sudden remembrance of a little daughter, dead in infancy long years ago that, like a sudden sunbeam, melted the ice, behind which there was a real tender woman.

'You wish me to be a friend to Miss Hale,' said Mrs. Thornton, in her clear, measured voice.

Mrs. Hale pressed her hand. She could not speak.

Mrs. Thornton sighed. 'I will be a true friend, if circumstances require it. Not a tender friend; it is not my nature to show affection even where I feel it. Still, if it will be any comfort to you, I will promise you.' Then she paused. She was too conscientious to promise what she did not mean to perform; and to perform any kind act on behalf of Margaret, more disliked at this moment than ever, was difficult; almost impossible.

'I promise,' said she, with grave severity, 'I promise that in any difficulty in which Miss Hale–'

'Call her Margaret!' gasped Mrs. Hale.

'In which she comes to me for help, I will help her with every power I have, as if she were my own daughter. I also promise that if ever I see her doing what I think is wrong–'

‘But Margaret never does wrong – not knowingly,’ pleaded Mrs. Hale. Mrs. Thornton went on as if she had not heard:

‘If ever I see her doing what I believe to be wrong – and it does not involve me or mine – I will tell her of it, faithfully and plainly, as I should wish my own daughter to be told.’

There was a long pause. Mrs. Hale felt that this promise did not include all; and yet it was much, and she was dizzy and tired. Mrs. Thornton was reviewing all the probable cases in which she had pledged herself to act. She had a fierce pleasure in the idea of telling Margaret unwelcome truths. Mrs. Hale began to speak:

‘I thank you. I pray God to bless you. I shall never see you again in this world. But I thank you for your promise of kindness to my child.’

‘Not kindness!’ said Mrs. Thornton, ungraciously truthful to the last. But she was not sorry that her words were not heard. She pressed Mrs. Hale’s hand; and left the house.

While Mrs. Thornton was having this interview with Mrs. Hale, Margaret and Dixon were laying their heads together, and consulting how they should keep Frederick’s coming a secret to all outside the house. A letter from him might be expected any day; and he would surely follow quickly on its heels. Martha must be sent away on her holiday; Dixon must keep stern guard on the front door – Mrs. Hale’s illness giving her a good excuse for this. If Mary Higgins was asked to help Dixon in the kitchen, she was to hear and see as little of Frederick as possible; and he was to be spoken of as Mr. Dickinson. But Mary’s sluggish and incurious nature was the greatest safeguard.

They resolved that Martha should leave them that very afternoon for this visit to her mother. Margaret wished that she had been sent away on the previous day, as it might be thought strange to give a servant a holiday when her mistress’s state was so much worse.

Poor Margaret! All that afternoon she had to give strength to her father. Mr. Hale would hope, would not despair; he buoyed himself up in every respite from her pain, and believed that it was the beginning of recovery. And so, when the paroxysms came on again, each more severe than the last, they were fresh agonies to him.

This afternoon, he sat in the drawing-room with his head buried in his arms, which lay folded on the table. Margaret’s heart ached to see him; yet, as he did not speak, she did not either. Martha was gone. Dixon sat with Mrs. Hale while she slept. The house was very still and quiet, and darkness came on. Margaret sat at the window, looking out at the lamps and the street, but seeing nothing – only hearing her father’s heavy sighs. She did not like to go down for lights, lest he might give way to more violent emotion, without her being there to comfort him.

Yet she was just thinking that she ought to go and check the kitchen fire, when she heard the muffled door-bell ring with so violent a pull, that the wires jingled all through the house. She started up, and kissed her father tenderly in passing, although he never moved. Then she went down softly, through the dark, to the door. When she opened it, a man’s tall figure stood between her and the luminous street. He was looking away; but at the sound of the latch he turned quickly round.

‘Is this Mr. Hale’s?’ said he, in a clear, full voice.

Margaret trembled all over; at first she did not answer. Then she sighed out, ‘Frederick!’ and stretched out both her hands to catch his, and draw him in.

‘Oh, Margaret!’ said he, holding her by her shoulders, after they had kissed each other, as if even in that darkness he could see her face. ‘My mother! is she alive?’

‘Yes, she is alive, dear brother! She is as ill as she can be; but alive!’

‘Thank God! You expect me, don’t you?’

‘No, we have had no letter.’

‘Then I have come before it. But my mother knows I am coming?’

‘Oh! we all knew you would come. Step in here,’ she said. ‘Give me your hand. What is this? Oh! your carpet-bag. This is papa’s study. Rest here for a few minutes, while I go and tell him.’

She groped her way to the taper and the matches. When the little feeble light made them visible, she felt suddenly shy. All she could see was, that her brother’s face was unusually dark, and she caught the stealthy look of a pair of remarkably long-cut blue eyes, that suddenly twinkled drolly as they inspected each other. They did not exchange a word; yet Margaret felt sure that she should like her brother as a companion as much as she already loved him as a relation.

Her father still lay across the table; but now she had the spell by which to rouse him. She used it perhaps too violently in her own great relief.

‘Papa,’ said she, throwing her arms fondly round his neck, and pulling up his weary head to look into his eyes. ‘Papa! guess who is here!’

He looked at her; and then hid his face once more, whispering:

‘Don’t tell me it is Frederick. I cannot bear it – I am too weak. And his mother is dying!’ He began to cry like a child. It was so different to all that Margaret had hoped and expected, that she turned sick with disappointment. After a moment she spoke again very differently – not so exultingly, far more tenderly.

‘Papa, it is Frederick! Think of mamma, how glad she will be! And oh, for her sake, how glad we ought to be! For his sake, too!’

With his face still hidden, he asked, ‘Where is he?’

‘In your study. He is quite alone, and will be wondering—’

‘I will go to him,’ broke in her father; and he lifted himself up and leant on her arm as she led him to the study door.

Her spirits were so agitated that she could not bear to see the meeting. She ran upstairs, and cried most heartily: the first time she had dared to allow herself this relief for days. The strain had been terrible. But Frederick was come! He was there, safe, amongst them! She could hardly believe it.

She stopped crying, and opened her bedroom door. Hearing no sound, she went downstairs. She heard the buzz of voices through the study door; and that was enough. She went into the kitchen, and stirred up the fire, and prepared some food. How fortunate it was that her mother slept! The traveller could be refreshed and bright, and the first excitement of the meeting with his father be over, before her mother became aware of anything unusual.

When all was ready, Margaret opened the study door, and went in with a heavy tray. Frederick sprang up, and relieved her of her burden. It was a sign of all the relief which his presence would bring. The brother and sister arranged the table together, saying little, but their hands touching, and their eyes meeting. The fire had gone out, so Margaret tried to light it, for the evenings were chilly.

‘Dixon says it is a gift to light a fire; not an art to be acquired.’

‘Dear old Dixon!’ said Frederick. ‘She used to kiss me, and then look in my face to be sure I was the right person, and then set to again! But, Margaret, what a

bungler you are! I never saw such an awkward little pair of hands. Run away and wash them, and leave the fire. I'll manage it. Lighting fires is one of my natural accomplishments.'

So Margaret passed in and out of the room, in glad restlessness. The more wants Frederick had, the better she was pleased; and he understood this by instinct. It was a joy snatched in the house of mourning, and all the sharper because they knew what great sorrow awaited them.

They heard Dixon's foot on the stairs. Mr. Hale started up, and faced the door. He showed such a strange, sudden anxiety to conceal Frederick from the sight of anyone, even faithful Dixon, that a shiver came over Margaret's heart: it reminded her of the new fear in their lives. She caught at Frederick's arm. And yet they knew it was only Dixon's measured tread. They heard her walk into the kitchen, and Margaret rose up.

'I will go and tell her, and hear how mamma is.'

Mrs. Hale was awake. She rambled at first. Although she was refreshed after they had given her some tea, it was better that the night should pass before she was told of her son's arrival. Dr. Donaldson's visit that evening would bring nervous excitement enough.

Margaret could not sit still. It seemed as though she could never be tired again. Each glimpse into the room where Frederick sat talking with his father gave her strength. Her own time for talking and hearing would come later. She liked his appearance: he had delicate features under his swarthy complexion, and a quick intensity of expression. His eyes were generally merry-looking, but at times they and his mouth so suddenly changed, and gave her such an idea of latent passion, that it almost made her afraid. But this look was only for an instant; and though it betrayed an impulsive nature, there was nothing in it to make Margaret recoil.

On the contrary, all their talk was peculiarly charming to her from the very first. She knew then how much responsibility she had had to bear, from the relief she felt in Frederick's presence. He understood his father and mother's characters, and spoke with freedom, yet was most delicately careful not to hurt their feelings. He seemed to know instinctively when a little of the natural brilliancy of his manner would not jar on his father's deep depression, or might relieve his mother's pain. And his patient devotion and watchfulness made him an admirable nurse.

Margaret was almost touched into tears by the allusions which he often made to their childish days in the New Forest; he had never forgotten her – or Helstone – all the time he had been roaming among distant countries. She had been afraid before he came, even while she had longed for his coming; she felt that she herself had changed so much in seven or eight years that his wild career must have almost substituted another Frederick for the tall stripling in his midshipman's uniform, whom she remembered looking up to with such admiring awe. But they had grown nearer to each other in age, as well as in many other things.

And so it was that the weight of this sorrowful time was lightened to Margaret. Other light she had none. For a few hours, the mother rallied on seeing her son. She sat with his hand in hers; she would not part with it even while she slept; and Margaret had to feed him like a baby, rather than that he should disturb her mother by removing a finger. Mrs. Hale wakened while they were doing this; she slowly moved her head round on the pillow, and smiled at her children, as she understood what they were doing.

‘I am very selfish,’ said she; ‘but it will not be for long.’ Frederick bent down and kissed the feeble hand.

This state of tranquillity could not endure for many days, nor perhaps for many hours; so Dr. Donaldson assured Margaret. After the kind doctor had gone away, she stole down to Frederick, who, during the visit, had remained concealed in the back parlour. She told him what Dr. Donaldson had said.

‘I don’t believe it,’ he exclaimed. ‘She is very ill; but I can’t imagine that she is on the point of death. Margaret! she should have some other advice – some London doctor. Have you never thought of that?’

‘Yes,’ said Margaret, ‘more than once. But I don’t believe it would do any good. And, you know, we have not the money to bring any great London surgeon down, and I am sure Dr. Donaldson is only second in skill to the very best – if indeed, he is to them.’

Frederick began to walk up and down impatiently.

‘I have credit in Cadiz,’ said he, ‘but none here. Why did my father leave Helstone? That was the blunder.’

‘It was no blunder,’ said Margaret. ‘And do not let papa hear you say that. He is tormenting himself already with the idea that mamma would never have been ill if we had stayed at Helstone, and you don’t know papa’s agonising power of self-reproach!’

Frederick stopped opposite her as she stood drooping.

‘My little Margaret!’ said he, caressing her. ‘Let us hope as long as we can. I will hope, in spite of a thousand doctors. Bear up, Margaret, and be brave enough to hope!’

Margaret choked in trying to speak, and when she did it was very low.

‘I must try to be meek enough to trust. Oh, Frederick! mamma was getting to love me so! And I was getting to understand her. And now comes death to snap us asunder!’

‘Come, come! Let us go upstairs, and do something, rather than waste time that may be so precious. Thinking has often made me sad, darling; but doing never did. My motto is, “Do something, do good if you can; but, at any rate, do something.”’

‘Not excluding mischief,’ said Margaret, smiling faintly through her tears.

‘By no means. What I do exclude is remorse afterwards. Blot your misdeeds out by a good deed, as soon as you can; just as at school we did a correct sum on the slate, over an incorrect one.’

If Margaret thought Frederick’s theory rather a rough one at first, she saw how he carried it out. After a bad night with his mother, he was busy next morning before breakfast, allowing some rest for Dixon, who was beginning to feel the fatigues of watching. At breakfast-time, he interested Mr. Hale with vivid, rattling accounts of the wild life he had led in Mexico and South America. Margaret would have despaired of rousing Mr. Hale out of his dejection; but Fred, true to his theory, did something perpetually; and talking was the only thing to be done, besides eating, at breakfast.

Before the end of that day, Dr. Donaldson’s opinion was proved to be too well founded. Convulsions came on; and when they ceased, Mrs. Hale was unconscious. Her husband might lie by her shaking the bed with his sobs; her son’s strong arms might lift her tenderly into a comfortable position; her daughter might bathe her face; but she knew them not. She would never recognise them again, till they met in Heaven.

Before the morning came all was over.

Then Margaret rose from her despondency, and became as a strong angel of comfort to her father and brother. For Frederick broke down now, and all his theories were of no use to him. He cried so violently in his little room at night, that Margaret and Dixon came down to warn him to be quiet: for the walls were thin, and the next-door neighbours might easily hear his passionate sobs.

Margaret sat with her father in the room with the dead. From time to time, he uncovered the face, and stroked it gently, making a kind of soft inarticulate noise, like that of some mother-animal caressing her young. He took no notice of Margaret's presence. Once or twice she kissed him; and he submitted, giving her a little push away when she had done, as if it disturbed him from his absorption in the dead. On hearing Frederick's cries, he shook his head. 'Poor boy!' he said, and took no more notice.

Margaret's heart ached. She could not think of her own loss in attending to her father. The night was wearing away, and the day was at hand, when her voice broke upon the stillness of the room, with a clearness that startled even herself:

'Let not your heart be troubled,' it said; and she went steadily on through all that chapter of unspeakable consolation.

CHAPTER 31

‘SHOULD AULD ACQUAINTANCE BE FORGOT?’

The chill, shivery October morning came; not the October morning of the country, with soft, silvery mists clearing before the sunbeams, but the October morning of Milton, whose silver mists were heavy fogs, and where the sun could only show long dusky streets when he did break through. Margaret went languidly about, helping Dixon. Her eyes were continually blinded by tears, but she had no time to cry. Her father and brother depended upon her; she must be working, planning, arranging the funeral.

When the fire was bright and crackling, and everything was ready for breakfast, and the tea-kettle was singing away, Margaret gave a last look round the room before going to summon Mr. Hale and Frederick. She wanted everything to look as cheerful as possible; and yet the contrast between it and her own thoughts forced her into sudden weeping. She was hiding her face so that no one might hear her cry, when she was touched on the shoulder by Dixon.

‘Come, Miss Hale, my dear! You must not give way, or where shall we all be? There’s the funeral to manage; and Master Frederick’s crazed with crying, and master, poor gentleman, goes about as if he was lost. It’s bad, my dear, I know; but death comes to us all; and you’re well off never to have lost any friend till now.’

Perhaps so. But this seemed a loss not to be compared to any other. Nevertheless, the unusual tenderness of the prim old servant touched Margaret to the heart. She smiled at Dixon; and went to tell her father and brother that breakfast was ready.

Mr. Hale came in like a sleep-walker. Frederick entered briskly, with a forced cheerfulness, grasped her hand, looked into her eyes, and burst into tears. She had to try and think of little nothings to say all breakfast-time, to prevent her companions from thinking too much about the last meal they had taken together.

After breakfast, she spoke to her father about the funeral. He shook his head, and agreed to all she proposed, though many of her propositions contradicted one another. Margaret was leaving the room when Mr. Hale beckoned her back.

‘Ask Mr. Bell,’ said he in a hollow voice.

‘Mr. Bell of Oxford!’ said she, a little surprised.

‘Yes. He was my grooms-man at our wedding.’

Margaret understood, and said, ‘I will write today.’ All morning she toiled on, longing for rest, but in a continual whirl of melancholy business.

Towards evening, Dixon said to her:

‘I’ve done it, miss. I was really afraid that master would have a stroke with grief. He’s been all this day with poor missus; talking to her as if she was alive. When I went in he would be quiet, but all in a maze like. I thought to myself, he ought to be roused. So I’ve been and told him, that I don’t think it’s safe for Master Frederick to be here. And I don’t. It was only on Tuesday, when I was out, that I met a Southampton man – young Leonards, old Leonards the draper’s son, as great a scamp as ever lived – who plagued his father almost to death, and then ran off to sea. I never could abide him. He was on the *Orion* at the same time as Master Frederick, I know; though I don’t recollect if he was there at the mutiny.’

‘Did he recognise you?’ said Margaret eagerly.

‘Why, that’s the worst of it. I don’t believe he would have known me but for my being such a fool as to call out his name. Says he, “Miss Dixon! who would ha’ thought of seeing you here? But perhaps I mistake, and you’re Miss Dixon no longer?” So I told him he might still address me as an unmarried lady, though if I hadn’t been so particular, I’d had good chances of matrimony. He was polite enough; but I asked after his father (who I knew had turned him out), as if they was best friends. So then, to spite me – for you see we were getting savage, for all we were so civil to each other – he began to inquire after Master Frederick, and said what a scrape he’d got into, and how he’d be hung for mutiny if ever he were caught, and how a hundred pound reward had been offered for catching him, and what a disgrace he had been to his family. So I said, there were other families who had far more cause to blush for their sons. To which he made answer, like the impudent chap he is, that if I knew of any young man who had been leading vicious courses, and wanted to turn steady, he’d lend a hand. He, indeed! Why, he’d corrupt a saint. I’ve not felt so bad for years. I could have cried to think I couldn’t spite him better, for he kept smiling in my face, while I was mad with him.’

‘But you did not tell him anything about Frederick?’

‘Not I,’ said Dixon. ‘He had never the grace to ask where I was staying; and I shouldn’t have told him if he had asked. He was waiting for a bus, and just then it drove up, and he hailed it. But he turned back before he got in, and said, “If you can help me to trap Lieutenant Hale, Miss Dixon, we’ll go partners in the reward. I know you’d like to be my partner, wouldn’t you? Don’t be shy.” And he jumped on the bus, and I saw his ugly face leering at me with a wicked smile.’

Margaret was made very uncomfortable by this account. ‘Have you told Frederick?’

‘No,’ said Dixon. ‘I were uneasy in my mind knowing that Leonards was in town; but there was so much else to think about that I did not dwell on it. But when I saw master sitting so stiff and sad, I thought it might rouse him to have to think of Master Frederick’s safety. So I told him all; and it has done master good. And if we’re to keep Master Frederick in hiding, he would have to go before Mr. Bell came.’

‘Oh, I’m not afraid of Mr. Bell; but I am afraid of this Leonards. What did he look like?’

‘A bad-looking fellow, miss. Whiskers such as I should be ashamed to wear – they are so red. And he was dressed in coarse fustian just like a working-man.’

It was evident that Frederick must go. Go, too, when he had promised to be such a support to his father and sister. Just as Margaret was thinking this, sitting by the drawing-room fire – her father restless and uneasy with this newly-aroused fear – Frederick came in. He kissed her forehead.

‘How wan you look, Margaret! You have been thinking of everybody, and no one has thought of you. Lie on this sofa – there is nothing for you to do.’

‘That is the worst thing,’ said Margaret sadly. But she went and lay down, and her brother sat on the floor by her side.

The two began to talk in a subdued tone. Margaret told him all that Dixon had related of her interview with young Leonards. Frederick’s lips closed with a long whew of dismay.

‘A worse sailor was never on board ship – nor a much worse man either. You know the whole affair?’

‘Yes, mamma told me.’

‘Well, when all the sailors who were good for anything were indignant with our captain, this fellow, to curry favour – pah! And to think of his being here! If he knew I was within twenty miles of him, he’d ferret me out to pay off old grudges. I’d rather anybody had the hundred pounds reward than that rascal. What a pity poor old Dixon could not be persuaded to give me up, and provide for her old age!’

‘Oh, Frederick, hush! Don’t talk so.’

Mr. Hale came towards them, eager and trembling. He had overheard, and took Frederick’s hand, saying:

‘My boy, you must go. You have done all you could – you have been a comfort to her.’

‘I declare, I’ve a good mind to face it out, and stand my trial,’ said Frederick. ‘If I could only pick up my evidence! I cannot endure the thought of being in the power of a blackguard like Leonards. I could almost have enjoyed – in other circumstances – this stolen visit: it has had all the charm of forbidden pleasures.’

‘One of the earliest things I can remember,’ said Margaret, ‘was your being in great disgrace, Fred, for stealing apples. We had plenty of our own, but someone had told you that stolen fruit tasted sweetest, and off you went a-robbing. You have not changed much since then.’

‘Yes – you must go,’ repeated Mr. Hale, not following the zig-zag remarks of his children.

Margaret and Frederick looked at each other with quick sympathy. So much was understood that could not be put into words. Frederick said:

‘Do you know, Margaret, I nearly gave both Dixon and myself a good fright this afternoon. I was in my bedroom; I had heard a ring at the front door, but I thought the ringer must have gone away; so I was just coming out into the passage, when I saw Dixon; and she frowned and kicked me into hiding again. I kept the door open, and heard a message given to some man in my father’s study, who then went away. Who could it have been? Some shopman? It was a great powerful fellow.’

‘It was Mr. Thornton,’ said Mr. Hale.

‘Mr. Thornton!’ said Margaret, a little surprised. ‘I thought—’

‘Well, little one, what did you think?’ asked Frederick.

‘Oh, only,’ said she, reddening, ‘I thought you meant someone come on an errand, not a gentleman.’

‘I took him for a shopman,’ said Frederick, carelessly.

Margaret was silent. She remembered how at first she had spoken of Mr. Thornton just as Frederick was doing. It was only natural, and yet she was a little annoyed by it. She wanted to make Frederick understand what kind of person Mr. Thornton was – but she was tongue-tied.

Mr. Hale went on. ‘He came to offer any assistance in his power. But I could not see him. I told Dixon to ask him if he would like to see you.’

‘He has been a very agreeable acquaintance, has he not?’ asked Frederick.

‘A very kind friend,’ said Margaret, when her father did not answer.

Frederick was silent for a time. At last he spoke:

‘Margaret, it is painful to think I can never thank those who have shown you kindness. Your acquaintances and mine must be separate – unless I run the chances of a court-martial, or you both come to Spain.’ He threw out this last suggestion as a kind of feeler; and then suddenly made the plunge.

‘I wish you would. I have a good position,’ continued he, reddening. ‘That Dolores Barbour that I was telling you of, Margaret – I only wish you knew her; I am

sure you would like – no, love is the right word – you would love her, father, if you knew her. She is not eighteen; but if she is in the same mind next year, she is to be my wife. Mr. Barbour won't let us call it an engagement. But if you would come, you would find friends everywhere, besides Dolores. Think of it, father.'

'No more removals for me,' said Mr. Hale. 'One removal has cost me my wife. No more removals. She will be here; and here will I stay.'

'Oh, Frederick,' said Margaret, 'tell us more about Dolores. I am so glad. You will have someone to love and care for you out there.'

'In the first place, she is a Roman Catholic. But my father's change of opinion – nay, Margaret, don't sigh.'

Margaret had reason to sigh a little more before long. Frederick himself was Roman Catholic, though not officially as yet. This, then, was the reason why he had shown so little distress at her father's leaving the Anglican Church. Margaret gave up talking about this subject. Returning to the engagement, she began to see it in a fresh light:

'But for her sake, Fred, you surely will try and clear yourself of the charges brought against you. If there were to be a court-martial, and you could find your witnesses, you might show how your disobedience to authority was because that authority was unworthily exercised.'

'Who is to hunt up my witnesses?' responded Frederick. 'All of them are sailors, drafted off to other ships, except those whose evidence would go for very little, as they took part in the affair. And you don't know what a court-martial is. You consider it as an assembly where justice is administered, but really it is a court where authority weighs nine-tenths in the balance, and evidence forms only the other tenth.'

'But is it not worth trying, to see how much evidence might be discovered and arrayed on your behalf? At present, you are believed guilty without any shadow of excuse. You have never tried to justify yourself. Now, for Miss Barbour's sake, make your conduct as clear as you can in the eye of the world. She trusts in you, I am sure; but you ought not to let her ally herself to one under such a serious charge, without showing the world exactly how you stand. You disobeyed authority – that was bad; but to have stood by passively while the authority was brutally used, would have been infinitely worse. For Dolores' sake, people ought to know your motives.'

'But I am not sure enough of the purity of my judges to give myself up to a court-martial, even if I could bring a whole array of witnesses.'

'Will you consult a lawyer as to your chances?' asked Margaret, turning red.

'I must first catch my lawyer, and have a look at him, before I confide in him. Many a briefless barrister might decide he could earn a hundred pounds very easily by giving me up to justice.'

'I know a lawyer on whose honour I can rely; people speak very highly of his cleverness; and I think he would take a good deal of trouble for any of – of Aunt Shaw's relations. Mr. Henry Lennox, papa.'

'It is a good idea,' said Mr. Hale. 'But don't propose anything which will detain Frederick in England.'

'You could go to London tomorrow evening by overnight train,' suggested Margaret.

Mr. Hale groaned. 'I can't bear to part with you, and yet I am miserable with anxiety as long as you stop here.'

'Well then,' said Margaret, 'listen to my plan. He gets to London on Friday morning. I will give him a note to Mr. Lennox; his chambers are in the Temple.'

‘I will write down a list of all the names I can remember on board the *Orion*, and leave it with him to ferret them out. He is Edith’s husband’s brother, isn’t he? I remember him from your letters. I have money in Barbour’s hands. I can pay a pretty long bill, if there is any chance of success.’

‘You can sail from London as well as from Liverpool?’ asked Margaret.

‘To be sure, little goose. Wherever I feel water heaving under a plank, there I feel at home. I’ll pick up some craft or other to take me off, never fear. I won’t stay twenty-four hours in London.’

It was rather a comfort to Margaret that Frederick looked over her shoulder as she wrote to Mr. Lennox. It made her write steadily and concisely, despite the awkwardness of being the first to resume communications after his proposal. The note was taken from her before she had even had time to look it over, and treasured up in a pocket-book, out of which fell a long lock of black hair, which caused Frederick’s eyes to glow with pleasure.

‘Now you would like to see that, wouldn’t you?’ said he. ‘No! you must wait till you see her herself.’

CHAPTER 32

MISCHANCES

All the next day they sat together – they three. Mr. Hale hardly spoke except when his children asked him questions, and forced him, as it were, into the present. Frederick's grief was no more to be seen or heard; for now he was ashamed of having been so battered down by emotion; and though his sorrow was deep and real, and would last out his life, it was never to be spoken of again.

Margaret, not so passionate at first, was suffering more now. At times she cried a good deal; and her mournful tenderness was deepened whenever she looked at Frederick, and thought of his rapidly approaching departure. She was glad he was going, however, on her father's account. The anxious terror in which Mr. Hale lived lest his son should be detected far out-weighed the pleasure he took from his presence. He started at every unusual sound; and was not comfortable unless Frederick sat out of view of anyone entering the room. Towards evening he said:

'You will go with Frederick to the station, Margaret? I shall want to know he is safely off – I should be fancying someone had recognised him, and stopped him, unless you could tell me you had seen him off. And go to the Outwood station. There are not so many people about. What time is your train, Fred?'

'Ten minutes past six; very nearly dark.'

'But it is a well-lit road all the way home,' said Margaret. 'I was out last week much later.'

Margaret was thankful when Frederick's parting with his father was over. She hurried Frederick into the cab, in order to shorten a scene which she saw was bitterly painful to her father. In consequence they found, on reaching Outwood, that they had nearly twenty minutes to spare. The booking-office was not open, so they could not even buy the ticket. So they went down the flight of steps below the railway, where there was a path crossing a field alongside the road, and walked backwards and forwards for a few minutes.

Frederick took his sister's hand affectionately.

'Margaret! I will consult Mr. Lennox as to the chance of exculpating myself, so that I may return to England whenever I choose. I can't bear to think of your lonely position if anything should happen to my father. He looks sadly changed – terribly shaken. I wish you could get him to think of the Cadiz plan. What could you do if he were taken away? You have no friend near.'

Margaret could hardly keep from crying. Frederick was bringing before her an event which she herself felt was not improbable, so severely had the cares of the last few months affected Mr. Hale. But she said:

'There have been such unexpected changes in my life during these last two years, that it is not worth while trying to predict the future. I try to think only of the present.' She paused; they stood still for a moment, by the stile leading into the road; the setting sun fell on their faces. Frederick held her hand, and looked with wistful anxiety into her face, as she went on:

'We shall write often to one another, and I will promise to tell you every worry I have. Papa is' – she started a little, and Frederick turned to look at the road, along

which a horseman was slowly riding, just passing the stile where they stood. Margaret bowed; her bow was stiffly returned.

‘Who is that?’ said Frederick, once he was past. Margaret was a little drooping, a little flushed, as she replied:

‘Mr. Thornton; you saw him before, you know.’

‘Only his back. He is an unprepossessing-looking fellow. What a scowl he has!’

‘Something has happened to vex him,’ said Margaret, apologetically.

‘It must be time to go and get my ticket. If I had known how dark it would be, we wouldn’t have sent away the cab.’

‘Oh, don’t fidget about that. I can take a cab here, if I like; or go back by train, when I should have people and lamps all the way from Milton Station. Don’t think of me; take care of yourself. I am sick with the thought that Leonards may be in the same train with you. Check the carriage before you get in.’

They went back to the station, and Margaret bought the ticket. Some idle-looking young men were lounging about. Margaret thought she had seen one of them before, and returned him a proud look of offended dignity for his impertinent stare of admiration. She went hastily outside to her brother, and took hold of his arm.

‘Have you got your bag? Let us walk about here on the platform,’ said she, a little flurried, her bravery oozing out rather faster than she liked to acknowledge even to herself. She heard a step following them along the flagstones; it stopped when they stopped, looking out along the line and hearing the whizz of the coming train.

They did not speak; their hearts were too full. Another moment, and the train would be here, and he would be gone. Margaret almost repented entreating him to go to London; it was throwing more chances of detection in his way. If he had sailed for Spain from Liverpool, he might have been off in two or three hours.

Frederick turned round, facing the gas-lamp. A man dressed as a railway porter started forward; a bad-looking man, who seemed to have drunk himself into a state of brutality.

‘By your leave, miss!’ said he, pushing Margaret rudely aside, and seizing Frederick by the collar. ‘Your name is Hale, I believe?’

In an instant – how, Margaret did not see, for everything danced before her eyes – Frederick had tripped him up, and he fell three or four feet from the platform to the soft ground below. There he lay.

‘Run, run!’ gasped Margaret. ‘The train is here. It was Leonards, was it? oh, run! I will carry your bag.’ A door opened in a carriage – he jumped in; and as he leant out to say, ‘God bless you!’ the train rushed past her; and she was left standing alone.

She was terribly sick and faint. She was thankful to be able to turn into the ladies’ waiting-room, and sit down for an instant. At first she could do nothing but gasp for breath. It was such a hurry; such a sickening alarm. If the train had not arrived, the man would have jumped up again and called for assistance to arrest Frederick. She wondered if the man had got up; she wondered if he could have been seriously hurt.

She ventured out; the platform was lit, but quite deserted. She went to the end, and looked over, somewhat fearfully. No one was there; and then she was glad she had made herself go and inspect it, for otherwise terrible thoughts would have haunted her dreams. Even as it was, she was so frightened that she felt she could not walk home. She would wait for the down train.

But what if Leonards recognised her as Frederick's companion! She peered about, before venturing into the booking-office to buy her ticket. There were only some railway officials standing about, talking loudly.

'So Leonards has been drinking again!' said one. 'He'll need all his boasted influence to keep his place this time.'

'Where is he?' asked another, while Margaret, her back towards them, was counting her change with trembling fingers, not daring to turn round until she heard the answer.

'I don't know. He came in not five minutes ago, with some story or other about a fall he'd had, swearing awfully; and wanted to borrow some money to go to London by the next up-train. I'd better things to do than listen to him; so I told him to go about his business; and he went off.'

'He's at the nearest inn, I'll be bound,' said the first speaker. 'Your money would have gone there too, if you'd been such a fool as to lend it.'

'Catch me doing that! I know better. Why, he has never paid me back that five shillings' – and so they went on.

Now all Margaret's anxiety was for the train to come. She hid once more in the ladies' waiting-room, and fancied every noise was Leonards' step – every loud and boisterous voice was his. But the train drew up; she was civilly helped into a carriage by a porter, at whom she dared not look till they were in motion, and then she saw that it was not Leonards.

CHAPTER 33

PEACE

Home seemed unnaturally quiet after all this terror and noise. Her father sat in his usual chair, in one of his sad waking dreams. In the kitchen, Dixon was scolding Mary Higgins in an energetic, angry whisper, in deference to the dead one lying in the house.

Margaret had resolved not to mention her fright to her father. There was no use in speaking about it; it had ended well; the only thing to be feared was lest Leonards should manage to follow Frederick to London, and hunt him out there. But that was unlikely; and Margaret determined not to torment herself by thinking of what she could not prevent. Frederick would be on his guard; and in a day or two he would be safely out of England.

‘I suppose we shall hear from Mr. Bell tomorrow,’ she said to her father. ‘He may be here tomorrow evening.’

‘If he cannot come, I shall ask Mr. Thornton to go with me to the funeral. I cannot go alone. I should break down.’

‘Don’t ask Mr. Thornton, papa. Let me go with you,’ said Margaret, impetuously.

‘You! My dear, women do not generally go.’

‘No: women of our class don’t go, because they have no control over their emotions, and yet are ashamed of showing them. Poor women go, and don’t care if they are seen overwhelmed with grief. But I promise you, papa, I will be no trouble. Don’t have a stranger, and leave me out. Dear papa! if Mr. Bell cannot come, I shall go.’

Mr. Bell could not come. He had the gout. It was a most affectionate and regretful letter. He hoped to pay them a visit soon; his agent had told him that he needed to attend to his Milton property; otherwise he avoided coming near Milton, and now the only thing that would reconcile him to this necessary visit was the idea that he could see and comfort his old friend.

Margaret had great difficulty in persuading her father not to invite Mr. Thornton. She had an indescribable repugnance to this step being taken. The night before the funeral, a stately note came from Mrs. Thornton, saying that, at her son’s desire, their carriage should attend the funeral, if it was not disagreeable to the family. Margaret tossed the note to her father.

‘Oh, don’t let us have these formalities,’ said she. ‘Let us go alone – you and me, papa. They don’t care for us, or else he would have offered to go himself, and not have proposed sending an empty carriage.’

‘I thought you were averse to his going, Margaret,’ said Mr. Hale in some surprise.

‘And so I am. I don’t want him to come at all. But this seems such a mockery of mourning that I did not expect it from him.’ She startled her father by bursting into tears. She had been so subdued in her grief, so thoughtful and patient, that he could not understand her. She seemed agitated and restless; and at her father’s tenderness, she only cried the more.

She passed so bad a night that she was ill prepared for the additional anxiety caused by a letter from Frederick. Mr. Lennox was out of town; his clerk said that he would return by the following Tuesday at the latest. Therefore Frederick had decided to stay in London a day or two longer. Margaret might be assured that after their alarm at the railway station, he would take every precaution against being tracked by Leonards.

Margaret was thankful that she received this letter while her father was absent. If he had been present, he would have expected her to read it aloud to him, and it would have worried him greatly. There was not merely the fact of Frederick's delay in London, but allusions to the recognition at Milton, and the possibility of a pursuit, which made her blood run cold; how then would it have affected her father? Many a time did Margaret repent of having urged the plan of consulting Mr. Lennox. At the time, it had seemed as if it would cause so little delay – and now it seemed so undesirable.

Her father had forgotten that they had any reason to expect a letter from Frederick that morning. He was absorbed only in the coming funeral, and the final removal of his wife from his sight. He trembled pitifully as the undertaker's man was arranging his crape draperies around him.

'Pray for me, Margaret,' he murmured. 'I have no strength left. I cannot pray. I try to bear it: indeed I do. I know it is God's will. But I cannot see why she died.'

Margaret sat by him in the coach, almost supporting him in her arms; and repeating all the noble verses of holy comfort that she could remember. Her voice never faltered; and she herself gained strength by doing this. Her father's lips moved after her, repeating the well-known texts; it was terrible to see his patient struggle for resignation.

At the church, Margaret's fortitude nearly gave way when she noticed Nicholas Higgins and his daughter, standing a little aloof. Nicholas wore his usual fustian clothes, but had a bit of black stuff sewn round his hat – a mark of mourning which he had never shown to his daughter Bessy's memory. But Mr. Hale saw nothing. He went on mechanically repeating to himself all the funeral service as it was read by the clergyman; he sighed when all was ended; and then, putting his hand on Margaret's arm, he mutely entreated to be led away, as if he were blind.

Dixon sobbed aloud; she covered her face with her handkerchief, and did not perceive that the crowd was dispersing, till she was spoken to by someone close at hand. It was Mr. Thornton. He had been present all the time, standing with bent head behind a group of people, so that no one had seen him.

'I beg your pardon – but can you tell me how Mr. Hale is? And Miss Hale, too?'

'Of course, sir. They are much as is to be expected. Master is terribly broke down. Miss Hale bears up better than likely.'

Mr. Thornton would rather have heard that she was suffering natural sorrow. In the first place, there was selfishness enough in him to have taken pleasure in the idea that his great love might come in to comfort and console her; much the same kind of strange passionate pleasure which stings a mother's heart when her drooping infant nestles close to her. But this delicious vision of what might have been was miserably disturbed by the recollection of what he had seen near the Outwood station.

Miserably disturbed! That is not strong enough. He was haunted by the remembrance of the handsome young man, with whom she stood in such a familiar

attitude; and the remembrance shot through him like an agony, till it made him clench his hands tight to subdue the pain. So late, so far from home!

It took a great moral effort to rouse his trust in Margaret's pure maidenliness; as soon as the effort ceased, his trust dropped down dead: and wild fancies chased each other like dreams through his mind. Here was a little piece of miserable, gnawing confirmation. 'She bore up better than likely.' She had then some hope to look to, so bright that it could lighten the dark hours of a daughter newly made motherless.

Yes! he knew how she would love. He had not loved her without gaining that instinctive knowledge of what capabilities were in her. Her soul would walk in glorious sunlight if any man was worthy to win back her love. Even in her mourning she would rest with a peaceful faith upon his sympathy. His sympathy! Whose? That other man's. And Mr. Thornton's pale grave face grew doubly wan and stern at Dixon's answer.

'I suppose I may call,' said he coldly. 'On Mr. Hale, I mean.'

He spoke as if it were a matter of indifference to him. But it was not so. For all his pain, he longed to see the author of it. Although he hated Margaret at times, he had a restless desire to renew her picture in his mind – a longing for the very atmosphere she breathed.

'I dare say, sir, master will see you.'

For some reason or other, Dixon never mentioned this interview with Mr. Thornton to Margaret. It might have been mere chance, but so it was that Margaret never heard that he had attended her poor mother's funeral.

CHAPTER 34

FALSE AND TRUE

The 'bearing up better than likely' was a terrible strain upon Margaret. Sometimes she thought she must give way, and cry out with pain, as the sudden sharp thought came across her, even during her apparently cheerful conversations with her father, that she no longer had a mother.

About Frederick, too, there was great uneasiness. By Tuesday Margaret was surprised and disheartened to find that there was still no letter. She was quite in the dark as to his plans, and her father was miserable, and kept pacing up and down the room. She tried to tranquillise him by reading aloud; but he could not listen for long. She was glad that she had not told him about their encounter with Leonards.

She was thankful to hear Mr. Thornton announced. His visit would force her father's thoughts into another channel.

He came straight up to her father, whose hands he took silently – holding them in his for a minute or two, while his look told of more sympathy than could be put into words. Then he turned to Margaret. She did not look 'better than likely'. Her stately beauty was dimmed with much watching and with many tears. The expression on her face was of gentle patient sadness, nay, of positive suffering. He had meant to greet her coldly; but he could not help going up to her, and saying the few necessary commonplace words in so tender a voice, that her eyes filled with tears, and she turned away to hide her emotion. She took her needlework and sat down very quiet.

Mr. Thornton's heart beat quick and strong, and for the time he utterly forgot the Outwood lane. He tried to talk to Mr. Hale: and his presence gave her father pleasure, Margaret saw.

Presently Dixon came to the door and said, 'Miss Hale, you are wanted.'

Dixon's manner was so flurried that Margaret turned sick at heart. Something had happened to Fred. She had no doubt of that. It was well that her father and Mr. Thornton were busy talking.

'What is it, Dixon?' asked Margaret, after shutting the drawing-room door.

'It's nothing, miss,' said Dixon, choking a little. 'Only a police-inspector. He wants to see you, miss. But I dare say, it's about nothing at all.'

'Did he name—' asked Margaret, almost inaudibly.

'No, miss; he named nothing. He only asked if you lived here, and if he could speak to you. Martha let him in; she has shown him into master's study.'

Margaret did not speak again till her hand was on the study door. Then she turned and said, 'Take care papa does not come down. Mr. Thornton is with him now.'

The inspector was almost daunted by the haughtiness of her manner as she entered. There was a controlled indignation in her face that gave her a superb air of disdain. She showed no surprise, no curiosity, but stood waiting for him to speak.

'I beg your pardon, ma'am, but my duty obliges me to ask you a few plain questions. A man has died at the Infirmary, in consequence of a fall received at Outwood station, between the hours of five and six on Thursday evening. At the time, this fall did not seem of much consequence; but it was rendered fatal, the doctors say, by the presence of some internal complaint, and the man's own habit of drinking.'

The large dark eyes, gazing straight into the inspector's face, dilated a little. Otherwise he observed no motion. She never trembled, but fixed him with her eye. Now, as he paused, she said, 'Well – go on!'

'An inquest will have to be held; there is some slight evidence that the blow, or push, or scuffle that caused the fall, was provoked by this poor fellow's tipsy impertinence to a young lady, walking with a man who pushed the deceased over the edge of the platform. This much was observed by someone on the platform, who, however, thought no more about the matter, as the blow seemed of slight consequence. There is some reason to identify the lady with yourself; in which case—'

'I was not there,' said Margaret, still keeping her expressionless eyes fixed on his face.

The inspector bowed but did not speak. The lady before him showed no emotion, no fluttering fear, no desire to end the interview. The information he had received was very vague; one of the porters had seen a scuffle at the other end of the platform, between Leonards and a gentleman with a lady, but heard no noise; and soon after the train had started, he had been almost knocked down by the headlong run of the enraged Leonards, who was cursing awfully. The station-master had told the inspector that a young lady and gentleman had been there about that hour – the lady remarkably handsome, and said by a grocer's assistant who was there to be a Miss Hale of Crampton.

Leonards himself, half-mad with rage and pain, had gone to the nearest gin-palace, where the busy waiters did not attend much to his tipsy words. However, they remembered his starting up and cursing himself for not having thought of the electric telegraph, for some purpose unknown. They believed that he was going to telegraph when, overcome by pain or drink, he had lain down in the road, where the police had found him and taken him to the Infirmary.

There he had never recovered full consciousness, although a magistrate was fetched in case he spoke; but he was rambling about being at sea, and mixing up names of captains and lieutenants in an indistinct manner with those of his fellow porters. His last words were a curse on the 'Cornish trick' which had, he said, made him a hundred pounds poorer than he ought to have been. The inspector ran over all this in his mind while Margaret stood awaiting his next words with supreme composure.

'Then, madam, I have your denial that you were the lady accompanying the gentleman who struck the blow, or gave the push, which caused the death of this poor man?'

A quick, sharp pain went through Margaret's brain. 'Oh God! that I knew Frederick were safe!' The inspector was a little struck by the form of her answer, which sounded like a mechanical repetition of her first reply.

'I was not there,' said she, slowly and heavily, never ceasing from that glassy, dream-like stare. His quick suspicions were aroused by this dull echo of her former denial.

He put away his notebook in a very deliberate manner. Still she did not move.

'Miss Hale, I may have to call on you again. I may have to summon you to appear at the inquest, and prove an alibi, if my witnesses persist in deposing to your presence at the unfortunate event.' He looked at her sharply. She was still perfectly quiet, with no change of colour, and he was a little abashed by her regal composure. His one witness must have mistaken her identity. He went on:

‘It is very unlikely, ma’am, that I shall have to do anything of the kind. I hope you will excuse me for doing what is only my duty.’

Margaret bowed her head as he went towards the door. Her lips were stiff and dry. She could not speak. But she walked before him to the door of the house, which she threw wide for his exit. Once he was out, she shut the door, and locked it.

Then she went into the study, paused – tottered forward – swayed for an instant, and fell on the floor in a dead swoon.

CHAPTER 35

EXPIATION

Mr. Thornton sat on. He felt that his company gave pleasure to Mr. Hale; and was touched by the plaintive entreaty 'Don't go yet,' which his poor friend begged from time to time. He wondered that Margaret did not return; but it was with no view of seeing her that he lingered. He was deeply interested in all her father said.

It was curious how Mr. Thornton's presence could unlock the secret thoughts which Mr. Hale kept shut up even from Margaret. Whether he was afraid of his own reaction to her keen sympathy, or whether he felt she would have shrunk from his doubts and fears at such a time – whatever the reason, he could unburden himself better to Mr. Thornton than to her. Mr. Thornton said very little; but every sentence he uttered added to Mr. Hale's regard for him. If he paused in the expression of some remembered agony, Mr. Thornton's two or three words would complete the sentence, and show how deeply he understood. Mr. Thornton, instead of being shocked by any doubts, seemed to have passed through that very stage of thought himself, and could suggest where to find the ray of light which should make the dark places plain. Busy man of action though he was, there was a deep religion binding him to God in his heart, through all his mistakes. They never spoke of such things again, as it happened; but this one conversation knit them together.

And all this while, Margaret lay as still and white as death on the study floor! Her burden had been heavy and long carried; and she had been very meek and patient under it, till all at once her faith had given way, and she had groped in vain for help.

The first symptom of returning life was a quivering about the lips – a mute attempt at speech, that sank into stillness. Then, feebly leaning on her arms to steady herself, Margaret gathered herself up, and rose. Her comb had fallen out of her hair; and with an intuitive desire to remove the traces of weakness, she sought for it, although in the course of the search, she had to sit down and recover strength. She tried to remember the details which had thrown her into such deadly fright; but she could not. She only understood two facts – that Frederick had been in danger of being pursued and detected in London, and that she had lied to save him.

There was one comfort; her lie had gained him time. If the inspector came again tomorrow, after she had received a letter assuring her of her brother's safety, she would brave shame, and acknowledge before a crowded courtroom that she had withheld the truth. But if the inspector came before she heard from Frederick, why! she would tell that lie again; though how the words would come out without betraying her falsehood, she did not know. But it would gain time for Frederick.

She was roused by Dixon's entrance into the room; she had just let out Mr. Thornton.

He had hardly gone ten steps in the street, before a man came up to him, touching his hat. It was the police-inspector.

Mr. Thornton had obtained for him his first situation in the police, and had heard from time to time of his progress, but they had not often met. At first Mr. Thornton did not remember him.

'My name is Watson – George Watson, sir –'

'Ah, yes! I recollect. You are getting on famously, I hear.'

‘Yes, I ought to thank you, sir. But it is on a little matter of business I make so bold as to speak to you now. I believe you were the magistrate who attended to take down the deposition of a poor man who died in the Infirmary last night.’

‘Yes,’ replied Mr. Thornton. ‘I went and heard some kind of a rambling statement, which the clerk said was of no great use. I’m afraid he was a drunken fellow, though he came to his death by violence at last. One of my mother’s servants was engaged to him, I believe, and she is in great distress. What about him?’

‘Why, sir, his death is oddly mixed up with somebody in the house I saw you coming out of just now; Mr. Hale’s, I believe.’

‘Yes?’ said Mr. Thornton, looking into the inspector’s face with sudden interest.

‘Why, sir, I have got a pretty distinct chain of evidence, inculcating a gentleman who was walking with Miss Hale that night at the Outwood station, as the man who struck or pushed Leonards off the platform. But the young lady denies that she was there at the time.’

‘Miss Hale denies she was there!’ repeated Mr. Thornton, in an altered voice. ‘Tell me, what evening was it? What time?’

‘About six o’clock, on the evening of Thursday, the twenty-sixth.’

They walked on, side by side, in silence for a minute or two. The inspector was the first to speak.

‘You see, sir, there is like to be a coroner’s inquest; and I’ve got a young man who is pretty sure that he saw Miss Hale at the station, walking about with a gentleman, not five minutes before one of the porters saw a scuffle, which he set down to some of Leonards’ impudence – but which led to the fall which caused his death. And seeing you come out of the very house, sir, I thought I might make bold to ask – you see, it’s awkward, and one doesn’t like to doubt the word of a respectable young woman unless one has strong proof to the contrary.’

‘And she denied having been at the station that evening!’ repeated Mr. Thornton, in a low, brooding tone.

‘Yes, sir, twice. I told her I should call again, and I was just on my way there after talking to the witness again when I saw you. I thought I would ask your advice, both as the magistrate who saw Leonards on his death-bed, and as the gentleman who got me my berth in the force.’

‘You were quite right,’ said Mr. Thornton. ‘Don’t take any steps till you have seen me again.’

‘The young lady will expect me to call.’

‘I only want to delay you an hour. It’s now three. Come to my warehouse at four.’

‘Very well, sir!’

And they parted company. Mr. Thornton hurried to his warehouse, and, sternly forbidding his clerks to allow anyone to interrupt him, he went to his private room, and locked the door. Then he indulged himself in the torture of thinking it all over.

How could he have lulled himself into pity by her tearful image, and have forgotten the savage, distrustful jealousy with which the sight of her and another man – at such an hour – in such a place – had filled him! How could one so pure have stooped from her decorous and noble manner of bearing! But was it decorous?

He hated himself for the idea that forced itself upon him, just for an instant, and yet thrilled him with its old potency of attraction towards her image. And then this falsehood – how terrible her dread must be of some shame to be revealed. After all,

the provocation given by such a man as Leonards might be more than enough to justify anyone stating the circumstances openly! How creeping and deadly that fear which could bow down the truthful Margaret to falsehood! He could almost pity her. What would be the end of it? She could not have considered; if there was an inquest and the young man came forward—

Suddenly he started up. There should be no inquest. He would save Margaret. He would take the responsibility of preventing the inquest. He had heard the medical testimony from the surgeon the night before, and it was doubtful; the doctors had discovered an internal disease far advanced, and sure to prove fatal. They had stated that death might have been accelerated by the fall, or by the subsequent drinking and exposure to cold.

If he had only known how Margaret would have become involved in the affair – if he had foreseen that she would have stained her whiteness by a falsehood, he could have saved her by a word; for the necessity of an inquest had hung in the balance only the night before. Miss Hale might love another – was indifferent and contemptuous to him – but he would yet do her faithful acts of service of which she should never know. He might despise her, but the woman whom he had once loved should be kept from shame; and shame it would be to lie in a public court.

Very grey and stern did Mr. Thornton look, as he passed out through his wondering clerks. He was away about half an hour; and scarcely less stern did he look when he returned, although his errand had been successful.

He wrote two lines on a slip of paper, put it in an envelope, and sealed it up. This he gave to one of the clerks, saying:

‘I asked Watson – he who was a packer in the warehouse, and who went into the police – to call on me at four o’clock. But I need to see a gentleman from Liverpool before he leaves town. Give this note to Watson when he calls.’

The note contained these words:

‘There will be no inquest. Medical evidence not sufficient to justify it. Take no further steps. I have not seen the coroner; but I will take the responsibility.’

‘Well,’ thought Watson, ‘it relieves me from an awkward job. None of my witnesses seemed certain of anything except the young woman. The porter had seen a scuffle; but when he found it was likely to bring him in as a witness, then it might not have been a scuffle, only a little larking, and Leonards might have jumped off the platform – he would not stick to anything. And Jennings, the shopman – well, I doubt if I could have got him up to an oath after he heard that Miss Hale denied it. It would have been a troublesome job. And now I must go and tell them they won’t be wanted.’

He accordingly went to Mr. Hale’s that evening. Her father and Dixon had tried to persuade Margaret to go to bed; but neither of them knew the reason for her continued refusals to do so. Dixon had learnt only part of the truth. Margaret would not tell any human being of what she had said, and she did not reveal the fatal end to Leonards’ fall. Mr. Hale was so miserably uneasy at her wan appearance that, at last, she consented to prepare for bed. She thought the inspector would not call again that night, as it was already past nine o’clock.

‘You will go to bed soon, papa, won’t you? Don’t sit up alone!’

What his answer was she did not hear; for there was a low ring at the door-bell. She kissed her father and glided rapidly downstairs.

‘Don’t come, Dixon; I will open the door. I know it is him – I must manage it myself.’

‘As you please, miss!’ said Dixon testily; ‘but you are more dead than alive.’
‘Am I?’ said Margaret. Her eyes were aglow, and her cheeks flushed, though her lips were livid still.

She opened the door to the Inspector, and led him into the study.

‘You are late!’ said she. ‘Well?’ She held her breath for the answer.

‘I’m sorry to have given any unnecessary trouble, ma’am. After all, they’ve given up all thoughts of holding an inquest. I have had people to see, or I should have been here before now.’

‘Then it is ended,’ said Margaret. ‘There is to be no further enquiry.’

‘I believe I’ve got Mr. Thornton’s note about me,’ said the Inspector, fumbling in his pocket-book.

‘Mr. Thornton’s!’

‘Yes! he’s a magistrate – ah! here it is.’ She could not read it. The words swam before her. But she held it, and looked at it as if she were intently studying it.

‘I’m sure, ma’am, it’s a great weight off my mind; for the evidence was so uncertain, you see. I met Mr. Thornton this morning, just as he was coming out of this house, and, as he’s an old friend of mine, besides being the magistrate who saw Leonards last night, I made bold to tell him of my difficulty.’

Margaret sighed deeply. She did not want to hear any more; she wished that the man would go. She forced herself to speak.

‘Thank you for calling. It is very late.’ As he held out his hand for the note, she continued, ‘It is a cramped sort of writing. I could not read it; will you just read it to me?’

He read it aloud to her.

‘Thank you. You told Mr. Thornton that I was not there?’

‘Oh, of course, ma’am. I’m sorry now that I acted upon information which seems to have been erroneous. At first the young shop-man was so positive; and now he says that he doubted all along, and hopes that his mistake won’t have annoyed you so as to lose your custom. Good night, ma’am.’

‘Good night.’ She rang the bell for Dixon, who showed him out.

‘It is all right!’ said Margaret to Dixon; and then sped upstairs, entered her bedchamber, and bolted her door.

She threw herself, dressed as she was, upon her bed. She was too exhausted to think. Half an hour or more elapsed before her cramped position, and the chilliness, roused her. Then she began to recall, to wonder.

Her first thought was that all this sickening alarm was over; that the strain was past. The next was a wish to remember every word of the Inspector’s which related to Mr. Thornton. When had he seen him? What had Mr. Thornton said? What had he done? Until she could recollect the exact words of his note, her mind refused to go on.

But the next conviction she came to was clear enough; Mr. Thornton had seen her close to Outwood station on the fatal night, and had been told of her denial that she was there. She stood as a liar in his eyes. She *was* a liar. She had no thought of penitence before God; nothing but chaos and night surrounded the one lurid fact that, in Mr. Thornton’s eyes, she was degraded.

She never dreamed that Mr. Thornton, or anyone, might find cause for suspicion in her accompanying her brother. It was the lie that shamed her. Her false, wrong act was known to him, and he had a right to judge her.

‘Oh, Frederick! Frederick!’ she cried, ‘what have I not sacrificed for you!’ Even when she fell asleep her thoughts were compelled to travel the same circle, only with exaggerated and monstrous circumstances of pain.

When she awoke a new idea flashed upon her. Mr. Thornton had learnt her falsehood before he went to the coroner; so he had possibly done so in order to spare her the repetition of her denial. But she pushed this notion aside with the sick wilfulness of a child. If it were so, she felt no gratitude to him, as it only showed her how keenly he must have seen that she was disgraced already. She would have gone through the whole – she would have perjured herself again to save Frederick, rather than Mr. Thornton should have had the knowledge that prompted him to save her.

What ill-fate brought him in contact with the Inspector? What made him be the very magistrate who received Leonards’ deposition? What had Leonards said? For all she knew, Mr. Thornton might already be aware of the accusation against Frederick, through Mr. Bell. If so, he had striven to save the son who came to attend his mother’s death-bed. And under this idea she could feel grateful – but not if his interference had been prompted by contempt.

Oh! had anyone such just cause to feel contempt for her? Mr. Thornton, above all people, on whom she had looked down from her imaginary heights till now! She suddenly found herself at his feet, and was strangely distressed at her fall. She shrank from admitting to herself how much she valued his respect and good opinion. Whenever this idea presented itself to her at the end of a long avenue of thoughts, she turned away from it.

Mr. Hale had given orders that she was not to be disturbed; but by and by the door opened cautiously, and Dixon put her head in. Seeing that Margaret was awake, she came forwards with a letter.

‘Here’s something to do you good, miss. A letter from Master Frederick.’

‘Thank you, Dixon. How late it is!’

She spoke very languidly, and let Dixon lay it on the counterpane before her.

‘You want your breakfast, I’m sure. I will bring it you in a minute.’

Margaret did not reply; she let Dixon go; she felt that she must be alone before she could open that letter.

She opened it at last. The first thing that caught her eye was the date: two days previously, so he had written when he had promised. It was hastily written, but perfectly satisfactory. He had seen Henry Lennox, who knew enough of the case to shake his head over it, and tell him he had done a very daring thing in returning to England, with such an accusation hanging over him. But when they had talked it over, Mr. Lennox had acknowledged that there might be some chance of acquittal, if he could find credible witnesses. Otherwise it would be a great risk to stand trial. He would examine the case.

‘It struck me,’ wrote Frederick, ‘that your introduction, little sister of mine, went a long way. Is it so? He made many inquiries, I can assure you. He seemed a sharp, intelligent fellow, and in a good practice too. I have just caught a packet on the point of sailing – I am off in five minutes. I may have to come back to England again on this business, so keep my visit secret. I shall send my father some rare old sherry – my dear love to him – God bless him. – here’s my cab. P.S. What an escape that was!’

Margaret turned to the envelope; it was marked ‘Too late.’ The letter had probably been trusted to some careless waiter, who had forgotten to post it. Oh! what slight cobwebs of chance stand between us and Temptation! Frederick had been

safely out of England twenty, nay, thirty hours ago; and it was only seventeen hours since she had told a falsehood to baffle pursuit – which would have been in vain. How faithless she had been! If she had only dared to bravely tell the truth about herself, if not him, how light of heart she would now have felt! Not humbled before God; not degraded and abased in Mr. Thornton's sight.

She caught herself up at this: here she was classing Mr. Thornton's low opinion alongside the displeasure of God. How was it that he haunted her imagination so persistently? Why did she care what he thought in spite of all her pride? She believed that she could have borne the sense of Almighty displeasure, because He knew all, and could read her penitence. But Mr. Thornton – why did she tremble, and hide her face in the pillow? What strong feeling had overtaken her at last?

She sprang out of bed and prayed long and earnestly. It soothed and comforted her to open her heart. But as soon as she reviewed her position she found the sting was still there; that she was not good enough, nor pure enough to be indifferent to his low opinion; that the thought of his contempt stood between her and her sense of wrong-doing.

She took her letter to her father as soon as she was dressed. There was so slight an allusion to their alarm at the station, that Mr. Hale did not pay it any attention. Indeed, beyond the mere fact of Frederick having sailed undiscovered, he did not gather much from the letter, because he was so uneasy about Margaret's pallid looks. She seemed continually on the point of weeping.

'You are sadly overdone, Margaret. It is no wonder. But you must let me nurse you now.'

He made her lie down on the sofa, and went for a shawl to cover her with. His tenderness released her tears; and she cried bitterly.

'Poor child! – poor child!' said he fondly, as she lay with her face to the wall, shaking with sobs. After a while they ceased, and she began to wonder whether she dared tell her father of her trouble. But there were more reasons against it than for it. The only reason for it was the relief to herself; and against it was the thought that it would add greatly to her father's nervousness. He would be troubled by his son's having caused the death of a man, however unwittingly; and he would be distressed beyond measure at her own great fault – her lack of courage and faith – yet would feel the need to make excuses for her.

No; she would keep her secret, and bear the burden alone. Alone she would ask for God's absolution. Alone she would endure her disgrace in Mr. Thornton's opinion. She was unspeakably touched by her father's tender efforts to talk of cheerful subjects. It was some months since he had been so talkative.

At last she smiled; a poor, weak smile; but it gave him the truest pleasure.

'It seems strange to think that what gives us most hope for the future should be called Dolores, which means sorrows,' said Margaret.

'Her mother was a Spaniard, I believe: that accounts for her religion. Her father is a stiff Presbyterian.'

'How young she is! Papa, we will go and see them in Spain.'

He shook his head; but said, 'If you wish it, Margaret. Only let us come back here. It would seem unfair to your mother, who disliked Milton so much, and cannot go with us. No, dear; you shall go and see them, and bring me back a report of my Spanish daughter.'

'I won't go without you, Papa. Who will take care of you when I am gone?'

‘I should like to know which of us is taking care of the other. But if you went, I should persuade Mr. Thornton to let me give him double lessons. We would work up the classics famously. You might go on and see Edith at Corfu, if you liked.’

Margaret did not speak at once. Then she said gravely: ‘Thank you, papa. But I don’t want to go. We will hope that Mr. Lennox will manage so well that Frederick may bring Dolores to see us when they are married. As for Edith, the regiment won’t remain much longer in Corfu.’

Mr. Hale’s cheerful subjects had come to an end, and he sat in silence, until Margaret said:

‘Papa – did you see Nicholas Higgins at the funeral? He was there, and Mary too. Poor fellow! It was his way of showing sympathy. He has a good warm heart under his abrupt ways.’

‘I am sure of it,’ replied Mr. Hale. ‘We will go and see them tomorrow, if you are strong enough.’

‘Oh yes. I want to see them. We did not pay Mary – or rather, she refused to take any money, Dixon says. We will go so as to catch him just after his dinner, and before he goes to his work.’

Towards evening Mr. Hale said:

‘I half expected Mr. Thornton would have called. Yesterday he spoke of bringing a book which I wanted to see.’

Margaret sighed. She knew he would not come. He would be too delicate to run the chance of meeting her, while her shame must be so fresh in his memory. The very mention of his name produced a relapse of her depressed, pre-occupied exhaustion. She gave way to listless languor.

Suddenly it struck her that this was a strange way to reward her father for his watchful care of her all day. She sat up and offered to read aloud. He gladly accepted her proposal. She read well: but had anyone asked her afterwards what she had been reading, she could not have said. She was smitten with a feeling of ingratitude to Mr. Thornton; earlier, she had refused to admit the kindness he had shown her in consulting the medical men further, so as to make an inquest unnecessary.

Oh! she was grateful! She had been cowardly and false, and could not alter those actions now; but she was not ungrateful. It sent a glow to her heart, to know how she could feel towards one who had reason to despise her. His cause for contempt was so just, that she should have respected him less if he had not felt contempt for her. It was a pleasure to feel how thoroughly she respected him. He could not prevent her doing that; it was the one comfort in all this misery.

Late in the evening, the expected book was delivered, ‘with Mr. Thornton’s kind regards, and wishes to know how Mr. Hale is.’

‘Say that I am much better, Dixon, but that Miss Hale—’

‘No, papa,’ said Margaret, eagerly, ‘don’t say anything about me. He does not ask.’

‘My dear child, how you are shivering!’ said her father. ‘You must go to bed directly.’

Margaret did not refuse. She needed the relief of solitude after a day of busy thinking, and busier repenting.

But she seemed much as usual the next day; her gravity and sadness, and occasional absence of mind, were not unnatural symptoms in the early days of grief. Meanwhile her father relapsed into his abstracted musing upon the wife he had lost, and the past that was closed to him for ever.

CHAPTER 36

UNION NOT ALWAYS STRENGTH

At the time arranged, they set out on their walk to see Nicholas Higgins and his daughter. They both felt a strange kind of shyness in their mourning clothes, and drew close to each other in unspoken sympathy.

Nicholas was sitting by the fire-side in his accustomed corner, leaning his head upon his hand, his arm resting on his knee. He did not get up when he saw them.

‘Sit ye down, sit ye down. Fire’s nearly out,’ said he, giving it a vigorous poke, as if to turn attention away from himself. He was rather disorderly, to be sure, with several days’ black growth of beard making his pale face look yet paler, and a well-worn jacket.

‘We thought we should have a good chance of finding you just after dinner-time,’ said Margaret.

‘We have had our sorrow too, since we saw you,’ said Mr. Hale.

‘Ay, ay. Sorrows is more plentiful than dinners just now; and my dinner hour stretches all day long; yo’re pretty sure of finding me.’

‘Are you out of work?’ asked Margaret.

‘Ay,’ he replied shortly. Then, after a moment’s silence, he added, looking up for the first time: ‘I’m not wanting brass. Bess, poor lass, had a little stock under her pillow ready to give me, and Mary is fustian-cutting.’

‘We owe Mary some money,’ said Mr. Hale.

‘If hoo takes it, I’ll turn her out o’ doors.’

‘But we owe her many thanks for her kind service,’ began Mr. Hale again.

‘I ne’er thanked your daughter there for her deeds o’ love to my poor wench. I ne’er could find th’ words.’

‘Is it because of the strike you’re out of work?’ asked Margaret gently.

‘Strike’s ended. I’m out o’ work because I ne’er asked for it. And I ne’er asked for it, because good words is scarce, and bad words is plentiful.’

He was in a mood to take a surly pleasure in giving answers that were like riddles. But Margaret saw that he would like to be asked for the explanation.

‘And good words are—?’

‘Asking for work. “Gi’ me work” means “and I’ll do it like a man.” Them’s good words. And bad words is saying “Aha, my fine chap! Yo’ve been true to your order, and I’ll be true to mine. Yo’ve been a poor faithful fool, so go and be d__d to yo’. There’s no work for yo’ here.” Them’s bad words. I’m not a fool; and if I was, folk ought to ha’ taught me how to be wise. I could ha’ learnt, if anyone had tried to teach me.’

‘Would it not be worth while,’ said Mr. Hale, ‘to ask your old master if he would take you back again?’

Higgins uttered a low and bitter laugh.

‘Measter! if it’s no offence, I’ll ask yo’ a question or two in my turn.’

‘You’re quite welcome,’ said Mr. Hale.

‘I reckon yo’n some way of earning your bread.’

‘You are quite right. I am a private tutor.’

‘So folk pay yo’ for teaching them?’

‘Yes,’ replied Mr. Hale, smiling.

‘And them that pays yo’, dun they tell yo’ what to do wi’ the money they give you?’

‘No; to be sure not!’

‘They dunnot say, “Yo’ may have a brother, or a dear friend, who needs this brass; but yo’ mun promise not to give it to him, or we’ll just leave off dealing with yo’.” They dunnot say that?’

‘No: to be sure not! I would not submit to that.’

‘Now yo’ve got it,’ said Nicholas Higgins. ‘Hamper’s – where I worked – makes their men pledge they’ll not give a penny to help th’ Union or keep turnouts fro’ clemming. They make nobbut liars and hypocrites. And that’s a less sin, to my mind, than making men’s hearts so hard that they’ll not do a kindness to them as needs it. But I’ll ne’er forswear mysel’. I’m a member o’ the Union; and I think it’s the only thing to do the workman any good. And I’ve been a turn-out, and known what it were to clem; so if I get a shilling, sixpence shall go to them who needs it. Consequence is, I dunnot see where I’m to get a shilling.’

‘Is that rule in force at all the mills?’ asked Margaret.

‘I cannot say. It’s a new regulation at ourn. But by-and-by they’ll find out, tyrants makes liars.’

There was a little pause. Margaret was hesitating whether to say what was in her mind; she was unwilling to irritate one who was already gloomy enough. At last out it came. But in her soft tones it did not seem to annoy Higgins, only to perplex him.

‘Do you remember poor Boucher saying that the Union was a tyrant? I think he said it was the worst tyrant of all.’

It was a long while before he spoke. He was looking down into the fire, so she could not read the expression on his face.

‘I’ll speak truth. A man leads a hard life who’s not i’ th’ Union. But once i’ the Union, his interests are taken care on better nor he could do it for himsel’. It’s the only way working men can get their rights, by all joining together. More the members, more chance for each man having justice done him. If any man is inclined to do himsel’ or his neighbour a hurt, it puts a check on him. That’s all we do i’ th’ Union. We can’t clap folk into prison; but we can make a man’s life so heavy that he’s obliged to come in, and be wise in spite of himself. Boucher were a fool all along, and ne’er a worse fool than at th’ last. We had public opinion on our side, till he and his sort began rioting and breaking laws. It were all o’er wi’ the strike then.’

‘Then would it not have been better to have left him alone, and not forced him to join the Union? He did you no good; and you drove him mad.’

‘Margaret,’ said her father, in a low and warning tone.

‘I like her,’ said Higgins, suddenly. ‘Hoo speaks plain out what’s in her mind. Hoo doesn’t comprehend th’ Union for all that. It’s our only power. I ha’ read a bit o’ poetry about a plough going o’er a daisy, as made tears come into my eyes. But the chap ne’er stopped driving the plough, for all he pitied the daisy. He’d too much sense for that. Th’ Union’s the plough, making ready the land for harvest-time. Such as Boucher – he’s no daisy; he’s liker a weed lounging over the ground – they must make up their mind to be put out o’ the way. I’m sore vexed wi’ him just now. I could go o’er him wi’ a plough mysel’.’

‘Why? What has he been doing?’

‘He’s ne’er out o’ mischief, that man. First he must go raging like a mad fool, and kick up yon riot. Then he’d go into hiding. And when Thornton didn’t follow him nor go on wi’ the prosecution, Boucher slunk back again to his house. And then, where think ye that he went? Why, to Hamper’s. Damn him! He went wi’ his mealy-mouthed face, asking for work, though he knowed well enough the new rule, o’ pledging to give nought to th’ Unions! Why, he’d a clemmed to death, if th’ Union had na helped him. The good-for-nothing Judas! But I’ll say this for Hamper, he drove Boucher away, and would na listen to him, though folk says the traitor cried like a babby!’

‘Oh! how shocking! how pitiful!’ exclaimed Margaret. ‘Higgins, I don’t know you today. Don’t you see how you’ve made Boucher what he is, by driving him into the Union against his will!’

Made him what he is! What was he?

Gathering along the narrow street, came a hollow, measured sound, forcing itself on their attention. Many voices were hushed and low: there was a distinct, slow tramp of feet, the laboured walk of men carrying a heavy burden. They were all drawn towards the house-door by some impulse.

Six men walked in the middle of the road, three of them policemen. Upon their shoulders they carried a door, taken off its hinges, on which lay some dead human creature; and the door was dripping. All the street turned out to see the procession, questioning the bearers, who answered reluctantly at last.

‘We found him i’ th’ brook in the field beyond there.’

‘Th’ brook! – why, there’s not water enough to drown him!’

‘He was a determined chap. He lay with his face downwards. He was sick o’ living.’

Higgins said in a weak, high voice: ‘It’s not John Boucher? He had na pluck enough. Sure! It’s not John Boucher! I’ve a singing in my head, and cannot hear.’

They put the door down carefully, and all might see the poor drowned wretch – his glassy eyes staring upwards to the sky. His face was swollen and discoloured; his skin was stained by the water in the brook, which had been used for dyeing purposes. Water trickled through his hair.

Through all these disfigurements, Margaret recognised John Boucher. It seemed to be so sacrilegious to be peering into that poor distorted face, that she instinctively went forwards and softly covered the dead man’s countenance with her handkerchief. Nicholas Higgins stood rooted to the spot. The men spoke together, and then one of them came up to Higgins.

‘Higgins, thou knowed him! Thou must go tell the wife. Do it gently, man, but do it quick, for we canna leave him here long.’

‘I canna go,’ said Higgins. ‘Dunnot ask me. I canna face her.’

‘Thou knows her best,’ said the man.

‘I canna do it,’ said Higgins. ‘I’m felled wi’ seeing him.’

‘Well, if thou wunnot thou wunnot. Some one must, though. It’s a dree task; but it’s a chance, every minute, that she’ll hear on it some rougher way.’

‘Papa, you go,’ said Margaret, in a low voice.

‘If I had time to think of what to say; but all at once—’ Margaret saw that her father was trembling.

‘I will go,’ said she.

‘Bless yo’, miss, it will be a kind act; for she’s been sickly, I hear, and few hereabouts know her.’

Margaret knocked at the closed door; but there was such a noise of many little children, that she could hear no reply; indeed, she doubted if she was heard. Before she could recoil from her task, she opened the door and went in.

Mrs. Boucher was sitting in a rocking-chair by the dirty fireplace; it looked as if the house had not been cleaned for days.

Margaret said something, she hardly knew what, her throat and mouth were so dry, and the children’s noise so great. She tried again.

‘How are you, Mrs. Boucher? Very poorly, I’m afraid.’

‘I’ve no chance o’ being well,’ said she querulously. ‘I’m left alone to manage these childer, and no food to keep ’em quiet. John should na ha’ left me.’

‘How long is it since he went away?’

‘Four days. No one would give him work here, and he’d to go on tramp toward Greenfield. But he might ha’ sent me some word.’

‘Oh, don’t blame him,’ said Margaret. ‘He felt it deeply, I’m sure—’

‘Willto’ hold thy din, and let me hear the lady speak!’ she said, in no gentle voice, to a little urchin of about a year old. She apologised to Margaret. ‘He’s always mithering me for “daddy” and “butty;” and I ha’ no butties to give him, and daddy’s forgotten us, I think. He’s his father’s darling, he is.’ With a sudden turn of mood, she began kissing the child fondly.

Margaret laid her hand on the woman’s arm. Their eyes met.

‘Poor little fellow!’ said Margaret, slowly; ‘he *was* his father’s darling.’

‘He *is* his father’s darling,’ said the woman, rising hastily to face her. Neither of them spoke for a moment. Then Mrs. Boucher began in a low tone, gathering in wildness: ‘He *is* his father’s darling, I say. Poor folk can love their childer as well as rich. Why dunno yo’ speak? Why dun yo’ stare at me? Where’s John? Oh, my God!’ She sank back into the chair. Margaret lifted the child and put him into her arms.

‘He loved him,’ said she.

‘Ay,’ said the woman, shaking her head, ‘he loved us a’. We had someone to love us once. It’s a long time ago; but he did love us, he did. He loved this babby the best; but he loved me and I loved him, though I was calling him five minutes ago. Are yo’ sure he’s dead?’ said she, trying to get up.

‘He is dead – drowned!’

‘Folk are brought round after they’re dead-drowned. Here, whisth thee, child – whisth thee! Dunnot cry while my heart’s breaking! Oh, where is my strength gone to? Oh, John – husband!’

Margaret saved her from falling by catching her in her arms. She sat down and held the woman, her head lying on Margaret’s shoulder. The other children, clustered together in affright, began to slowly understand the mystery of the scene; for their brains were dull and languid. Then they set up such a cry of despair that Margaret knew not how to bear it. Johnnie’s cry was loudest of them all, though he knew not why he cried, poor little fellow.

As she held the quivering mother, Margaret heard a noise at the door.

‘Open it quick,’ said she to the eldest child. ‘Make no noise.’ Seeing her father with the other men, she told him, ‘Oh, papa, let them go upstairs very softly, and perhaps she will not hear them. She has fainted.’

‘It’s as well for her, poor creature,’ said a woman following the bearers of the dead. ‘Stay, I’ll run fetch a pillow and we’ll let her down easy on the floor.’

This helpful neighbour was a great relief to Margaret; she was a new-comer in the district, but so kind and thoughtful that Margaret felt she was no longer needed; and that it would be better, perhaps, to leave and set an example of clearing the house, which was filled with idle, if sympathising gazers.

She looked round for Nicholas Higgins. He was not there. So she spoke to the woman who had helped in placing Mrs. Boucher on the floor.

‘Can you give these people a hint that they had better leave quietly? When she comes round, she should only find one or two that she knows. Papa, will you ask the men to go away? She cannot breathe, poor thing, with this crowd about her.’

Margaret was kneeling down by Mrs. Boucher and bathing her face with vinegar; but in a few minutes she felt a gust of fresh air. She looked round, and saw a smile pass between her father and the woman.

‘What is it?’ asked she.

‘Our good friend here,’ replied her father, ‘hit on a capital expedient for clearing the place.’

‘I bid ’em begone, and each take a child with ’em, and to mind that they were fatherless, and their mother a widow. The childer are sure of a bellyful today, and of kindness too. Does hoo know how he died?’

‘No,’ said Margaret; ‘I could not tell her all.’

‘Hoo must be told. See! Hoo’s coming round; shall you or I do it? Or your father?’

‘No; you,’ said Margaret.

As Mrs. Boucher recovered, the neighbour woman sat down on the floor, and took Mrs. Boucher’s head and shoulders on her lap.

‘Neighbour,’ said she, ‘your man is dead. Guess yo’ how he died?’

‘He were drowned,’ said Mrs. Boucher, feebly, beginning to cry for the first time.

‘He were found drowned. He were coming home very hopeless o’ aught on earth. He thought God could na be harder than men; happen as tender as a mother, or tenderer. I’m not saying he did right, and I’m not saying he did wrong. All I say is, may neither me nor mine ever have his sore heart.’

‘He has left me alone wi’ a’ these children!’ moaned the widow, less distressed at the manner of the death than Margaret expected.

‘Not alone,’ said Mr. Hale, solemnly. ‘Who is with you? Who has promised to be a father to the fatherless?’

‘But I’ve gotten six children, sir, and the eldest not eight years of age. I’m not meaning for to doubt His power, sir – only it needs a deal o’ trust;’ and she began to cry afresh.

‘Hoo’ll be better able to talk tomorrow, sir,’ said the neighbour. ‘Best comfort now would be the feel of a child at her heart. I’m sorry they took the babby.’

‘I’ll go for it,’ said Margaret. And in a few minutes she returned, carrying Johnnie, his face all smeared with eating, and his hands loaded with treasures in the shape of shells, and the head of a plaster figure. She placed him in his mother’s arms.

‘There!’ said the woman, ‘now you go. They’ll cry together, and comfort together. I’ll stop with her as long as I’m needed, and if yo’ come tomorrow, yo’ can talk with her.’

As Margaret and her father went slowly up the street, she paused at Higgins’s closed door.

‘Shall we go in?’ asked her father.

They knocked. There was no answer, so they tried the door. It was bolted, but they thought they heard him moving within.

‘Nicholas!’ said Margaret. ‘Nicholas! It is only us. Won’t you let us in?’

‘No,’ said he. ‘Let me be, this day.’

Mr. Hale would have protested, but Margaret placed her finger on his lips.

‘I don’t wonder at it,’ said she. ‘I myself long to be alone, after a day like this.’

CHAPTER 37

LOOKING SOUTH

Higgins's door was locked the next day: but they learnt from a neighbour that he was really away from home. He had, however, been in to see Mrs. Boucher, whom Margaret and her father visited next.

It was an unsatisfactory visit: Mrs. Boucher considered herself ill-used by her poor husband's suicide; and there was truth enough in this idea to make it difficult to refute. Her thoughts were turned upon herself and her own position, and this selfishness extended even to her children, whom she considered as incumbrances, in the very midst of her affection for them. While Mr. Hale spoke to her, Margaret talked to one or two of the children, and found that they were truer and simpler mourners than the widow. Daddy had been kind to them; each could tell, in their eager stammering way, of some tenderness shown by the lost father.

'Is yon thing upstairs really him? It doesna look like him. I'm feared on it, and I never was feared o' daddy.'

Margaret's heart bled to hear that the mother had taken her children upstairs to see their disfigured father. She tried to turn their thoughts in some other direction; on what they could do for mother; on what father would have wished. The children began to do as she suggested towards tidying up the slatternly room.

But her father, trying to raise the widow's thoughts, set too high a standard, and too abstract a view. She could not rouse her torpid mind to imagine what her husband's misery might have been; she could only look upon it as it affected herself. Although she was secretly blaming her husband for having fallen into such despair, and denying that he had any excuse for his last rash act, she abused all who could be supposed to have driven him to such desperation. The masters – Mr. Thornton in particular, whose mill had been attacked by Boucher – the Union, represented by Higgins – the children so numerous, so hungry, and so noisy – all made up one great army of personal enemies, whose fault it was that she was now a helpless widow.

Margaret was disheartened; and when they came away she found it impossible to cheer her father.

'It is the town life,' said she. 'The haste and bustle of everything around them, to say nothing of the confinement in these pent-up houses, is enough to induce depression and worry. In the country, people live so much more out of doors, even in the winter.'

'But people must live in towns. And in the country some get such stagnant habits of mind that they are almost fatalists.'

'Yes; I acknowledge that. I suppose each mode of life produces its own trials. The town-dweller must find it as difficult to be patient and calm, as the country-bred man to be active. Both must find it hard to realise a future of any kind; the one because the present is so hurrying and close around him; the other because his slow life tempts him to revel in the mere sense of animal existence, rather than looking forward.'

'But this poor Mrs. Boucher! how little we can do for her.'

'And yet we must try. Oh papa! it's a hard world to live in!'

‘So it is, my child. Yet we have been very happy, even in the midst of our sorrow. What a pleasure Frederick’s visit was!’

‘Yes, that it was,’ said Margaret. ‘It was such a charming, snatched thing.’ But she suddenly stopped speaking as she remembered her own cowardice. Of all faults, the one she most despised in others was the want of bravery and truth. And she had been guilty of it! Then came the thought of Mr. Thornton’s knowledge of her falsehood. She wondered if she should have minded detection half so much from anyone else. She did not think so. Even a fall in Frederick’s opinion would be as nothing to the shrinking shame she felt at the thought of meeting Mr. Thornton again.

And yet she longed to see him, to get it over; to understand where she stood in his opinion. Her cheeks burnt as she recollected how proudly she had implied an objection to trade in the early days of their acquaintance, because it led to a passing off of inferior as superior goods. She remembered Mr. Thornton’s look of calm disdain, as in a few words he gave her to understand that there was folly and deceit in every walk of life, and that all dishonourable ways of acting were sure to prove injurious in the long run. She remembered how she – strong in her own untempted truth – had asked him if buying in the cheapest and selling in the dearest market did not show a lack of justice. She had used the word chivalric; her father had corrected her with the word, Christian; and so drawn the argument upon himself, while she sat silent with a slight feeling of contempt.

No more contempt! – no more talk about the chivalric! Henceforward she must feel humiliated and disgraced in his sight. But when should she see him? Her heart leaped up in apprehension at every ring of the door-bell; and yet she felt strangely saddened and sick at heart with each disappointment. Her father was surprised that he did not come. Mr. Hale had not yet resumed his tutoring, so he had fewer occupations than usual. He was restless all evening. He kept saying, ‘I quite expected to have seen Mr. Thornton. Has there been any message left today?’

‘I will go and inquire, papa,’ said Margaret.

‘Wait, there’s a ring!’

She sat down instantly, and bent her head attentively over her work. She heard a step on the stairs, but knew it was only Dixon’s. She lifted up her head and sighed, and believed she felt glad.

‘It’s that Higgins, sir. He wants to see you, or else Miss Hale. He’s in a strange kind of way.’

‘He had better come up here, Dixon; and then he can see us both.’

‘Oh! very well, sir. Only if you could see his shoes, I’m sure you’d say the kitchen was the fitter place.’

‘He can wipe them, I suppose,’ said Mr. Hale.

So Dixon flung off, to bid him walk upstairs. She was a little mollified, however, when Higgins looked at his feet; and then, sitting down on the bottom stair, took off the offending shoes, and walked up.

‘If hoo’l excuse me for being i’ my stockings,’ he said, looking at Margaret, ‘I’ve been tramping all day, and streets is none o’ th’ cleanest.’

He was unusually subdued; and he had evidently some difficulty in saying what he came to say. Mr. Hale, ever-ready in sympathy with shyness, said:

‘We shall have tea directly, and then you’ll take a cup with us, Mr. Higgins. I am sure you are tired, if you’ve been out all day. Margaret, my dear, can’t you hasten tea?’

Margaret could only hasten tea by taking the preparation of it into her own hands, and so offending Dixon, who was emerging out of her sorrow for her late mistress into a very touchy, irritable state.

‘Why master and you must always be asking the lower classes upstairs, since we came to Milton, I cannot understand. Folk at Helstone were never brought higher than the kitchen.’

Higgins found it easier to unburden himself to one than to two. After Margaret left the room, he said:

‘Master, yo’d not guess easy what I’ve been tramping after today. I’ve been a seeking work. I said to mysel’, I’d keep a civil tongue in my head, let who would say what ’em would. For that man’s sake – yo’ understand,’ jerking his thumb back in some unknown direction.

‘No, I don’t,’ said Mr. Hale, bewildered as to who ‘that man’ could be.

‘Him as went and drowned himself, poor chap! Boucher, yo’ know.’

‘Yes,’ said Mr. Hale. ‘Go on.’

‘I’ll not speak in haste for his sake. Yet not for his sake; but for the wife’s sake, and the childer.’

‘God bless you! What do you mean? Tell me.’

‘I have telled yo’,’ said Higgins, a little surprised. ‘I would na ask for work for mysel’; but them’s left as a charge on me. I reckon I set Boucher off o’ th’ road, and so I mun answer for him.’

Mr. Hale took Higgins’s hand and shook it heartily, without speaking. Higgins looked awkward and ashamed.

‘Theer, theer, master! Theer’s ne’er a man amongst us, but what would do th’ same. Ay, and better too; for I’se ne’er got a stroke o’ work. For all I telled them that they’d ne’er ha’ such a worker as I would be – they’d ha’ none o’ me. I’m a poor black feckless sheep – childer may clem for aught I can do, unless, parson, yo’d help me?’

‘Help you! I would do anything – but what can I do?’

‘Miss there’ – for Margaret had re-entered the room, and stood listening – ‘has often talked grand o’ the South. Now I dunnot know how far off it is, but I’ve been thinking if I could get down theer, where food is cheap and wages good, and all the folk friendly like; yo’ could, maybe, help me to find work. I’m not forty-five, and I’ve a deal o’ strength in me, measter.’

‘But what kind of work could you do?’

‘Well, I reckon I could spade a bit.’

‘And for that,’ said Margaret, stepping forwards, ‘with the best will in the world, you would, maybe, get nine shillings a week; ten at the outside. And food costs much the same as here.’

‘I’m sick o’ Milton anyways, and Milton is sick o’ me.’

‘You must not go to the South,’ said she, ‘for all that. You could not stand it. You would have to be out in all weathers. The bodily work at your time of life would break you down. The fare is far different to what you have been accustomed to.’

‘I’se nought particular about my meat,’ said he, as if offended.

‘But you’ve reckoned on having butcher’s meat once a day, if you’re in work. I owe it to you to put it all clear before you. You would not bear the dullness of the life; you don’t know what it is; it would eat you away like rust. Those that have lived there all their lives, are used to labouring on, from day to day, in the great solitude of steaming fields – never speaking or lifting up their poor, bent heads. The toil robs

their brain of life; it deadens their imagination; they don't care to meet to talk after their work is done; they go home brutishly tired, poor creatures! caring for nothing but food and rest. You could not stir them up into any companionship. You of all men could not bear a life among such labourers. Think no more of it, Nicholas, I beg. Besides, you could never pay to get mother and children all there.'

'I've reckoned for that. One house mun do for us all. And men theer must have their families to keep – God help 'em!' said he. 'God help 'em! North an' South have each gotten their own troubles. If work's sure and steady theer, labour's paid at starvation prices; while here we'n rucks o' money coming in one quarter, and ne'er a farthing th' next. For sure, th' world is in a confusion that passes understanding; it needs fettling, and who's to fettle it?'

Mr. Hale was busy cutting bread and butter, and did not argue with this. He and Margaret kept up an indifferent conversation until Higgins had made a very substantial meal. Then he pushed his chair away from the table, and fell back into dreamy gloom.

Suddenly, Margaret said, 'Higgins, have you been to Marlborough Mills to seek for work?'

'Thornton's?' asked he. 'Ay, I've been at Thornton's.'

'And what did he say?'

'I didna see the measter. Th' o'erlooker bid me go and be d___ d.'

'I wish you had seen Mr. Thornton,' said Mr. Hale. 'He might not have given you work, but he would not have used such language.'

'I'm used to it; it dunnot matter to me. It were th' fact that I were na wanted theer that I minded.'

'Would you go again tomorrow,' said Margaret, 'and try to see Mr. Thornton? I should be so glad if you would.'

'I'm afraid it would be of no use,' said Mr. Hale, in a low voice.

Higgins gave a great sigh. 'It would tax my pride above a bit; if it were for mysel', I'd sooner be flogged. But I'll make a wry face, and go at it tomorrow. Dunna yo' think that he'll do it. That man has it in him to be burnt at the stake afore he'll give in. I do it for your sake, Miss Hale, and it's first time in my life as e'er I give way to a woman. Neither my wife nor Bess could e'er say that much against me.'

'I thank you,' said Margaret, smiling. 'Though I don't believe you: I expect you have given way to wife and daughter as much as most men.'

'As to Mr. Thornton,' said Mr. Hale, 'I'll give you a note to him, which should ensure you a hearing.'

'I thank yo' kindly, sir, but I'd as lief stand on my own. I'll stand guard at the lodge door fro' six in the morning till I get speech on him. But dunna yo' hope, miss. There'll be more chance o' getting milk out of a flint. I wish yo' a very good night, and many thanks to yo'.'

'You'll find your shoes by the kitchen fire; I put them there to dry,' said Margaret.

He turned round and looked at her steadily, and then he brushed his lean hand across his eyes and went his way.

'How proud that man is!' said her father.

'What grand makings of a man there are in him,' replied Margaret, 'pride and all. There's granite in all these northern people, papa, is there not?'

'There was none in poor Boucher, I am afraid; none in his wife either.'

‘I wonder what success he’ll have tomorrow. If Higgins would forget that Mr. Thornton was a master, and speak to him as he does to us – and if Mr. Thornton would be patient enough to listen to him with his human heart, not with his master’s ears—’

‘You are getting to do Mr. Thornton justice at last, Margaret,’ said her father.

Margaret had a strange choking at her heart, which made her unable to answer. But she thought, ‘I wish I were a man, and could go and force him to express his disapproval, and tell him honestly that I knew I deserved it. It is hard to lose him as a friend just when I had begun to feel his value. How tender he was with dear mamma! I wish he would come, and then at least I should know how much I was abased in his eyes.’

CHAPTER 38

PROMISES FULFILLED

It was not merely that Margaret was known to Mr. Thornton to have spoken falsely – though this was the only reason she imagined – but that her falsehood was linked in his mind to some other lover. He could not forget the fond and earnest look that had passed between her and the other man – the attitude of familiar confidence. The thought of this stung him.

In addition (and he ground his teeth as he remembered it) was the hour, dusky twilight; the place, so far away from home, and lonely. His nobler self had said at first that all this might be accidental and innocent; but once allow her the right to love and be beloved (and had he any reason to deny that right?) – she might easily have been beguiled into a longer walk, to a later hour than she had anticipated.

But that falsehood! which showed a fatal consciousness of something wrong, and to be concealed, which was unlike her. He did her that much justice, though it would have been a relief to believe her utterly unworthy of his esteem. It was this that made the misery – that he passionately loved her, and thought her, even with all her faults, more lovely and more excellent than any other woman; yet he believed her so attached to some other man that she would violate her truthful nature. The falsehood was proof of how blindly she loved another – this dark, slight, handsome man – while he himself was rough, and stern, and strongly made.

He lashed himself into an agony of fierce jealousy. He thought of that look, that attitude! He would have laid his life at her feet for such tender glances! He mocked himself, for having valued the mechanical way in which she had protected him from the fury of the mob; now he had seen how soft and bewitching she looked when with a man she really loved. This man, this hidden lover, had her looks, words, hand-cleavings, lies, concealment, all to himself.

Mr. Thornton was conscious that he had never been so irritable in his life as he was now. He felt inclined to give a short abrupt answer, like a bark, to every question; and this hurt his pride, for he had always piqued himself on his self-control. So he subdued his manner, but it was a hard task. He was more than usually silent at home; spending his evenings pacing backwards and forwards, which would have annoyed his mother exceedingly if it had been done by anyone else; and was tiresome even in this beloved son.

‘Can you sit down for a moment? I have something to say to you, if you would give up that everlasting walk, walk, walk.’

He sat down instantly.

‘I want to speak to you about Betsy. She says she must leave us; that her lover’s death has so affected her spirits she can’t work.’

‘Very well. I suppose other cooks are to be found.’

‘That’s so like a man. It’s not merely the cooking, it is that she knows all the ways of the house. Besides, she tells me something about your friend Miss Hale.’

‘Miss Hale is no friend of mine. Mr. Hale is my friend.’

‘I am glad to hear you say so, for if she had been your friend, what Betsy says would have annoyed you.’

‘Let me hear it,’ said he, with the extreme quietness of manner he had been assuming for the last few days.

‘Betsy says, that the night on which her lover – I forget his name—’

‘Leonards.’

‘The night on which Leonards was last seen at the station – Miss Hale was there, walking with a young man who, Betsy believes, killed Leonards by some blow or push.’

‘Leonards was not killed by any blow or push.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because I distinctly put the question to the surgeon of the Infirmary. He told me there was a long-standing disease, caused by Leonards’ habit of drinking to excess; that his last fatal attack was caused by drinking, not the fall.’

‘The fall! What fall?’

‘Caused by the blow or push of which Betsy speaks.’

‘Then there was a blow or push?’

‘I believe so.’

‘And who did it?’

‘As there was no inquest, I cannot tell you.’

‘But Miss Hale was there?’

No answer.

‘And with a young man?’

Still no answer. At last he said: ‘I tell you, mother, that there was no judicial inquiry.’

‘Betsy says that some man who is in a grocer’s shop at Crampton can swear that Miss Hale was at the station, walking with a young man.’

‘I don’t see what we have to do with that. Miss Hale is at liberty to please herself.’

‘I’m glad to hear you say so,’ said Mrs. Thornton, eagerly. ‘It certainly means nothing to you, after what has passed! but I promised Mrs. Hale that I would not allow her daughter to go wrong without advising her. I shall certainly let her know my opinion of such conduct.’

‘I do not see any harm in what she did that evening,’ said Mr. Thornton, getting up, and standing by the chimney-piece with his face turned away from the room.

‘You would not have approved of Fanny’s being seen out, after dark, in a lonely place, with a young man. I say nothing of the choice of time, when her mother lay unburied, for such a promenade. Should you have liked your sister to have been noticed by a grocer’s assistant for doing so?’

‘In the first place, as it is not many years since I myself was a draper’s assistant, that circumstance does not alter the nature of the act to me. And in the next place, I see a great deal of difference between Miss Hale and Fanny. I can imagine that the one may have weighty reasons, which might make her overlook any seeming impropriety in her conduct. I never knew Fanny have weighty reasons for anything.’

‘A pretty character of your sister, indeed! Really, John, one would have thought Miss Hale had done enough to make you clear-sighted. She drew you on to an offer, by a bold display of pretended regard – to play you off against this very young man, I’ve no doubt. Her whole conduct is clear to me now. You believe he is her lover, I suppose?’

He turned round to his mother; his face was very grey and grim. 'Yes, mother. I do believe he is her lover.' When he had spoken, he turned again and leant his face against his hand. Then before she could speak, he added:

'Mother. He is her lover; but she may need help and womanly counsel; there may be difficulties or temptations which I don't know. I fear there are. I don't want to know what they are; but as you have always been a good and tender mother to me, go to her, and gain her confidence, and tell her what is best to be done. I know that something is wrong; and it must be a terrible torture to her.'

'For God's sake, John!' said his mother, now really shocked, 'what do you mean? What do you know?'

He did not reply.

'John! I don't know what to think unless you speak. You must explain. These half-expressions are what ruin a woman's character.'

'Her character! Mother, you do not dare—' He looked her in the face with flaming eyes. Then, drawing himself up with determined composure, he said, 'I will not say any more than this: that I have good reason to believe that Miss Hale is in some difficulty connected with an attachment which of itself, from my knowledge of Miss Hale's character, is perfectly innocent and right. I refuse to tell my reason. But never let me hear anyone say a word against her, implying anything more serious than that she now needs the counsel of some kind and gentle woman. You promised Mrs. Hale to be that woman!'

'No!' said Mrs. Thornton. 'I am happy to say, I did not promise kindness and gentleness, for I felt that it might be out of my power to offer these to one of Miss Hale's character. I promised counsel and advice, such as I would give to my own daughter. I shall speak to her as I would do to Fanny, if she had gone gallivanting with a young man in the dusk. Then I shall have fulfilled my promise, and done my duty.'

'She will never bear it,' said he passionately.

'She will have to bear it, if I speak in her dead mother's name.'

'Well!' said he, breaking away, 'don't tell me any more about it. I cannot endure to think of it.'

As he shut himself into his private room, he continued. 'Oh! that look of love! And that cursed lie; which showed some terrible shame to be kept dark! Oh, Margaret, Margaret! Could you not have loved me? I am uncouth and hard, but I would never have led you into any falsehood for me.'

The more Mrs. Thornton thought over what her son had said, in pleading for a merciful judgment on Margaret, the more bitter she felt towards her. She took a savage pleasure in the idea of 'speaking her mind' to her, in the guise of fulfilling her duty. She enjoyed the thought of showing herself untouched by the enchantment which she felt Margaret had thrown over many people. She snorted scornfully over her victim's beauty; her jet black hair, her smooth skin, her lucid eyes would not save her one word of the just and stern reproach which Mrs. Thornton spent half the night preparing in her mind.

'Is Miss Hale within?' She knew she was, for she had seen her at the window, and she had her feet inside the little hall before Martha had answered.

Margaret was sitting alone, writing to Edith about her mother's last days. She had to brush away unbidden tears as Mrs. Thornton was announced.

She was so gentle and ladylike that her visitor was somewhat daunted; and it became impossible to utter the speech, so easy to prepare with no one to address it to.

Margaret's low rich voice was softer than usual; her manner more gracious, because she was feeling very grateful to Mrs. Thornton for the courteous attention of her call. She exerted herself to make conversation; and praised Martha, the servant whom Mrs. Thornton had found for them.

Mrs. Thornton was fairly discomfited. Her sharp blade seemed out of place, and useless among rose-leaves. She was silent until she stung herself into performing her duty by reflecting that all this sweetness was probably put on just to propitiate her. She suspected that the other attachment had fallen through, and Miss Hale hoped to recall her rejected lover.

Poor Margaret! It was true that Mrs. Thornton was the mother of one whose regard she valued, and feared to have lost; and this thought unconsciously added to her natural desire of pleasing her. Mrs. Thornton cleared her throat and began:

'Miss Hale, I have a duty to perform. I promised your poor mother that I would not allow you to act in any way wrongly, or (she softened her speech a little here) inadvertently, without remonstrating; at least, without offering advice, whether you took it or not.'

Margaret stood blushing, with her eyes dilating. She thought Mrs. Thornton had come to speak to her about the falsehood she had told – that Mr. Thornton had employed her to explain the danger she had exposed herself to, of being confuted in court. Although her heart sank to think he had not chosen to come himself, yet she was too much humbled not to listen patiently and meekly.

Mrs. Thornton went on:

'At first, when I heard from one of my servants, that you had been seen walking about with a gentleman, at the Outwood station, late in the evening, I could hardly believe it. But my son, I am sorry to say, confirmed her story. It was indiscreet, to say the least; many a young woman has lost her character before now—'

Margaret's eyes flashed fire. This was a new idea – this was insulting. If Mrs. Thornton had spoken to her about the lie, well and good – she would have owned up to it. But to speak of her character! Mrs. Thornton, a mere stranger – it was too impertinent! She would not answer her – not one word.

Mrs. Thornton saw the battle-spirit in Margaret's eyes, and it called up her combativeness also.

'For your mother's sake, I thought it right to warn you against such improprieties; they must degrade you in the long run in the world's eyes, even if they do not lead you to positive harm.'

'For my mother's sake,' said Margaret tearfully, 'I will bear much; but she never meant me to be exposed to insult, I am sure.'

'Insult, Miss Hale!'

'Yes, madam,' said Margaret more steadily, 'it is insult. What do you know of me that should lead you to suspect – Oh!' said she, breaking down, and covering her face with her hands – 'I know now, Mr. Thornton has told you—'

'No, Miss Hale,' said Mrs. Thornton, her truthfulness causing her to break in. 'Stop. Mr. Thornton has told me nothing. You do not know my son. You are not worthy to know him. He said this. Listen, young lady, and understand, if you can, what sort of a man you rejected. He said to me last night, "Go to her. I have good reason to know that she is in some difficulty, arising out of an attachment; and she needs womanly counsel." Beyond that – and your being at the station with a gentleman – he has said not one word against you. If he has knowledge of anything which should make you sob so, he keeps it to himself.'

Margaret's face was still hidden in her hands. Mrs. Thornton was a little mollified.

'Come, Miss Hale. There may be circumstances, I'll allow, that, if explained, may lessen the impropriety.'

Still no answer. Margaret was considering what to say; she wished to stand well with Mrs. Thornton; and yet she could not explain. Mrs. Thornton grew impatient.

'I shall be sorry to break off an acquaintance; but for Fanny's sake—'

'I can give you no explanation,' said Margaret, in a low voice. 'I have done wrong, but not in the way you think. Mr. Thornton judges me more mercifully than you;' — she had hard work to keep herself from choking with her tears — 'but, I believe, madam, you mean to do rightly.'

'Thank you,' said Mrs. Thornton, drawing herself up; 'I was not aware that my meaning was doubted. It is the last time I shall interfere. I did not approve of my son's attachment to you. You did not appear to me worthy of him. But when you compromised yourself at the time of the riot, and exposed yourself to the comments of servants and workpeople, I felt it was no longer right to set myself against my son's wish of proposing to you — a wish, by the way, which he had always denied having until the day of the riot.' Margaret winced, and drew in her breath. Mrs. Thornton went on. 'He came; you had apparently changed your mind. I told my son yesterday, that I thought it possible, short as was the interval, you might have learnt something of this other lover—'

'What must you think of me, madam?' asked Margaret, throwing her head back with proud disdain. 'You can say nothing more, Mrs. Thornton. I decline every attempt to justify myself. You must allow me to leave the room.'

And she swept out of it with the noiseless grace of an offended princess. Mrs. Thornton had enough natural humour to make her feel the ludicrousness of the position in which she was left. There was nothing for it but to show herself out. She was not particularly annoyed; she did not care enough about Margaret for that. Margaret's passion had mollified her visitor, far more than any silence could have done. It showed the effect of her words.

'My young lady,' thought Mrs. Thornton, 'you've a pretty good temper of your own. If John and you had come together, he would have had to keep a tight hand over you. But I don't think you will go a-walking again with your beau, at such an hour. You've too much pride for that. I like to see a girl fly out at the notion of being talked about. It shows they're neither giddy, nor bold. As for that girl, she might be bold, but she'd never be giddy. Now as for Fanny, she'd be giddy, and not bold. She's no courage, poor thing!'

Mr. Thornton was not spending the morning so satisfactorily as his mother. He was trying to understand what damage the strike had done him. A good deal of his capital was locked up in new and expensive machinery; and he had also bought in cotton with a view to some large orders. The strike had thrown him terribly behindhand in the completion of these orders. Even with his own skilled workpeople, he would have had some difficulty in fulfilling them; as it was, the incompetence of the Irish hands, who had to be trained, was an annoyance.

It was not a favourable hour for Higgins to make his request. But he had promised Margaret to do it. So, though every moment added to his repugnance, pride and sullenness, he stood leaning against the wall, hour after hour, first on one leg, then on the other. At last Mr. Thornton came out.

'I want for to speak to yo', sir.'

‘Can’t stay now, my man. I’m late as it is.’

‘Well, sir, I reckon I can wait till yo’ come back.’

Mr. Thornton was half way down the street. Higgins sighed. It was no use. To catch him in the street was his only chance of seeing ‘the measter;’ if he had rung the lodge bell, he would have been referred to the overlooker. So he stood still again as the crowd drove out of the millyard at dinner-time, scowling at the imported Irish ‘knobsticks’. At last Mr. Thornton returned.

‘What! you there still!’

‘Ay, sir. I mun speak to yo’.’

‘We’ll go across the yard; the men are not come back, and we shall have it to ourselves.’ He stopped to speak to the overlooker, who said in a low tone:

‘I suppose you know, sir, that that man is Higgins, one of the leaders of the Union.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ said Mr. Thornton, looking round sharply. Higgins was known to him by name as a turbulent spirit.

‘Come along,’ said he, more roughly than before. ‘It is men such as this,’ he thought, ‘who interrupt commerce and injure the very town they live in: mere demagogues, lovers of power, at whatever cost to others.’

‘Well, sir! what do you want?’ he said, as soon as they were in the counting-house.

‘My name is Higgins—’

‘I know that,’ broke in Mr. Thornton. ‘What do you want, Mr. Higgins?’

‘I want work.’

‘Work! You don’t lack impudence, that’s very clear.’

‘I’ve gotten enemies, like my betters; but I ne’er heerd o’ any of them calling me o’er-modest,’ said Higgins. His blood was a little roused by Mr. Thornton’s manner.

Mr. Thornton took up a letter from the table and read it through. At the end, he looked up and said, ‘What are you waiting for?’

‘An answer.’

‘I gave it you before. Don’t waste any more of your time.’

‘Yo’ made a remark, sir, on my impudence: but I were taught that it was manners to say either “yes” or “no,” when axed a civil question. I should be thankfu’ to yo’ if yo’d give me work. Hamper will speak to my being a good hand.’

‘You’d better not send me to Hamper to ask for a character, my man. I might hear more than you’d like.’

‘I’d take th’ risk. Worst they could say of me is, that I did what I thought best, even to my own wrong.’

‘You’d better go and try them, then, and see whether they’ll give you work. I’ve turned off a hundred of my best hands, for no other fault than following such as you. D’ye think I’ll take you on? I might as well put a firebrand into the midst of the cotton-waste.’

Higgins turned away; then he remembered Boucher, and tried once more.

‘I’d promise yo’, measter, I’d not speak a word as could do harm, if yo’ did right by us; and I’d promise more: I’d promise that when I seed yo’ going wrong, and acting unfair, I’d speak to yo’ in private first; and that would be a fair warning. If yo’ and I did na agree in our opinion, yo’ might turn me off at an hour’s notice.’

‘Upon my word, you don’t think small beer of yourself! Hamper has had a loss of you. How came he to let you and your wisdom go?’

‘Well, we parted wi’ mutual dissatisfaction. I wouldn’t agree to their pledge; and they wouldn’t have me. But I’m a good hand, measter, and a steady man – specially when I can keep fro’ drink; and that I shall do now, if I ne’er did afore.’

‘So that you may save money for another strike, I suppose?’

‘No! It’s for to keep th’ widow and childer of a man who was drove mad by them knobsticks o’ yourn; put out of his place by a Paddy that did na know weft fro’ warp.’

‘Well! you’d better turn to something else.’

‘If it were summer,’ said Higgins, ‘I’d do Paddy’s work, and go as a navvy, or haymaking, or summut. But it’s winter, and th’ childer will clem.’

‘A pretty navvy you’d make! why, you couldn’t do half a day’s digging against an Irishman.’

‘I’d only charge half-a-day for twelve hours, if I could only do half-a-day’s work in th’ time. Yo’re not knowing of any place, where they could gi’ me a trial? I’d take any wage they thought I was worth, for the sake of those childer.’

‘Don’t you see what you would be? You’d be a knobstick. You’d be taking less wages than the other labourers – all for the sake of another man’s children. Think how you’d abuse any poor fellow who was willing to take what he could get. You and your Union would soon be down upon him. No! if only because of the way in which you’ve used the poor knobsticks before now, I say No! I’ll not give you work. As for your pretext for coming and asking for work, it may be true, or it may not. It’s a very unlikely story, at any rate. Let me pass. I’ll not give you work. There’s your answer.’

‘I hear, sir. I would na ha’ troubled yo’, but that I were bid to come, by one as seemed to think yo’d gotten some soft place in your heart. Hoo were mistook, and I were misled. But I’m not the first man as is misled by a woman.’

‘Tell her to mind her own business the next time. I believe women are at the bottom of every plague in this world. Be off with you.’

‘I’m obleeged to yo’ for your kindness, measter, and for your civil way o’ saying good-bye.’

Mr. Thornton did not deign to reply. But, looking out of the window a minute after, he was struck with the lean, bent figure going out of the yard: the heavy walk was in strange contrast with the resolute determination of the man to speak to him. He crossed to the porter’s lodge.

‘How long has that man Higgins been waiting to speak to me?’

‘He was outside the gate before eight o’clock, sir.’

‘And it is now—?’

‘Just one, sir.’

‘Five hours,’ thought Mr. Thornton; ‘it’s a long time for a man to wait, doing nothing but hoping and fearing.’

CHAPTER 39

MAKING FRIENDS

After leaving Mrs. Thornton, Margaret shut herself up in her room. She began to walk backwards and forwards, but then, remembering that in that house every step was heard from one room to another, she sat down and forced herself to recollect the conversation. She said to herself:

‘Her words do not touch me; for I am innocent of the motives she attributes to me. But still, it is hard to think that any woman can believe all this of another so easily. It is hard and sad. Where I have done wrong, she does not accuse me. He never told her: I might have known he would not!’

She lifted up her head, as if she took pride in Mr. Thornton’s delicacy of feeling. Then, at a new thought, she pressed her hands tightly together.

‘He, too, must take poor Frederick for some lover. I see it now. It is not merely that he knows of my falsehood, but he believes that I – Oh dear! Oh dear! What shall I do? Why do I care what he thinks? I cannot tell. But I am very miserable! Oh, how unhappy this last year has been! I have passed out of childhood into old age. The hopes of womanhood have closed for me – I shall never marry. I feel as worn-down and fearful as an old woman; I am weary of this continual call upon me for strength. I could bear up for papa; and I think I could bear up against Mrs. Thornton’s unjust suspicions. But it is hard to feel how completely he must misunderstand me. Why am I so morbid today? I do not know. I only know I cannot help it. I must give way sometimes. No, I will not, though,’ said she, springing to her feet. ‘I will not think of myself. I won’t examine my own feelings. It would be of no use. If I live to be an old woman, then I may sit over the fire, and looking into the embers, see the life that might have been.’

All this time, she was hastily putting on her things to go out, only stopping to wipe her eyes impatiently.

‘I dare say, there’s many a woman makes as sad a mistake as I have done, and only finds it out too late. And how proudly I spoke to him that day! But I did not know then. It has come upon me little by little, and I don’t know where it began. I shall find it difficult to behave in the same way to him; but I will be very calm, and say little. But, to be sure, I may not see him; he keeps out of our way. No wonder, believing what he must about me.’

She went out, going rapidly towards the country, and trying to drown reflection by walking swiftly. On her return, her father met her on the door-step.

‘Good girl!’ said he. ‘You’ve been to Mrs. Boucher’s. I was just meaning to go there.’

‘No, papa; I have not,’ said Margaret, reddening. ‘I never thought about her. But I will go directly after dinner.’

Accordingly she went. Mrs. Boucher was very ill. The kind and sensible neighbour, who had come in the other day, seemed to have taken charge of everything. Some of the children were gone to the neighbours. Mary Higgins had come for the three youngest at dinner-time; and Nicholas had gone for the doctor. Mrs. Boucher was dying; and there was nothing to do but to wait. Margaret thought

that she had better go and visit the Higginses in the meantime. She might hear whether Nicholas had been able to see Mr. Thornton.

She found Nicholas busy amusing the three little children, by spinning pennies. He, and they, were smiling at a good long spin; and Margaret thought that was a good sign. When the penny stopped spinning, little Johnnie began to cry.

‘Come to me,’ said Margaret, holding him in her arms and putting her watch to his ear, while she asked Nicholas if he had seen Mr. Thornton.

The look on his face changed instantly.

‘Ay!’ said he. ‘I’ve seen and heard too much on him.’

‘He refused you, then?’ said Margaret, sorrowfully.

‘To be sure. I knew he would. It’s no good expecting marcy at the hands o’ them measters.’

‘I am sorry I asked you. Was he angry?’

‘He weren’t o’er-civil!’ said Nicholas, spinning the penny again. ‘Never yo’ fret, I’m only where I was. I’ll go on tramp tomorrow. I gave him as good as I got. I telled him, I’d only come because yo’d advised me to, and I were beholden to yo’.’

‘You told him I sent you?’

‘I dunno’ if I said your name. I dunnot think I did. I said, a woman who knew no better had advised me for to come and see if there was a soft place in his heart.’

‘And he—?’

‘Said I were to tell yo’ to mind your own business. That’s the longest spin yet, my lads. – But ne’er mind. We’re but where we was; and I’ll break stones on th’ road afore I let these little uns clem.’

‘I am sorry I asked you to go to Mr. Thornton’s,’ said Margaret. ‘I am disappointed in him.’

There was a slight noise behind her. They both turned, and there stood Mr. Thornton, with a look of displeased surprise upon his face. Swiftly Margaret went out past him, saying not a word, only bowing low to hide her face. He bent equally low in return, and then closed the door after her.

He was annoyed to find her there. He had tenderness in his heart; but he kept it very sacred and safe. However, if he dreaded exposure of his tenderness, he equally wished that men should recognise his justice; and he felt that he had been unjust in giving so scornful a hearing to anyone who had waited patiently for five hours to speak to him. That the man had then spoken saucily was nothing to Mr. Thornton. He rather liked him for it; and he was conscious of his own irritability, which probably made them quits. It was the five hours of waiting that struck Mr. Thornton. He spent two hours himself going about collecting evidence of the truth of Higgins’s story and the nature of his character. He tried not to be, but was convinced that all that Higgins had said was true.

And then the conviction touched the latent tenderness of his heart. The man’s patience and generosity made him forget entirely the mere reasonings of justice. He came to tell Higgins he would give him work; and he was annoyed to find Margaret there because then he understood that she was the woman who had urged Higgins to come to him; and he was doing this not because of her, but solely because it was right.

‘So that was the lady you spoke of?’ said he indignantly to Higgins. ‘You might have told me who she was.’

‘And then, maybe, yo’d ha’ spoken of her more civil than yo’ did when yo’ were talking o’ women being at the root o’ all plagues.’

‘Of course you told that to Miss Hale?’

‘In coorse I did. Leastways, I telled her she weren’t to meddle again in aught that concerned yo’.’

‘Whose children are those – yours?’

‘They’re not mine, and they are mine.’

‘They are the children you spoke of this morning?’

‘When yo’ said,’ replied Higgins fiercely, ‘that my story might be true or might not, but it were a very unlikely one.’

Mr. Thornton was silent for a moment. Then he said: ‘I spoke to you about those children in a way I had no business to do. I did not believe you. I could not have taken care of another man’s children myself, if he had acted towards me as I hear Boucher did towards you. But I know now that you spoke truth. I beg your pardon.’

Higgins did not immediately respond to this. But when he did speak, it was in a softened tone, although the words were gruff.

‘Yo’ve no business to go prying into what happened between Boucher and me. He’s dead, and I’m sorry. That’s enough.’

‘So it is. Will you take work with me? That’s what I came to ask.’

Higgins wavered: and then his eye fell on the children.

‘Yo’ve called me impudent, and a liar, and a mischief-maker, and happen wi’ some truth, as I were now and then given to drink. An’ I ha’ called you a tyrant, an’ an oud bull-dog, and a hard, cruel master; that’s where it stands. But for th’ childer, Measter, do yo’ think we can get on together?’

‘Well!’ said Mr. Thornton, half-laughing, ‘we neither of us can think much worse of the other than we do now.’

‘That’s true,’ said Higgins, reflectively. ‘So, measter, I’ll come; and what’s more, I thank yo’; and that’s a deal fro’ me.’

‘And this is a deal from me,’ said Mr. Thornton, gripping his hand. ‘Now mind you come sharp to your time. I’ll have no laggards at my mill. And the first time I catch you making mischief, off you go. So now you know where you are.’

‘Would yo’ rayther have me wi’out my brains?’

‘Without your brains if you use them for meddling with my business; with your brains if you can keep them for your own.’

‘I shall need a deal o’ brains to settle where my business ends and yours begins.’

‘Your business has not begun yet. So good afternoon.’

Just before Mr. Thornton came up to Mrs. Boucher’s door, Margaret came out of it. She did not see him; and he followed her for several yards, admiring her light and graceful walk. But, suddenly, this simple emotion of pleasure was poisoned by jealousy. He wished to overtake her, and speak to her, to see how she would receive him, now she must know he was aware of some other attachment. He wished too, but of this wish he was rather ashamed, that she should know that he had repented of his morning’s decision about Higgins.

He came up to her. ‘Allow me to say, Miss Hale, that you were premature in your disappointment. I have taken Higgins on.’

‘I am glad of it,’ said she, coldly.

‘He tells me he repeated to you, what I said about—’ Mr. Thornton hesitated.

‘About women not meddling. You had a perfect right to express your opinion, which was a very correct one, I have no doubt. But,’ Margaret went on more eagerly, ‘Higgins did not quite tell you the exact truth.’ The word ‘truth’ reminded her of her own untruth, and she stopped short, feeling uncomfortable.

Mr. Thornton was puzzled; and then he remembered the lie she had told. ‘The exact truth!’ said he. ‘Very few people do speak the exact truth. I have given up hoping for it. Miss Hale, have you no explanation to give me? You must perceive what I have to think.’

Margaret was silent, wondering whether an explanation would be consistent with loyalty to Frederick.

‘Nay,’ said he, ‘I will ask no farther. At present, believe me, your secret is safe with me. But you run great risks, allow me to say, in being so indiscreet. I am now only speaking as a friend of your father’s: if I had any other thought or hope, of course that is at an end.’

‘I am aware of that,’ said Margaret, forcing herself to speak in an indifferent way. ‘I am aware of what I must appear to you, but the secret is another person’s, and I cannot explain it without doing him harm.’

‘I have not the slightest wish to pry into the gentleman’s secrets,’ he said, with growing anger. ‘My own interest in you is simply that of a friend. You may not believe me, Miss Hale, after the persecution I’m afraid I threatened you with at one time – but that is all passed away. You believe me, Miss Hale?’

‘Yes,’ said Margaret, quietly and sadly.

‘Then I don’t see any occasion for us to go on walking together. I thought perhaps you might have had something to say, but I see we are nothing to each other. I wish you good afternoon.’ He walked off very hastily.

‘What can he mean?’ thought Margaret, ‘what could he mean by speaking so, when I know he does not care for me; he cannot. His mother will have said cruel things about me to him. But I won’t care for him. I surely am mistress enough of myself to control this wild, strange, miserable feeling, which tempted me even to betray my own dear Frederick, so that I might regain his good opinion – the good opinion of a man who takes such pains to tell me that I am nothing to him. Come, poor little heart! be cheery and brave.’

Her father was almost startled by her merriment that afternoon. She talked incessantly, and forced her natural humour to an unusual pitch; and even if there was a tinge of bitterness in much of what she said, he was glad to see her shake off her cares. For some days her spirits varied strangely; and her father was beginning to be anxious about her, when news arrived that promised some variety for her.

Mr. Hale received a letter from Mr. Bell, who proposed to visit them; and Mr. Hale imagined this would be as agreeable to Margaret as to himself. Margaret tried to take an interest; but she was too languid to care about any Mr. Bell, even though he were twenty times her godfather.

She was more roused by a letter from Edith, full of sympathy about her aunt’s death, and saying that as Mrs. Shaw was talking of returning to England, she thought Captain Lennox might sell out of the army, and that they might all go and live again in the old Harley Street house; which, however, would seem very incomplete without Margaret.

Margaret yearned after that old house, and the placid tranquillity of that old well-ordered, monotonous life. She had been so buffeted about, and felt so exhausted by this recent struggle with herself, that even stagnation would be a rest and a refreshment. So she began to look forward to a long visit to the Lennoxes, on their return, as a place where she could regain her command over herself. At present it seemed as if she could not forget Mr. Thornton. If she went to see the Higginses, she heard of him there; her father had resumed their readings together, and quoted his opinions perpetually; even Mr. Bell wrote that he believed he would be occupied with Mr. Thornton, as a new lease was in preparation, and the terms of it must be agreed upon.

CHAPTER 40

OUT OF TUNE

Margaret had not expected much pleasure to herself from Mr. Bell's visit; but when her godfather came, they fell naturally into friendship. He seemed fresh and young under his Fellow's cap and gown, as she told him:

'Fresh and young in warmth and kindness, I mean. I'm afraid I think your opinions are the oldest and mustiest I have met with this long time.'

'Hear this daughter of yours, Hale. Her residence in Milton has quite corrupted her. She's a democrat, a red republican, a socialist—'

'Papa, it's all because I'm standing up for the progress of commerce. Mr. Bell would have us still exchanging wild-beast skins for acorns.'

'No, no. I'd dig the ground and grow potatoes. Don't exaggerate, missy. But I'm tired of this bustle. Everybody rushing to get rich.'

'It is not everyone who can sit comfortably in a set of college rooms, and let his riches grow without any exertion,' said Mr. Hale.

'The men here like the bustle and the struggle. As for sitting still – Why! Pooh! I don't believe there's a man in Milton who knows how to sit still; and it is a great art.'

'Milton people, I suspect, think Oxford men don't know how to move. It would be a very good thing if they mixed a little more.'

'Are you not a Milton man yourself?' Margaret asked Mr. Bell. 'I should have thought you would have been proud of your town.'

'I confess, I don't see what there is to be proud of. If you'll only come to Oxford, Margaret, I will show you a place to glory in.'

'Well!' said Mr. Hale, 'Mr. Thornton is coming to see us tonight, and he is as proud of Milton as you of Oxford. You two must try and make each other a little more liberal-minded.'

'I don't want to be more liberal-minded, thank you,' said Mr. Bell.

Mr. Thornton had determined not to ask his mother about her interview with Margaret. He felt pretty sure that his mother's account would only annoy him. He shrank from hearing Margaret's name mentioned. While he blamed her – was jealous of her – renounced her – he loved her sorely, in spite of himself. He dreamt of her; he dreamt she came dancing towards him with outspread arms, and with a lightness and gaiety which made him loathe her, even while it allured him. The impression of this figure of Margaret, with all her character taken out of it, was deeply stamped upon his imagination when he wakened.

Yet he was too proud to acknowledge his weakness by avoiding the sight of her. He would neither seek to be in her company nor avoid it. To convince himself of his power of self-control, he lingered over every piece of business that afternoon; so it was past eight o'clock before he reached Mr. Hale's. Then there was business to be discussed in the study with Mr. Bell, who kept talking long after it was done, when they might just as well have gone upstairs. Mr. Thornton chafed, and thought Mr. Bell a most prosy companion; while Mr. Bell considered Mr. Thornton as brusque a fellow as he had ever met with.

At last they went upstairs, and found Margaret with a letter open before her, eagerly discussing its contents with her father. It was immediately put aside; but Mr. Thornton's keen senses caught some words of Mr. Hale's to Mr. Bell.

'A letter from Henry Lennox. It makes Margaret very hopeful.'

Mr. Bell nodded. Margaret was red as a rose when Mr. Thornton looked at her. He had the greatest mind in the world to get up and go out of the room that very instant, and never set foot in the house again.

'We were thinking,' said Mr. Hale, 'that you and Mr. Thornton were each trying to convert the other, you were so long in the study. Mr. Thornton, we were accusing Mr. Bell this morning of bigotry against his native town; and we – Margaret, I believe – suggested that it would do him good to associate with Milton manufacturers.'

'I beg your pardon. Margaret thought it would do the Milton manufacturers good to associate a little more with Oxford men. Now wasn't it so, Margaret?'

'I believe we thought it would do both good to see a little more of the other.'

'So you see, Mr. Thornton, we ought to have been improving each other downstairs. However, I am willing to do my part now. I wonder when you Milton men intend to live. All your lives seem to be spent in gathering together the materials for life.'

'By living, I suppose you mean enjoyment.'

'Yes, enjoyment of the power and influence which money gives. You are all striving for money. What do you want it for?'

Mr. Thornton was silent. Then he said, 'I really don't know. But money is not what I strive for.'

'What then?'

'It is a personal question. I am not sure I am prepared to lay myself open to such a catechism.'

'No!' said Mr. Hale; 'don't let us be personal in our catechism. You are each of you too individual to represent a city.'

'I am not sure whether to consider that as a compliment or not,' said Mr. Bell. 'I should like to be the representative of Oxford, with its beauty and its learning, and its proud history. What do you say, Margaret; ought I to be flattered?'

'I don't know Oxford. But there is a difference between being the representative of a city and the representative man of its inhabitants.'

'Very true, Miss Margaret. Now I remember, you were against me this morning, and were quite Miltonian in your preferences.' Margaret saw the quick glance of surprise that Mr. Thornton gave her. Mr. Bell went on—

'Ah! I wish I could show you our High Street – our Radcliffe Square. I am leaving out our colleges, just as I give Mr. Thornton leave to omit his factories in speaking of the charms of Milton. I have a right to abuse my birth-place. Remember I am a Milton man.'

Mr. Thornton was not in a mood for joking. He was annoyed enough to attempt to defend what was never meant to be seriously attacked.

'I don't set up Milton as a model of a town.'

'Not in architecture?' slyly asked Mr. Bell.

'No! We've been too busy to attend to mere outward appearances. Remember, we are of a different race from the Greeks, to whom beauty was everything,' said Mr. Thornton. 'I belong to Teutonic blood; it is little mingled in this part of England.'

We retain much of their language, and more of their spirit; we do not look upon life as a time for enjoyment, but for action and exertion. Our glory and our beauty arise out of inward strength, which makes us victorious over difficulties. And in Darkshire, we hate to have laws made for us at a distance. We wish people would allow us to right ourselves, instead of continually meddling, with their imperfect legislation. We stand up for self-government, and oppose centralisation.'

'Well, at any rate, I revoke what I said this morning – that you Milton people did not reverence the past. You are regular worshippers of Thor.'

'If we do not reverence the past as you do in Oxford, it is because we want something which can apply to the present. It would be finer if the words of experience could direct us how to act in the difficulties that must be encountered. The way in which they are met and conquered – not merely pushed aside for the time – decides our future. Some people can speak of Utopia much more easily than of the next day's duty; and yet when that duty is all done by others, they are ready to cry, "Fie, for shame!"'

'Would you Milton men condescend to send up your today's difficulty to Oxford? You have not tried us yet.'

Mr. Thornton laughed outright. 'I was thinking of the strikes we have gone through, which are troublesome enough, as I am finding to my cost. And yet this last strike, under which I am smarting, has been respectable.'

'A respectable strike!' said Mr. Bell. 'That sounds as if you were far gone in the worship of Thor.'

Margaret felt, rather than saw, that Mr. Thornton was chagrined by the repeated turning into jest of what he was feeling as very serious. She tried to change the conversation, and forced herself to say something.

'Edith says she finds the printed calicoes in Corfu better and cheaper than in London.'

'Does she?' said her father. 'I think that must be one of Edith's exaggerations.'

'I don't believe a cousin of Margaret's could exaggerate,' said Mr. Bell.

'Is Miss Hale so remarkable for truth?' said Mr. Thornton, bitterly. The moment he had done so, he could have bitten his tongue out. Why should he stab her with her shame in this way? How evil he was tonight; possessed by ill-humour, unable to cope light-heartedly with one who was trying, by gay and careless speeches, to make the evening pass pleasantly. And to speak to Margaret as he had done!

She did not get up and leave the room, as she had done formerly, when his abruptness had annoyed her. She sat quite still, after the first momentary glance of grieved surprise. Her eyes looked like some child's who has met with a rebuff, full of reproachful sadness; and then they fell, and she bent over her work, and did not speak again. But he saw a sigh tremble over her body, as if she quivered in some unwonted chill.

He gave short sharp answers to the others; he was uneasy and cross, unable to discern between jest and earnest; anxious only for a look, a word of hers. But she neither looked nor spoke. Her tapered fingers flew in and out of her sewing as if that were the business of her life. She could not care for him, he thought, or else the passionate fervour of his wish would have forced her to raise those eyes, to read the repentance in his. He could have struck her before he left, in order that by some strange act of rudeness, he might earn the privilege of telling her the remorse that gnawed at his heart.

The long walk in the open air sobered him. He gravely resolved that henceforth he would see as little of her as possible, since the sight and sound of her threw him so off-balance. Well! He had known what love was – a sharp, fierce pang, a fire through which he was struggling! but through that furnace he would fight his way out into the serenity of middle age, all the richer and more human for having known this great passion.

When he had left, Margaret rose from her seat, and began silently to fold up her work. She looked like one who had gone through a day of great fatigue. As the three prepared for bed, Mr. Bell muttered a little condemnation of Mr. Thornton.

‘I never saw a fellow so spoiled by success. He can’t bear a jest of any kind. Everything seems to touch on his high dignity. Formerly, he was as simple as the day; you could not offend him, because he had no vanity.’

‘He is not vain now,’ said Margaret, turning round. ‘Tonight he has not been like himself. Something must have annoyed him before he came here.’

Mr. Bell gave her a sharp glance. After she had left the room, he asked, ‘Hale! did it ever strike you that Thornton and your daughter have a *tendresse* for each other?’

‘Never!’ said Mr. Hale, startled. ‘No, I am sure you are mistaken. If there is anything, it is on Mr. Thornton’s side. Poor fellow! I hope he is not thinking of her, for I am sure she would not have him.’

‘Well! I’m a bachelor, so perhaps my opinion is not worth having. Or else I should say she showed some pretty symptoms!’

‘Margaret would never think of him, I’m sure! Such a thing has never entered her head.’

‘Entering her heart would do. But I merely threw out a suggestion. I dare say I was wrong. And I’m very sleepy; so I’ll take myself off to bed.’

But Mr. Hale resolved that he would not be disturbed by any such nonsensical idea; so he lay awake, determining not to think about it.

Mr. Bell left the next day, telling Margaret to look on him as one who had a right to help her in all her troubles. To Mr. Hale he said:

‘That Margaret of yours has gone deep into my heart. Take care of her, for she is very precious – a great deal too good for Milton – only fit for Oxford, in fact. The town, I mean; not the men. Seriously, Hale! I wish you’d leave Milton, which is a most unsuitable place for you, though it was my recommendation. If you could swallow your doubts, you could take a college living; and you and Margaret should come and live at the parsonage – you as a sort of lay curate, and she to be our housekeeper – the village Lady Bountiful. I could be very happy in such a life. What do you think?’

‘Never!’ said Mr. Hale, decidedly. ‘My one great change has been made, and my price paid. Here I stay out my life.’

‘I don’t give up my plan. Only I won’t bait you with it any more just now. Where’s the Pearl? Come, Margaret, give me a farewell kiss; and remember, my dear, where you may find a true friend. You are my child, Margaret. Remember that, and God bless you!’

So they fell back into the monotony of their quiet life. There was no invalid to care for; even the Higginses seemed to have receded from any need of immediate thought. The Boucher children claimed Margaret’s care; and she went pretty often to see Mary Higgins, who had charge of them. The two families were living in one house: the elder children were at humble schools, while the younger ones were

tended, in Mary's absence at work, by the kind neighbour. She was paid for her trouble. Indeed, in all his arrangements for these orphan children, Nicholas showed a sober judgment at variance with his former more eccentric jerks of action. He was so steady at his work, that Margaret did not often see him during these winter months; but when she did, he winced away from any reference to Boucher. He did not speak easily of Mr. Thornton.

'To tell the truth,' said he, 'he fairly bamboozles me. He's two chaps. One chap I knowed of old as measter all o'er. T'other chap hasn't an ounce of measter about him. How them two chaps is bound up in one body, is a craddy for me to find out. He comes here pretty often; that's how I know the chap that's a man, not a measter. And I reckon he's taken aback by me pretty much as I am by him; for he sits and listens and stares, as if I were some strange beast. But I'm none daunted. And I tell him some of my mind that I reckon he'd ha' been the better of hearing when he were a younger man.'

'And does he answer you?' asked Mr. Hale.

'Well! I'll not say th' advantage is all on his side, for all I take credit for improving him. Sometimes he says a rough thing or two, which has a queer smack o' truth in it when yo' come to chew it. He'll be coming tonight, I reckon, about them childer's schooling. He's not satisfied wi' it, and wants for t' examine 'em.'

'What are they—' began Mr. Hale; but Margaret, touching his arm, showed him her watch.

'It is nearly seven,' she said. 'Come, papa.' She did not breathe freely till they were away from the house. Then, as she became calmer, she wished that she had not been in so great a hurry; for they saw Mr. Thornton very seldom now; and for the old friendship's sake she should like to have seen him tonight.

Yes! he came very seldom. Mr. Hale was disappointed in his pupil's sudden lukewarmness about Greek literature. And often a hurried note from Mr. Thornton would arrive at the last moment, saying that he could not come to read with Mr. Hale that evening. Though other pupils had taken his place, no one was like his first scholar in Mr. Hale's heart. He was saddened, and used to sit pondering the reasons for this change.

He startled Margaret one evening by suddenly asking:

'Margaret! had you ever any reason for thinking that Mr. Thornton cared for you?'

Margaret did not answer immediately; but by the drooping of her head, he guessed what her reply would be.

'Yes; I believe – oh papa, I should have told you.' And she dropped her work, and hid her face in her hands.

'No, dear; I am sure you would have told me if you had felt that you could return his regard. Did he speak to you about it?'

A little gentle, reluctant 'Yes.'

'And you refused him?'

A long sigh; and another 'Yes.' But before her father could speak, Margaret lifted up her face, rosy with beautiful shame, and said:

'Now, papa, I cannot tell you more; and the whole thing is so painful to me that I cannot bear to think of it. Oh, papa, I am sorry to have lost you this friend, but I could not help it. Oh! I am very sorry.' She sat down on the floor, and laid her head on his knees.

‘I too, am sorry, my dear. Mr. Bell quite startled me when he said some idea of the kind—’

‘Oh, did Mr. Bell see it?’

‘He took it into his head that you were not ungraciously disposed towards Mr. Thornton. I knew that could never be. I knew your real feelings; you could never like Mr. Thornton in that way. But I am very sorry.’

They were very quiet for some minutes. But, on stroking her cheek caressingly, he was shocked to find her face wet with tears. As he touched her, she sprang up, and smiling brightly, began to talk of the Lennoxes with such a vehement desire to turn the conversation, that Mr. Hale was too tender-hearted to force it back into the old channel.

‘Tomorrow they will be back in Harley Street. I wonder what room they will make into the nursery? Aunt Shaw will be happy with the baby. Fancy Edith a mamma! And Captain Lennox – I wonder what he will do with himself now he has sold out!’

‘I’ll tell you what,’ said her father, anxious to indulge her in this fresh subject of interest, ‘I think you should run up to town and see the travellers. You could learn more about Frederick’s chances in half an hour’s conversation with Mr. Henry Lennox than in a dozen of these letters of his. It would be uniting business with pleasure.’

‘No, papa, you cannot spare me.’ After a pause, she added, ‘I am losing hope about Frederick; he is letting us down gently, but I can see that Mr. Lennox has no hope of hunting up the witnesses after so many years. We must console ourselves with being glad that Frederick is so happy, and with being a great deal to each other. So don’t offend me by talking of being able to spare me, papa, for I assure you, you can’t.’

But the idea of a change took root in Margaret’s heart, although not in the way her father proposed. She began to consider how good a change would be for her father, whose spirits now became too frequently depressed, and whose health had been seriously affected by his wife’s death. His pupils did not provide the companionship that Mr. Thornton had. Margaret was conscious that her father needed to converse with men. At Helstone there had been perpetual exchanging of visits with neighbouring clergymen; and the poor labourers in the fields, or tending their cattle in the forest, were always at liberty to talk.

But in Milton everyone was too busy; they spoke only about business, and then sank into fallow until next morning. The workman went away to some lecture, or club, or beer-shop, according to his character. Mr. Hale thought of trying to deliver a course of lectures, but he contemplated doing this so much as an effort of duty that Margaret was sure that it would not be well done until he could look upon it with zest.

CHAPTER 41

THE JOURNEY'S END

So the winter was getting on, and the days were beginning to lengthen, without bringing any brightness of hope. Mrs. Thornton had entirely ceased to come to the house. Mr. Thornton came occasionally, but only to visit her father in his study. Mr. Hale spoke of him always with the same high regard. And from what Margaret could gather, he had ceased to visit not from any umbrage, but because his business affairs had required close attention since the strike. Nay, Margaret discovered that he even spoke from time to time of her, always in the same calm, friendly way.

The dreary peacefulness of this time had been preceded by so long a period of anxiety and care that her mind had lost its elasticity. She occupied herself in teaching the two younger Boucher children, and worked hard at goodness; worked hard, I say truly, for despite her efforts, her heart seemed dead; her life seemed bleak and dreary. The only thing she did well was the silent comforting of her father. There was not a wish of his that she did not strive to foresee, and to fulfil. They were quiet wishes to be sure, and hardly named without apology. All the more beautiful was her meek spirit of obedience.

March brought the news of Frederick's marriage. He and Dolores wrote; she in Spanish-English, as was only natural, and he with little Spanish turns of phrase.

Frederick had received a letter from Henry Lennox, announcing how little hope there was of his ever clearing himself at a court-martial, in the absence of the missing witnesses. At this, Frederick wrote Margaret a pretty vehement letter, renouncing England as his country; he declared that he would not take a pardon if it were offered him, nor live in England if he had permission to do so. All of which made Margaret cry sorely at first; but on consideration, she saw in such expression his sharp disappointment; and she felt that there was nothing for it but patience.

In the next letter, Frederick spoke so joyfully of the future that he had no thought for the past; and Margaret needed patience herself. But the pretty, timid, girlish letters of Dolores were beginning to have a charm for both Margaret and her father. She was so evidently anxious to make a favourable impression upon her lover's English relations, that her care peeped out at every erasure; and the letters announcing the marriage were accompanied by a splendid black lace mantilla, chosen by Dolores herself for her unseen sister-in-law.

Frederick's position was raised by this marriage to as high a level as they could desire. Barbour and Co. was one of the most extensive Spanish houses, and into it he was received as a junior partner. Margaret smiled a little, and then sighed as she remembered her old tirades against trade. Here was her chevalier of a brother turned merchant, trader! But then she rebelled against herself. Trade or no trade, Frederick was very, very happy. Dolores must be charming, and the mantilla was exquisite! And then she returned to the present life.

Her father had occasionally experienced a distressing difficulty in breathing. This made Margaret urge him to accept Mr. Bell's invitation to visit him at Oxford in April. The invitation included Margaret; but she felt that it would be a greater relief to her to remain quietly at home, entirely free from any responsibility, and so rest her

mind and heart in a manner which she had not been able to do for more than two years.

When her father had gone, Margaret felt how great had been the pressure on her time and spirits. It was almost stunning to feel herself so much at liberty; no one depending on her for cheering care; no invalid to plan for; she might be idle, and silent – and she might be unhappy if she liked. For months, all her own personal troubles had had to be stuffed away into a dark cupboard; but now she had leisure to take them out, and mourn over them, and seek the true method of subduing them into the elements of peace.

So she sat almost motionless for hours in the drawing-room, going over the bitterness of every remembrance with an unwincing resolution. Only once she cried aloud, at the stinging thought of the faithlessness which led to that falsehood. Her plans for Frederick had all failed, and the temptation to lie seemed now a dead mockery. The lie had been so despicably foolish, and faith in the power of truth would have been so infinitely wiser!

In her nervous agitation, she unconsciously opened a book of her father's that lay upon the table. The words that caught her eye seemed made for her state:

“Now, my poor heart, we are falling into the pit, which we had resolved to escape. Ah! Let us rise again, and leave it for ever. Let us claim the mercy of God, and hope that it will help us to be firmer henceforth; let us return to the way of humility. Courage! Let us be on our guard, and God will help us.”

‘The way of humility,’ thought Margaret. ‘That is what I have missed! But courage, little heart. By God’s help we may find the lost path.’

So she rose up, and determined at once to set to on some work which should take her out of herself. To begin with, she called in Martha, and tried to find out what was below her grave, respectful, servant-like manner. She found it difficult to induce Martha to speak of any of her personal interests; but at last she touched the right chord, in naming Mrs. Thornton. Martha’s whole face brightened, and, on a little encouragement, out came a long story. Her father had been connected with Mrs. Thornton’s husband, but circumstances had separated the two families until Martha was nearly grown up. Then, her father having sunk lower and lower from his original occupation as a clerk, and her mother being dead, she and her sister, to use Martha’s own expression, would have been ‘lost’ but for Mrs. Thornton; who sought them out and cared for them.

‘I had the fever, and was delicate; and Mrs. Thornton, and Mr. Thornton too, had me nursed in their own house, and sent me to the sea and all. The doctors said the fever was catching, but they cared none for that – only Miss Fanny, and she went a-visiting these folk that she is going to marry into.’

‘Miss Fanny is going to be married!’ exclaimed Margaret.

‘Yes; and to a rich gentleman, only he’s a deal older than she is. His name is Watson; and his mills are somewhere out beyond Hayleigh; it’s a very good marriage.’

At this piece of information, Margaret was silent long enough for Martha to recover her propriety. She swept up the hearth and quitted the room with the same wooden face with which she had entered it. Margaret had to pull herself up from indulging a bad trick, which she had lately fallen into – of trying to imagine how every event would affect Mr. Thornton: whether he would like it or dislike it.

The next day she had the little Boucher children for their lessons, and took a long walk, and ended by a visit to Mary Higgins. She found Nicholas already come home from his work. He too seemed to have entered a little more on the way of humility; he was quieter, and less self-asserting.

‘So th’ oud gentleman’s away on his travels, is he?’ said he. ‘Little ’uns telled me so. Eh! but they’re sharp ’uns, they are. My measter is spinning about th’ world somewhere.’

‘Is that the reason you’re so early home tonight?’ asked Margaret innocently.

‘Thou know’st nought about it,’ said he contemptuously. ‘I’m not one wi’ two faces – one for my measter, and t’other for his back. No! yon Thornton’s good enough to fight wi’, but too good to be cheated. It were you as gotten me the place, and I thank yo’ for it. Thornton’s is not a bad mill. Stand down, lad, and say your pretty hymn to Miss Margaret. Steady on thy legs, and right arm out. One to stop, two to stay, three mak’ ready, and four away!’

The little fellow repeated a Methodist hymn, whose swinging rhythm had caught his ear. When Margaret had duly applauded, Nicholas called for another, to her surprise, as she found him taking an interest in the sacred things which he had formerly scorned.

It was past the usual tea-time when she reached home; but she had the comfort of feeling that no one had been kept waiting for her. After tea she resolved to examine a large packet of letters, and pick out those that were to be destroyed.

Among them were four or five of Mr. Henry Lennox’s, relating to Frederick’s affairs; and she carefully read them over again, in order to judge exactly her brother’s chances. But the little personal revelation of character contained in them forced itself on her notice. It was evident, from the stiff wording, that Mr. Lennox had never forgotten his proposal to her. They were clever letters; but they contained nothing hearty or genial. They were to be kept, however; so she laid them carefully on one side.

Then she fell into a reverie; and the thought of her father ran strangely in her head that night. She almost blamed herself for having felt his absence as a relief; but these two days had set her up afresh, with new strength and brighter hope. The morbid scales had fallen from her eyes, and she saw her position and her work more truly. If only Mr. Thornton would restore her the lost friendship – or only come from time to time to cheer her father – though she should never see him, she felt as if the course of her future life, though not brilliant in prospect, might lie clear and even before her.

She sighed as she rose up to go to bed. In spite of the plain duty of devotion to her father, there lay at her heart a pang of sorrow.

And Mr. Hale thought of Margaret, that April evening, just as strangely and as persistently as she was thinking of him. He had been fatigued by going about among his old friends and familiar places. He had worried about his friends’ reception of his altered opinions; but as soon as they saw the face of the man whom they had once loved, they forgot his views; or only remembered them enough to give an additional tender gravity to their manner. Mr. Hale had always been shy and reserved; but those who in youth had cared to penetrate to his delicacy of thought and feeling took him to their hearts. And the renewal of this kindness, after so much time and change, overpowered him more than any disapproval could have done.

‘I’m afraid we’ve done too much,’ said Mr. Bell. ‘You’re suffering now from having lived so long in that Milton air.’

'I *am* tired,' said Mr. Hale. 'But it is not Milton air. I'm fifty-five.'

'Nonsense! I'm upwards of sixty, and feel no loss of strength. Fifty-five! why, you're quite a young man.'

Mr. Hale shook his head. 'These last few years!' said he. But after a pause, he said with trembling earnestness:

'Bell! if I could have foreseen all that would come of my change of opinion – even if I could have known how she would have suffered – I would not undo my acknowledgment that I no longer held the same faith as my church. I would have done just the same as far as leaving the church goes. I might have acted more wisely, in all that I subsequently did for my family. But I don't think God endued me with over-much wisdom or strength,' he added, falling back into his chair.

'He gave you strength to do what your conscience told you was right,' said Mr. Bell; 'and I don't see that we need any higher or holier strength than that; or wisdom either.'

There was a pause. Mr. Hale spoke first: 'About Margaret. If I die—'

'Nonsense!'

'What will become of her – I often think? I suppose the Lennoxes will ask her to live with them. Her aunt Shaw loved her well in her own quiet way; but she forgets to love the absent.'

'A very common fault. What sort of people are the Lennoxes?'

'He, handsome, fluent, and agreeable. Edith, a sweet little spoiled beauty. Margaret loves her with all her heart.'

'Now, Hale; you know that girl of yours has got pretty nearly all my heart. That visit that I paid to you at Milton made me her slave. I went, a willing old victim, following the car of the conqueror. For, indeed, she looks as grand and serene as one who has struggled, and yet has the victory secure in sight. All I have is at her service, if she needs it; and will be hers when I die. Moreover, I myself will be her chevalier, sixty and gouty though I be. Seriously, old friend, your daughter shall be my principal charge in life, and all the help that I can give shall be hers. But you're going to outlive me by many a long year. You spare, thin men are always cheating Death! It's the stout, florid fellows like me that go off first.'

If Mr. Bell had had a prophetic eye he might have seen the angel with the grave and composed face standing very nigh, beckoning to his friend. That night Mr. Hale laid his head down on the pillow on which it never more should stir with life.

The servant who entered his room in the morning received no answer to his speech; drew near the bed, and saw the calm, beautiful face lying white and cold. There had been no pain – no struggle. His heart must have stopped as he lay down.

Mr. Bell was stunned by the shock.

'Poor old Hale! Dr. Forbes says it is the natural end of a heart complaint. You wore out that tender heart of yours before its time. Poor old friend! Wallis, pack up a carpet-bag for me. Pack it up, I say. I must go to Milton by the next train.'

The bag was packed, the cab ordered, the railway reached in twenty minutes. The London train arrived, and Mr. Bell was hurried in by the impatient guard. He threw himself back in his seat, trying, with closed eyes, to understand how one alive yesterday could be dead today; and shortly tears stole out between his grizzled eye-lashes. On feeling them he opened his keen eyes, and looked as severely cheerful as he could. He was not going to blubber before a set of strangers. Not he!

There was no set of strangers, only one sitting far from him on the same side. Mr. Bell peered at him; and behind the great sheet of the outspread *Times*, he recognised Mr. Thornton.

‘Why, Thornton! is that you?’ said he, moving to a closer seat. He shook Mr. Thornton vehemently by the hand, until his own hand was needed to wipe away tears. He had last seen Mr. Thornton in his friend’s company.

‘I’m going to Milton on a melancholy errand. Going to break to Hale’s daughter the news of his sudden death!’

‘Death! Mr. Hale dead!’

‘Ay; I keep saying it to myself, “Hale is dead!” but it doesn’t make it any more real. He went to bed well, to all appearance, last night, and was quite cold this morning when my servant went to call him.’

‘Where? I don’t understand!’

‘At Oxford. He came to stay with me.’

‘And she!’ Mr. Thornton stopped short.

‘Margaret, you mean. Yes! I am going to tell her. Poor fellow! how full his thoughts were of her all last night! But I take Margaret as my child for his sake.’

Mr. Thornton made one or two fruitless attempts to speak, before he could get out the words:

‘What will become of her!’

‘I rather fancy there will be two people waiting for her: myself for one. I would take a live dragon into my house, if, by hiring such a chaperone, I could make my old age happy with having Margaret for a daughter. But there are those Lennoxes!’

‘Who are they?’ asked Mr. Thornton with trembling interest.

‘Oh, smart London people, who very likely will think they’ve the best right to her. Captain Lennox married her cousin – the girl she was brought up with. Good enough people, I dare say. There’s her aunt, Mrs. Shaw. And then there’s that brother!’

‘What brother?’

‘A clever Lennox, a young barrister, who will be setting his cap at Margaret. I know he has had her in his mind this five years or more: one of his chums told me as much; and he was only kept back by her want of fortune. Now that will be done away with.’

‘How?’ asked Mr. Thornton, earnestly curious.

‘Why, she’ll have my money at my death. And if this Henry Lennox is half good enough for her, and she likes him – well!’

Mr. Bell whistled, and changed his seat, without finding comfort or rest. Mr. Thornton sat immoveable, his eyes fixed on one spot in the newspaper.

‘Where have you been?’ asked Mr. Bell, at length.

‘To Havre. Trying to detect the secret of the great rise in the price of cotton.’

‘Ugh! Cotton, and speculations, and smoke. Poor old Hale! If you could have known the change which it was to him from Helstone. Do you know the New Forest at all?’

‘Yes.’ (Very shortly).

‘Then you can fancy the difference between it and Milton. Were you ever at Helstone? – a little picturesque village?’

‘I have seen it. It was a great change for them to leave it and come to Milton.’

He took up his newspaper with a determined air, as if to avoid further conversation; and Mr. Bell went back to wondering how to break the news to Margaret.

She was at an upstairs window; she saw him arrive, and guessed the truth with an instinctive flash. She stood in the middle of the drawing-room as if turned to stone, so white and still was she.

‘Oh! don’t tell me! I know it from your face! You would not have left him – if he were alive! Oh papa, papa!’

CHAPTER 42

ALONE! ALONE!

The shock had been great. Margaret did not sob or even speak. She lay on the sofa with her eyes shut. Mr. Bell was perplexed. He dared not leave her; he dared not ask her to accompany him back to Oxford, which had been one of the plans he had formed on the journey to Milton. He sat by the fire, considering what he had better do. Margaret lay motionless, and almost breathless. He would not leave her, even for the dinner which Dixon had prepared for him downstairs, and, sobbing, would fain have tempted him to eat. He had a plateful of something brought up, but it tasted like sawdust. When Dixon tried to feed Margaret, the languid shake of her head indicated that food would only choke her.

Mr. Bell gave a great sigh, and followed Dixon out of the room.

‘I can’t leave her. I must write to Oxford, to see that preparations are made for the funeral. Can’t Mrs. Lennox come to her? I’ll write and tell her she must. The girl must have some woman-friend about her.’

Dixon was crying; but after wiping her eyes, she managed to tell Mr. Bell that Mrs. Lennox was too near her confinement with her second child to undertake any journey at present.

‘Well! Mrs. Shaw; she’s back in England, isn’t she?’

‘Yes, sir; but I don’t think she will like to leave Mrs. Lennox at such an interesting time,’ said Dixon.

‘Interesting time be—’ Mr. Bell restricted himself to coughing. ‘What does that prosperous woman’s “interesting time” signify, in comparison with that poor creature there – homeless and friendless – lying as still on that sofa as if it were an altar-tomb? I tell you, Mrs. Shaw shall come.’

Accordingly Mr. Bell wrote a letter, which did not give Mrs. Shaw the option of refusing. If he had, she might not have come – true and sincere as was her sympathy with Margaret. It needed the sharp, uncourteous command to make her conquer her inertia. She allowed her things to be packed by her maid; and Edith, in cap, shawls, and tears, called to her mother, as Captain Lennox was taking her down to the carriage:

‘Don’t forget, mamma; Margaret must come and live with us. You must send word by Mr. Bell to Cosmo when we’re to expect you: Cosmo will be in Oxford, and can go on to Milton. Don’t forget, mamma; you are to bring back Margaret.’

Edith re-entered the drawing-room, where Mr. Henry Lennox was. Without lifting his head, he said, ‘If you don’t like Cosmo to be so long absent from you, Edith, I hope you will let me go down to Milton, and give what assistance I can.’

‘Thank you,’ said Edith. ‘Dear Margaret! won’t it be nice to have her here again? You were both great allies, years ago.’

‘Were we?’ asked he, indifferently.

‘Well, perhaps not – I forget. I was so full of Cosmo. But doesn’t it fall out well, that my uncle should die just after we are come home, and ready to receive Margaret? Poor thing! what a change it will be from Milton! I’ll have new chintz for her bedroom, and make it look bright, and cheer her up a little.’

In the same spirit of kindness, Mrs. Shaw journeyed to Milton planning how soon she could get Margaret away from 'that horrid place,' and back into the pleasant comforts of Harley Street.

'Oh dear!' she said to her maid; 'look at those chimneys! My poor sister Hale!' She had always thought her brother-in-law rather a weak man, but never so weak as now, when she saw for what a place he had exchanged the lovely Helstone home.

Margaret had remained in the same state; white, motionless, speechless, tearless. They had told her that her aunt Shaw was coming; but she had not answered. Despite Mr. Bell's urgings, she still refused to eat; she shook her head with the same quiet obstinacy as on the previous day.

She was the first to hear her aunt's cab stopping. Her eyelids quivered, her lips trembled. Mr. Bell went down to meet Mrs. Shaw, and when they came up, Margaret was standing dizzily: she went forward to her aunt's open arms, and found the passionate relief of tears. All that inexplicable likeness to her mother melted her numbed heart.

Mr. Bell stole out of the room, and went into the study, where he tried to divert his thoughts by taking down books. Each volume brought a remembrance of his dead friend. He was glad to catch the sound of Mr. Thornton's voice, making enquiry at the door. Dixon was rather cavalierly dismissing him; for the appearance of Mrs. Shaw and her Beresford blood made Dixon inclined to be supercilious in her treatment of Milton inhabitants. So, though she stood rather in awe of Mr. Thornton, she was as curt as she dared be in telling him that he could see nobody that night. Mr. Bell opened the study-door, and called out:

'Thornton! is that you? Come in; I want to speak to you.' So Mr. Thornton went into the study, and Dixon had to retreat.

'I don't know what I wanted to say to you after all. Only it's dull to sit in a room where everything reminds you of a dead friend. Yet Margaret and her aunt must have the drawing-room to themselves!'

'Is her aunt come?'

'Yes! maid and all. I shall have to turn out and find my way to the Clarendon Hotel.'

'You must not go to the Clarendon. We have five or six empty bedrooms at home.'

'Then I'll just run upstairs and wish that wan girl good-night, and make my bow to her aunt, and go off with you.'

Mr. Bell was some time upstairs. Mr. Thornton began to think it long, for he was busy, and had hardly been able to spare the time for running up to Crampton to enquire after Miss Hale.

When they had set out upon their walk, Mr. Bell said:

'Mrs. Shaw is anxious to get home, and wants Margaret to go off with her at once. Now she is no more fit for travelling than I am for flying. Besides, she says, and very justly, that she has friends she must see – that she must wish good-bye to several people. And she said, with a great burst of crying, she should be glad enough to leave a place where she had suffered so much. Now I must return to Oxford tomorrow, and I don't know which side to support.'

He received no answer from his companion, who was inwardly repeating: 'Where she had suffered so much.'

Alas! and that was the way in which this eighteen months in Milton – to him so unspeakably precious, even down to its very bitterness – would be remembered by her. Nothing could have poisoned his remembrance of the weeks when a walk of two miles took him to her sweet presence – every moment of which showed him some fresh grace in her demeanour, or pleasant pungency in her character. Yes! whatever had happened to him, he could never have spoken of that period as a time of suffering. It had been a royal time of luxury to him, with all its stings, compared to the poverty that crept round the anticipation of the future.

Mrs. Thornton and Fanny were in the dining-room; the latter in a flutter of exultation, as the maid held up one glossy material after another, to try out the effect of the wedding-dresses by candlelight. Her mother really tried to sympathise with her, but could not. She heartily wished that Fanny had accepted her brother's offer of having the wedding clothes made by some London dressmaker, without these endless troublesome discussions. Mr. Thornton was only too glad to mark his approval of any sensible man who could be captivated by Fanny's second-rate airs and graces, by giving her ample means for providing herself with finery.

When her brother and Mr. Bell came in, Fanny blushed and simpered in a way which could not have failed to draw attention from anyone else but Mr. Bell. If he thought about her at all, it was to compare her with the pale sorrow he had left behind him, sitting motionless in a room so still that you might almost fancy the rush in your straining ears was caused by the spirits of the dead.

Mrs. Thornton gave Mr. Bell her formal welcome. 'How is Miss Hale?' she asked.

'About as broken down by this last stroke as she can be.'

'I am sure it is very well for her that she has such a friend as you.'

'I wish I were her only friend, madam. I daresay it sounds very brutal; but I have been displaced by a fine lady aunt; and there are cousins and what not claiming her in London, as if she were a lap-dog belonging to them. And she is too weak and miserable to have a will of her own.'

'She must indeed be weak,' said Mrs. Thornton, with an implied meaning which her son understood well. 'But where have these relations been all this time that Miss Hale has appeared almost friendless?' However, she did not feel interest enough in the answer to wait for it. She left the room to make her household arrangements.

'They have been living abroad. The aunt brought her up, and she and the cousin have been like sisters. The thing vexing me, you see, is that I wanted to take her for a child of my own; and I am jealous of these people. Now it would be different if Frederick claimed her.'

'Frederick!' exclaimed Mr. Thornton. 'Who is he? What right--?' He stopped short.

'Frederick,' said Mr. Bell in surprise. 'Why, don't you know? He's her brother.'

'I never heard his name before.'

'Surely I told you about him, when the family first came to Milton – the son who was concerned in that mutiny.'

'I never heard of him till this moment. Where does he live?'

'In Spain. He's liable to be arrested the moment he sets foot in England. Poor fellow! He will grieve at not being able to attend his father's funeral.'

'I hope I may be allowed to go?'

'Certainly. You're a good fellow, Thornton. Hale liked you.'

‘But about Frederick. Does he never come to England?’

‘Never.’

‘He was not over here about the time of Mrs. Hale’s death?’

‘No. Why, I was here then – no, it was some time later. But poor Frederick was not here then. What made you think he was?’

‘I saw a young man walking with Miss Hale one day, about that time,’ replied Mr. Thornton.

‘Oh, that would be young Lennox, the Captain’s brother. He’s a lawyer, and they were in pretty constant correspondence with him; I remember Mr. Hale told me he thought he would come down. Do you know,’ said Mr. Bell, wheeling round, ‘that I once fancied you had a little tenderness for Margaret?’

No answer. No change of countenance.

‘And so did poor Hale, though not till I had put it into his head.’

‘I admired Miss Hale. Everyone must do so. She is a beautiful creature,’ said Mr. Thornton, at bay.

‘Is that all! You can speak of her in that measured way, as simply a “beautiful creature” – only something to catch the eye. I did hope you had had nobleness enough in you to make you pay her the homage of the heart. Though I believe she would have rejected you, still to have loved her without return would have lifted you higher than all those that have never known and loved her. “Beautiful creature” indeed! Do you speak of her as you would of a horse or a dog?’

Mr. Thornton’s eyes glowed like embers.

‘Mr. Bell,’ said he, ‘not all men are as free to express what they feel as you are. Let us talk of something else.’ For though his heart leaped up, as at a trumpet-call, to every word that Mr. Bell had said, he would not be forced into any expression of what he felt towards Margaret. He was no mocking-bird of praise, to try and out-do another. So he turned to some matters of business that lay between Mr. Bell and him, as landlord and tenant.

‘What is that heap of brick and mortar we came against in the yard? Are you building?’ asked Mr. Bell.

‘I’m building a dining-room for the men – the hands. I’ve got acquainted with a strange kind of chap, and I put one or two children in whom he is interested in school. I happened to be passing his house one day, and called in; and I saw such a miserable black frizzle of a dinner – a greasy cinder of meat, as set me a-thinking. By buying things wholesale, and cooking a good quantity together, much money might be saved, and much comfort gained. So I spoke to this man – and he found fault with every detail of my plan; and I had laid it aside, when, suddenly, this Higgins graciously signified his approval of a scheme so nearly the same as mine, that I might fairly have claimed it. I was a little “riled”, I confess, and thought of throwing the whole thing overboard. But that seemed a childish reaction; so I coolly took the part assigned to me, which is something like that of steward to a club. I buy in the provisions wholesale, and provide a cook.’

‘I hope you give satisfaction. Are you a good judge of potatoes and onions? But I suppose Mrs. Thornton assists you.’

‘Not a bit,’ replied Mr. Thornton. ‘She disapproves of the whole plan. But I manage pretty well, getting in great stocks from Liverpool, and meat from our own family butcher. I can assure you, the hot dinners the cook turns out are by no means to be despised.’

‘Do you taste each dish as it goes in?’

‘I was very scrupulous, at first, in confining myself to the buying, and even in that I obeyed the men’s orders rather than my own judgment. At one time, the beef was too large, at another the mutton was not fat enough. I think they saw how careful I was not to intrude my own ideas upon them; so, one day, some of the men – my friend Higgins among them – asked me to come in and take a snack. It was a very busy day, but I saw that the men would be hurt if I didn’t, so I went in, and I never made a better dinner in my life. I told them how much I’d enjoyed it; and for some time after I’d be met by these men, with a “Master, there’s hot-pot for dinner today, win yo’ come?”’

‘I should think you were rather a restraint on your hosts’ conversation. They can’t abuse the masters while you’re there.’

‘Well! if any of the old disputes came up, I would certainly speak out my mind next hot-pot day. But you are hardly acquainted with our Darkshire fellows, for all you’re a Darkshire man yourself. They have such a sense of humour, and such a racy mode of expression! I am getting to know some of them now, and they talk pretty freely before me.’

‘Nothing like the act of eating for equalising men. Will you accept a ten pound note towards your marketing, and give the poor fellows a feast?’

‘Thank you; but I’d rather not. They pay me rent for the oven and cooking-places at the back of the mill. I don’t want it to fall into a charity. I don’t want donations. But by-and-by we shall meet with plenty of stumbling-blocks, no doubt.’

CHAPTER 43

MARGARET'S FLITTIN'

The gentle Mrs. Shaw took a vehement dislike to Milton. It was noisy and smoky, and the poor people were dirty, and the rich ladies over-dressed, and not a man wore clothes made to fit him. She was sure Margaret would never regain her lost strength while she stayed in Milton; she must return with her. She urged this until Margaret, weak, weary, and broken-spirited, reluctantly promised that as soon as the funeral was over, she would accompany her aunt back to town, leaving Dixon in charge of shutting up the house.

Before that mournful day, Margaret received a letter from Mr. Bell.

'My dear Margaret,

'I did mean to return to Milton on Thursday, but unluckily it turns out to be one of the rare occasions when we Plymouth Fellows are called upon to perform a duty, and I must not be absent from my post. Captain Lennox and Mr. Thornton are here. The former seems a smart, well-meaning man; and declares he must take you and his mother-in-law home. I will put matters into the hands of my Milton attorney if there is no will; for I doubt if this smart captain is any great man of business. Nevertheless, his moustachios are splendid. There will have to be a sale, so select what things you wish reserved, or you can send a list afterwards.

'Two things more, and I have done. You are to have my money and goods when I die. Not that I mean to die yet; but I say this just to explain. These Lennoxes seem very fond of you now; but it is best to start with a formal agreement; namely, that you will pay them two hundred and fifty pounds a year, as long as you and they find it pleasant to live together. (This, of course, includes Dixon.) Then you won't be thrown adrift, if some day the captain wishes to have his house to himself, but you can carry yourself and your two hundred and fifty pounds off somewhere else; if, indeed, I have not claimed you to come and keep house for me first. As to dress, and Dixon, and so on, I shall consult some lady of my acquaintance, and see how much you will have from your father before fixing this.

'Now, Margaret, have you flown out yet, and wondered what right the old man has to settle your affairs for you? I make no doubt you have. Yet the old man has a right. He loved your father for five and thirty years; he stood beside him on his wedding-day; he closed his eyes in death. Moreover, he is your godfather; and has not a known relation on earth. His whole heart is set upon this one thing, and Margaret Hale is not the girl to say him nay. Write by return, if only two lines, to tell me your answer. But no thanks.'

Margaret took up a pen and scrawled with trembling hand, 'Margaret Hale is not the girl to say him nay.' In her weak state she could not think of any other words. But she was so much fatigued even by this slight exertion that she was obliged to lie down again, and try not to think.

'My dearest child!' said her aunt. 'Has that letter vexed you?'

'No!' said Margaret feebly. 'I shall be better when tomorrow is over.'

‘I feel sure, darling, you won’t be better till I get you out of this horrid air. How you can have borne it two years I can’t imagine.’

‘I could not leave papa and mamma.’

‘Well! don’t distress yourself, my dear. I dare say it was all for the best, but our butler’s wife lives in a better house than this.’

‘It is sometimes very pretty – in summer. I have been very happy here.’

Margaret closed her eyes to stop the conversation.

The house teemed with comfort now. Fires were lighted in every bedroom. Mrs. Shaw bought every delicacy or soft luxury which might give Margaret comfort. But Margaret, though grateful, was indifferent to all these things. She was restless; all day, she kept herself from thinking of the funeral, which was going on at Oxford, by wandering from room to room, and setting aside anything she wished to keep.

‘These books, Dixon, I will keep. Will you send the rest to Mr. Bell? They are ones that he will value for themselves, as well as for papa’s sake. This – I should like you to take this to Mr. Thornton, after I am gone. Stay; I will write a note with it.’ And she sat down hastily, and wrote:

‘Dear Sir,

The accompanying book I am sure will be valued by you for the sake of my father, to whom it belonged.

‘Yours sincerely,

‘Margaret Hale.’

She set out again upon her travels through the house, turning over familiar articles with a sort of caressing reluctance to leave them – shabby though they might be. But in the evening she was excessively weary.

At breakfast time the next day, she expressed her wish to bid one or two friends good-bye.

‘Today is my only day; if Captain Lennox comes this afternoon, and if we must really go tomorrow—’

‘Oh, yes; we shall go tomorrow. I am more and more convinced that this air is bad for you. If you must pay these calls, I will go with you. Dixon can get us a coach, I suppose?’

So Mrs. Shaw and her maid went, with shawls and cushions. Margaret’s face was too sad to lighten up into a smile at all this preparation for paying two visits that she had often made by herself at all hours of the day. She was half afraid of owning that one of her visits was to Nicholas Higgins’s, and was glad that her aunt stayed in the coach.

Nicholas was out; only Mary and one or two of the Boucher children were at home. Margaret was vexed with herself for not having timed her visit better. Mary had a very blunt intellect, although her feelings were warm and kind; and the instant she understood why Margaret was coming to see them, she began to sob with so little restraint that Margaret found it useless to say any of the thousand little things which she had intended to. She could only suggest vaguely that they might meet again, and bid her tell her father that she wished, if he could manage it, that he should come to see her that evening.

As she was leaving the place, she stopped and said:

‘I should like to have some little thing to remind me of Bessy.’

Instantly Mary's generosity was keenly alive. What could they give? And on Margaret's singling out Bessy's little common drinking-cup, Mary said: 'Oh, take summut better; that only cost fourpence!'

'That will do, thank you,' said Margaret; and she went quickly away. 'Now to Mrs. Thornton's,' thought she. 'It must be done.' But she looked rather pale at the thought of it, and had hard work to explain to her aunt who Mrs. Thornton was, and why she should bid her farewell.

Mrs. Shaw alighted here, and they were shown into Mrs. Thornton's drawing-room, in which a fire had only just been kindled. Mrs. Shaw huddled herself in her shawl, and shivered.

They had to wait for some time before Mrs. Thornton entered. There was some softening in her heart towards Margaret, now that she was going away. She remembered her spirit, even more than the patience with which she had endured long and wearing cares. There was even a shade of tenderness in her manner, as she noticed the white, tear-swollen face, and the quiver in the voice which Margaret tried to make steady.

'Allow me to introduce my aunt, Mrs. Shaw. I am going away from Milton tomorrow; and I wanted to see you once again, Mrs. Thornton, to – to apologise for my manner the last time I saw you; and to say that I am sure you meant kindly – however much we may have misunderstood each other.'

Mrs. Shaw looked extremely perplexed by this. But Mrs. Thornton replied:

'Miss Hale, I am glad you do me justice. I did what I believed to be my duty in remonstrating with you. I have always desired to act as a friend to you.'

'And,' said Margaret, blushing excessively, 'will you do me justice, and believe that though I cannot – I do not choose – to give explanations of my conduct, I have not acted in the unbecoming way you thought?'

Margaret's voice was so soft, and her eyes so pleading, that Mrs. Thornton was for once affected by the charm to which she had hitherto proved invulnerable.

'Yes, I do believe you. Let us say no more about it. Where are you going to live, Miss Hale?'

'With my aunt,' replied Margaret, turning towards Mrs. Shaw.

'My niece will reside with me in Harley Street. She is almost like a daughter to me,' said Mrs. Shaw, looking fondly at Margaret. 'If you and your husband ever come to town, we will do anything in our power to show you attention.'

Mrs. Thornton thought that Margaret had not taken much care to enlighten her aunt about the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Thornton. She said shortly, 'My husband is dead. Mr. Thornton is my son. I never go to London.'

At this instant Mr. Thornton entered the room; he had only just returned from Oxford, and still wore his mourning suit.

'John,' said his mother, 'this lady is Mrs. Shaw, Miss Hale's aunt. I am sorry to say that Miss Hale's call is to wish us good-bye.'

'You are going then!' said he, in a low voice.

'Yes,' said Margaret. 'We leave tomorrow.'

'My son-in-law comes this evening to escort us,' said Mrs. Shaw.

Mr. Thornton turned away, and seemed to be examining something on the table, which had made him forget the present company. He did not even seem to be aware when they got up to take leave.

He started forwards, however, to hand Mrs. Shaw down to the carriage. As it drove up, he and Margaret stood close together on the doorstep, and the recollection of the day of the riot forced itself into both their minds. Into his, it came associated with his proposal the following day, and her passionate declaration that there was not a man in all that violent crowd for whom she did not care as much as for him. And at the memory, his brow grew stern, though his heart beat thick with longing love.

‘No!’ thought he. ‘Let her go – with her stony heart, and her beauty – how set and terrible her look is now, for all her loveliness! Beauty and heiress as she may be, she will find it hard to meet with a truer heart than mine. Let her go!’

And there was no tone of regret, or emotion of any kind in the voice with which he said good-bye; and her offered hand was taken with a resolute calmness, and dropped as carelessly as if it had been a withered flower. But none in his household saw Mr. Thornton again that day. He was busily engaged; or so he said.

Margaret’s strength was so utterly exhausted by these visits, that she had to submit to ‘I-told-you-so’s,’ from her aunt. But when her aunt reluctantly proposed a few days’ delay in their journey, Margaret said, agonised:

‘Oh! let us go. I shall not get well here. I want to forget.’

Captain Lennox came, and with him news of Edith and the little boy; and Margaret found that his careless conversation did her good. By the time that Higgins arrived at her house that evening, she was ready to greet him.

‘Eh!’ said he, ‘to think of th’ oud gentleman dropping off as he did! Yo’ might ha’ knocked me down wi’ a straw when they telled me. He were as good a man as ever lived. And I came to tell yo’ how grieved I were, but them women in th’ kitchen wouldn’t tell yo’ I were there. They said yo’ were ill. And yo’re going to be a grand lady up i’ Lunnun, aren’t yo’?’

‘Not a grand lady,’ said Margaret, half smiling.

‘Well! Thornton said, a day or two ago, “Higgins, have yo’ seen Miss Hale?” “No,” says I; “there’s a pack o’ women who won’t let me at her. But she and I knows each other pretty well; and hoo’l not be doubting that I’m sorry for th’ oud gentleman’s death, just because I can’t get at her and tell her so.” And says he, “Yo’ll not have much time for to try and see her. She’s not staying with us a day longer nor she can help. She’s got grand relations, and they’re carrying her off; and we shan’t see her no more.” “Measter,” said I, “if I dunnot see her afore hoo goes, I’ll strive to get up to Lunnun next Whissuntide, that I will.” But, bless yo’, I knowed yo’d come.’

‘You’re quite right,’ said Margaret. ‘And you’ll not forget me, I’m sure. If no one else in Milton remembers me, I’m certain you will; and papa too. Look, Higgins! here is his Bible. I know he would have liked you to have it. I’m sure you’ll care for it, and study it, for his sake.’

‘If it were the deuce’s own scribble, and yo’ axed me to read in it for your sake, and th’ oud gentleman’s, I’d do it. Whatten’s this, wench? I’m not going to take your money, so dunnot think it.’

‘For Boucher’s children,’ said Margaret, hurriedly. ‘They may need it. I would not give *you* a penny,’ she said, smiling; ‘don’t think there’s any of it for you.’

‘Well, wench! I can nobbut say, Bless yo’! and bless yo’! – and amen.’

CHAPTER 44

EASE NOT PEACE

The quiet of the Harley Street house, during Edith's recovery from her confinement, gave Margaret the natural rest which she needed. It gave her time to comprehend the sudden changes of the last two months. In this luxurious house, the knowledge of trouble or care seemed scarcely to have penetrated: the wheels of the machinery of daily life were well oiled, and went along with delicious smoothness.

Mrs. Shaw and Edith could hardly make enough of Margaret. Edith wanted to fill her room with soft comforts, and pretty knick-knacks. Mrs. Shaw and her maid began to restore her wardrobe to a state of elegant variety. Captain Lennox was easy, kind, and gentlemanly; sat with his wife an hour or two every day; played with his little boy for another hour, and lounged away the rest of his time at his club.

Just as Margaret was recovering from her need for quiet, and before she had begun to feel her life dull, Edith came downstairs and resumed her usual part in the household. Margaret gladly took all duties off Edith's hands. She answered notes, reminded her of engagements, and tended her when no gaiety was in prospect, and Edith was consequently inclined to fancy herself ill. But the rest of the family were in the full swing of the London season, and Margaret, withdrawn from society while she was in mourning, was often left alone.

Then her thoughts went back to Milton, with a strange sense of the contrast between the life there, and here. She was getting surfeited of the ease in which no effort was required. She was afraid of becoming sleepily deadened into forgetfulness of anything beyond this luxurious life. There might be workers in London, but she never saw them; the very servants lived in an underground world of their own, and only seemed to start into existence when their master or mistress needed them. There was a strange unsatisfied vacuum in Margaret's heart; and once, when she hinted this to Edith, the latter languidly stroked Margaret's cheek.

'Poor child!' said Edith. 'It is a little sad for you to be left, night after night, when all the world is so gay. But we shall be having our dinner-parties as soon as Henry comes back from circuit – and then there will be a little pleasant variety for you, poor darling!'

Edith piqued herself on her dinner-parties; and Captain Lennox was always extremely kind and brotherly to Margaret. She was really very fond of him, except when he was anxiously attentive to Edith's dress and appearance, with a view to her beauty making a sufficient impression on the world. Then all the latent Vashti in Margaret was roused, and she could hardly keep herself from expressing her feelings.

The course of Margaret's day was this; a quiet hour or two before a late breakfast, lazily eaten by weary and half-awake people; afterwards came a discussion of plans, none of which concerned her; an endless number of notes to write, which Edith invariably left to her; a little play with baby Sholto, besides the care of the children during the servants' dinner; a drive or callers; and some engagement for her aunt and cousins, which left Margaret free, it is true, but rather wearied with the inactivity of the day.

She looked forward with longing to Dixon's return from Milton, where the old servant had been engaged in winding up all the Hale family's affairs. She was hungry for news of the people amongst whom she had lived so long. It was true that Dixon, in her business-letters, quoted every now and then an opinion of Mr. Thornton's as to what she had better do about the furniture. But it was only here and there that any Milton name came in.

Margaret was sitting one evening, alone in the Lennoxes's drawing-room, thinking over Dixon's letters and wondering if all went on in that busy whirl just as if she and her father had never been, or if anyone missed her; when, suddenly, Mr. Bell was announced. Margaret hurried the letters into her work-basket, and started up, blushing guiltily.

'Mr. Bell! I never thought of seeing you! Have you dined? How did you come? Let me order you some dinner.'

'If you're going to have any. But where are the others? Gone out to dinner and left you alone?'

'Oh yes! and it is such a rest. But will you run the risk of dinner? I don't know if there is anything in the house.'

'Why, to tell you the truth, I dined at my club. Only they don't cook as well as they did. You shall make me some tea, Margaret. And now, whose letters were those, god-daughter, that you hid away so speedily?'

'Only Dixon's,' replied Margaret, growing very red.

'Whew! is that all? Who do you think came up in the train with me?'

'I don't know.'

'Your what d'ye call him? What's the right name for a cousin-in-law's brother?'

'Mr. Henry Lennox?'

'Yes. What sort of a person is he, Margaret?'

'I liked him long ago,' said Margaret, glancing down for a moment. Then she looked straight up and went on in her natural manner. 'You know we have been corresponding about Frederick; but I have not seen him for nearly three years, and he may be changed. What did you think of him?'

'I don't know. He was so busy trying to find out who I was that he never let out what *he* was; unless indeed that veiled curiosity of his is a fair indication of his character. Do you call him good looking, Margaret?'

'No! certainly not. Do you?'

'Not I. But I thought, perhaps, you might. Is he a great deal here?'

'I fancy he is when he is in town. He has been on circuit since I came. But, Mr. Bell, have you come from Oxford or from Milton?'

'From Milton. Don't you see I'm smoke-dried?'

'Certainly. But I thought that it might be the effect of the antiquities of Oxford.'

'Come now, be a sensible woman! In Oxford, I could have managed all the landlords in the place with half the trouble your Milton landlord has given me. He won't take the house off our hands till June next year. Luckily, Mr. Thornton found a tenant for it. Why don't you ask after Mr. Thornton, Margaret? He has proved himself a very active friend of yours, I can tell you.'

'And how is he? How is Mrs. Thornton?' asked Margaret.

'I suppose they're well. I've been staying at their house till I was driven out of it by the perpetual clack about that Thornton girl's marriage. It was too much for Thornton himself, though she was his sister. He's getting past the age for caring for

such things. I was surprised to find the old lady carried away by her daughter's enthusiasm for orange-blossoms and lace. I thought Mrs. Thornton was made of sterner stuff.'

'She would put on any manner to veil her daughter's weakness,' said Margaret in a low voice.

'Perhaps so. You've studied her, have you? She doesn't seem over fond of you, Margaret.'

'I know it. Oh, here is tea at last!' exclaimed she, as if relieved. And with tea came Mr. Henry Lennox, who had walked up to Harley Street after his dinner, expecting to find his brother and sister-in-law at home. Margaret suspected him of being as thankful as she was at the presence of a third party, on this their first meeting since the memorable day of his offer. She hardly knew what to say at first, and was grateful for all the tea-table occupations which gave her an excuse for silence, and him an opportunity of recovering himself.

For, to tell the truth, he had rather forced himself up to Harley Street this evening, with a view of getting over an awkward meeting – doubly awkward now that he found her the only lady there. She was the first to recover her self-possession, saying,

'Mr. Lennox, I have been so much obliged to you for all you have done about Frederick.'

'I am only sorry it has been so unsuccessful,' replied he, with a quick glance towards Mr. Bell, as if unsure how much he might say before him. But Margaret addressed Mr. Bell, to show that he was perfectly aware of the situation.

'That last witness of all, Horrocks, has proved as unavailing as all the others. He sailed for Australia only last August; only two months before Frederick was in England, and gave us the names of—'

'Frederick in England! you never told me that!' exclaimed Mr. Bell in surprise.

'I thought you knew. Of course, it was a great secret, and perhaps I should not have mentioned it now,' said Margaret, a little dismayed.

'Never mind, Margaret; you needn't look so frightened because you have let the cat out of the bag to a faithful old hermit like me. I shall never name his having been in England. Stay! Was it at your mother's funeral?'

'He was with mamma when she died,' said Margaret, softly.

'To be sure! Why, someone asked me if he had not been over then, and I denied it – not many weeks ago – who could it have been? Oh! I recollect!'

But he did not say the name; and although Margaret would have given much to know if her suspicions were right, and it had been Mr. Thornton, she could not ask.

Mr. Lennox said, 'I suppose I may inform Mr. Bell how the research into the evidence stands at present. So, if he will do me the honour to breakfast with me tomorrow, we will go over the names of these missing gentry.'

'I should like to hear all the particulars. Cannot you both come here?' asked Margaret.

'I have an engagement at half-past eleven. But I will certainly come if you wish it,' replied Mr. Lennox, with a willingness which made Margaret shrink. Mr. Bell got up and looked around for his hat.

'Well!' said he, 'I don't know what Mr. Lennox is inclined to do, but I'm moving off homewards.'

‘I believe I shall stay and see my brother and sister,’ said Mr. Lennox. Margaret was seized with a shy awkward dread of being left alone with him; and could not help thinking he must feel the same.

‘Don’t go yet, please, Mr. Bell,’ said she, hastily. ‘I want you to see Edith; and I want Edith to know you. Please!’ She laid a light but determined hand on his arm. He saw the confusion in her countenance, and sat down again.

‘You see how she overpowers me, Mr. Lennox,’ said he. ‘And I hope you noticed the happy choice of words; she wants me to “see” Edith, who, I am told, is a great beauty; but she has the honesty to change her word to “know” when she comes to me. I suppose I am not much to see, eh, Margaret?’

He joked to give her time to recover from the slight flutter in her manner; and she caught the tone, and threw the ball back. Mr. Lennox wondered how his brother, the Captain, could have reported her as having lost all her good looks. To be sure, in her quiet black dress, she was a contrast to Edith, who came in all softness and glitter. Edith dimpled and blushed most becomingly when introduced to Mr. Bell, conscious that she had her reputation as a beauty to keep up. Mrs. Shaw and Captain Lennox gave Mr. Bell a kind and sincere welcome, making him like them almost in spite of himself, especially when he saw how naturally Margaret took her place as daughter of the house.

‘What a shame that we were not at home to receive you,’ said Edith. ‘You, too, Henry! though I don’t know that we should have waited at home for you.’

‘Will you ask me to breakfast tomorrow to meet Mr. Bell, and be so kind as to order it at half-past nine? I have some papers that I want to show to Miss Hale and Mr. Bell.’

‘I hope Mr. Bell will make our house his own during his stay in London,’ said Captain Lennox. ‘I am only sorry we cannot offer him a bedroom.’

‘Thank you. I am much obliged.’ Mr. Bell, bowing, was secretly thinking: ‘I couldn’t stand the restraints of such proper-behaved people as these. I’m thankful they haven’t a bed!’

Out in the streets, walking side by side with Henry Lennox, he suddenly remembered Margaret’s little look of entreaty as she urged him to stay longer. It gave a new direction to his thoughts.

‘You have known Miss Hale for a long time, I believe,’ he said. ‘How do you think she is looking? She strikes me as pale and ill.’

‘I thought her looking remarkably well. Perhaps not when I first came in. But certainly, when she grew animated, she looked as well as ever I saw her do.’

‘She has had a great deal to go through,’ said Mr. Bell.

‘Yes! I have been sorry to hear of all she has had to bear; not merely sorrow, but all the annoyance which her father’s conduct must have caused her—’

‘Her father’s conduct!’ said Mr. Bell, in surprise. ‘You must have heard some wrong statement. He behaved in the most conscientious and resolute manner.’

‘Perhaps I have been wrongly informed. But I have been told, by his successor – a sensible, active clergyman – that there was no need for Mr. Hale to relinquish the living; he could have remained where he was, and so had no occasion to resign. But the truth is, these country clergymen live such isolated lives – isolated, I mean, from men of cultivation – that they are very apt to disturb themselves with imaginary doubts.’

‘I differ from you. I do not think they are very apt to do as my poor friend Hale did.’ Mr. Bell was inwardly chafing.

‘Yet certainly, their lives are such as very often to produce either inordinate self-sufficiency, or a morbid state of conscience,’ replied Mr. Lennox with perfect coolness.

‘You don’t meet with any self-sufficiency among lawyers?’ asked Mr. Bell. ‘And seldom, I imagine, any cases of morbid conscience.’ He was becoming more and more vexed. Mr. Lennox saw that he had annoyed his companion; and as he had talked pretty much for the sake of making conversation, he quietly came round by saying:

‘To be sure, there is something fine in a man of Mr. Hale’s age leaving his home for an idea which was probably erroneous. One cannot help admiring him, with a mixture of pity and admiration; something like what one feels for Don Quixote. Such a gentleman as he was too! I shall never forget the refined and simple hospitality he showed to me that last day at Helstone.’

Only half mollified, Mr. Bell growled – ‘Aye! And you don’t know Milton. Such a change from Helstone! It is years since I have been at Helstone – but I’ll answer for it, it is standing there yet, every stone as it has done for the last century, while Milton! I go there every four or five years, and yet I often lose my way. Do we part here? Well, good night, sir; we shall meet in Harley Street tomorrow morning.’

CHAPTER 45

NOT ALL A DREAM

The idea of Helstone had been suggested to Mr. Bell by this conversation, and all night long it ran riot through his dreams. He dreamt he was again the tutor at his college; it was again a long vacation, and he was staying with his newly married friend, the proud and happy Vicar of Helstone. Over babbling brooks they took impossible leaps, which seemed to keep them whole days suspended in the air. Time and space did not exist, though all other things seemed real. Every event was measured by emotion. But the trees were gorgeous in their autumnal leafiness – the warm odours of flower and herb were sweet. The young wife moved about her house with that mixture of annoyance at her lowered position, and pride in her devoted husband, which Mr. Bell remembered from a quarter of a century ago.

The dream was so like life that, when he awoke, the present seemed like a dream. Where were those who spoke to him, touched him, not an instant ago? Dead! lost for evermore. He was an old man, and the utter loneliness of his life was insupportable to think about. He got up hastily, and tried to forget it, hurriedly dressing for the breakfast in Harley Street.

He could not attend to all the lawyer's details, which, as he saw, made Margaret's eyes dilate, and her lips grow pale, as every morsel of evidence which would exonerate Frederick seemed to disappear. Even Mr. Lennox's professional voice took a softer tone as he drew near to the extinction of the last hope. When she gave way to tears, Mr. Lennox stopped reading.

'I had better not go on. It was a foolish proposal of mine. Lieutenant Hale is happy now; more secure in future prospects than he could ever have been in the navy; and has, doubtless, adopted his wife's country as his own.'

'That is it,' said Margaret. 'It seems so selfish of me to regret it,' trying to smile, 'and yet he is lost to me, and I am so lonely.'

Mr. Lennox turned over his papers, and wished that he were as rich and prosperous as he believed he should be some day. Mr. Bell blew his nose, but, otherwise, he also kept silence; and Margaret, in a minute or two, had apparently recovered her usual composure, and thanked Mr. Lennox very courteously for his trouble.

'Margaret!' said Mr. Bell, as he fumbled with his gloves. 'I am going down to Helstone tomorrow, to look at the old place. Would you like to come with me? Or would it give you too much pain?'

'Oh, Mr. Bell,' said she – and could say no more. But she took his old gouty hand, and kissed it.

'Come, come,' said he, awkwardly. 'I suppose your aunt Shaw will trust you with me. We'll go tomorrow morning, and we shall get there about two o'clock, I fancy. We'll take a snack, and order dinner at the little inn – the Lennard Arms. And we'll dine on doe-venison – and then I'll take my nap while you go and see old friends. I'll bring you back safe and sound to Mrs. Shaw by lunch-time on Friday. So, if you say yes, I'll just go upstairs and propose it.'

'I shall like it,' said Margaret, through her tears.

‘Well, then, prove your gratitude by keeping those fountains of yours dry for the next two days, or you will set me off too.’

‘I won’t cry a drop,’ said Margaret, forcing a smile.

‘There’s my good girl. Then we’ll go upstairs and settle it all.’

Aunt Shaw was first startled, then doubtful and perplexed, but in the end, yielded to Mr. Bell. ‘She was sure it had been a very kind thought of Mr. Bell’s, and just what she herself had been wishing for Margaret, as giving her the very change which she required.’

CHAPTER 46

ONCE AND NOW

Margaret was ready long before the appointed hour. She was alarmed lest they should miss the train; but no! they were in time. She breathed freely and happily at last, seated in the carriage opposite Mr. Bell, and whirling away past old country-towns and hamlets sleeping in the warm sunlight, which gave a ruddy colour to their tiled roofs, so different to the cold slates of the north. Broods of pigeons hovered around these peaked quaint gables, ruffling their soft feathers. There were few people about at the stations; none of the bustle and stir of the London and North-Western line. A spectator or two stood lounging at nearly every station, watching the passing trains. The hot air danced over the golden stillness of the land, and farm after farm was left behind, until they stepped down from the train and took the fly to Helstone.

Whether she felt pain or pleasure, Margaret could hardly tell. Every mile was full of associations which she would not have missed for the world, but which made her long for 'the days that are no more.' The last time she had passed along this road was when she left with her father and mother. Now she was alone, an orphan, and they had vanished from the face of the earth. It hurt her to see the Helstone road so flooded in sunlight, and every familiar tree so precisely the same in its summer glory as it had been in former years. Nature felt no change, and was ever young.

Mr. Bell knew something of what would be passing through her mind, and wisely and kindly held his tongue. They drove up to the Lennard Arms; half farmhouse, half-inn, by the village green. Before it stood an ancient lime-tree benched all round. The door of the inn stood wide open, but there was no hospitable hurry to receive the travellers. When the landlady did appear she gave them a kind welcome, and apologised for having been delayed; it was hay-time, and she had been busy packing up baskets of provisions to be sent out to the men in the field.

'Why, bless me!' exclaimed she. 'It's Miss Hale!' And she shook Margaret's hands with motherly fondness.

'And how are you all? How's the Vicar? God bless him! We've never ceased to be sorry that he left.'

Margaret choked in the effort to speak. She could only touch her deep mourning, and say, 'Papa.'

'Surely, sir, it's never so!' said Mrs. Purkis, turning to Mr. Bell. 'There was a gentleman here in the spring – or maybe last winter – who told us a deal of Mr. Hale and Miss Margaret; and he said Mrs. Hale was gone, poor lady. But never a word of the Vicar's ailing!'

'He died quite suddenly,' said Mr. Bell. 'He was a good man, Mrs. Purkis, and there's many of us that might be thankful to have as calm an end as his. Come, Margaret, my dear! She's my god-daughter, so I thought we would just come down together and see the old place; and I know you can give us comfortable rooms and a capital dinner. You don't remember me, but my name is Bell, and I've stayed here before.'

'To be sure; I ask your pardon; but I was taken up with Miss Hale. Let me show you to a room, Miss Margaret, where you can wash your face. It's only this very morning I plunged some fresh-gathered roses head downward in the water-jug, for,

thought I, perhaps some one will be coming, and there's nothing so sweet as spring-water scented by a musk rose or two.'

The little casement window in Margaret's bed-chamber was almost filled up with rose and vine branches; but pushing them aside, and stretching out, she could see the tops of the parsonage chimneys above the trees.

'Aye!' said Mrs. Purkis, smoothing down the bed, 'times is changed, miss; our new Vicar Mr. Hepworth has seven children, and is building a nursery ready for more, where the arbour used to be. And he has had new grates put in, and a plate-glass window in the drawing-room. He and his wife have done a deal of good, they say; though I should call it turning things upside down for very little purpose. The new Vicar is a teetotaller, miss, and a magistrate, and his wife has a deal of receipts for economical cooking; and they both talk so much, and both at a time, that they knock one down as it were. He'll be after the men's cans in the hay-field, and there'll be an ado because it's not ginger beer. But I must go, miss; I'll come back to you before long.'

Mr. Bell had strawberries and cream, a loaf of brown bread, and a jug of milk (together with a Stilton cheese and a bottle of port for his own refreshment,) ready for Margaret on her coming downstairs; and after this rustic luncheon they set out to walk.

'Shall we go to the vicarage?' asked Mr. Bell.

'No, not yet. We will go this way, and come back by it.'

Here and there old trees had been felled; or a decaying cottage had disappeared. Margaret grieved over them like old friends. They came past the spot where she and Mr. Lennox had sketched. The white, lightning-scarred trunk of the venerable beech where they had sat down was there no more; the old man who lived in the ruinous cottage was dead; the cottage had been pulled down, and a new one built. There was a small garden where the beech-tree had been.

'I did not think I was so old,' said Margaret after a pause.

'Yes!' said Mr. Bell. 'I take changes as a matter of course. The instability of all human things is familiar to me, but to you it is new and oppressive.'

'Let us go and see little Susan,' said Margaret, leading him up a grassy track into a forest glade.

'With all my heart, though I have no idea who little Susan may be.'

'My little Susan was disappointed when I left without wishing her goodbye; and it has been on my conscience ever since. But it is a long way. Are you sure you will not be tired?'

'Quite sure. That is, if you don't walk so fast. You would think it romantic to be walking with a person "fat and scant o' breath" if I were Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.'

'I like you twenty times better than Hamlet. Walk at your own pace, and I will follow. Stop and meditate, like Hamlet, if I go too fast.'

'Thank you. But as my mother has not murdered my father, and afterwards married my uncle, I shouldn't know what to think about, unless it were the chances of our having a well-cooked dinner. What do you think?'

'I am in good hopes. Mrs. Purkis used to be considered a famous cook.'

'But have you considered the distraction of all this haymaking?'

Margaret felt Mr. Bell's kindness in trying to make cheerful talk about nothing, to prevent her from thinking too much about the past. But she would rather have walked in silence.

They reached the cottage where Susan's widowed mother lived. Susan was not there; she was at school.

'Oh!' said Margaret. 'I am very glad to hear it. Only she used to stop at home with you.'

'Yes, she did; and I miss her sadly. I used to teach her what little I knew at nights. But she's a deal above me in learning now.' And the mother sighed.

'I'm a hundred years behind the world.' growled Mr. Bell. 'But I should say, that the child was getting a better and more natural education stopping at home, and helping her mother, and reading the New Testament every night by her side, than from all the schooling under the sun.'

Margaret did not want to encourage him to go on, so she turned to the mother and asked, 'How is old Betty Barnes?'

'I don't know,' said the woman rather shortly. 'We're not friends. She stole my cat.'

'Did she know it was yours?'

'I don't know. I reckon not.'

'Well! could not you get it back again when you told her it was yours?'

'No! for she'd burnt it.'

'Burnt it!' exclaimed both Margaret and Mr. Bell.

'Roasted it!' said the woman.

Margaret extracted from her the horrible fact that Betty Barnes, having been induced by a gypsy fortune-teller to lend the latter her husband's Sunday clothes, with which the gypsy had then disappeared, had followed one of the savage country superstitions: the cries of a cat, in the agonies of being boiled or roasted alive, would compel the powers of darkness to fulfil the executioner's wishes. Susan's mother evidently believed in it; she was only indignant because her cat had been the one chosen for a sacrifice.

Margaret listened in horror; and tried to use logical argument to enlighten her; but she was obliged to give up in despair. The bewildered woman simply repeated that 'it were very cruel for sure, but there were nothing like it for giving a person what they wished for; she had heard it all her life.' Margaret walked away sick at heart.

'You are a good girl not to triumph over me,' said Mr. Bell.

'What do you mean?'

'I am wrong about schooling. Anything rather than have that child brought up in such practical paganism.'

'Oh! Poor little Susan! I must go and see her; would you mind calling at the school?'

'Not a bit.'

They did not speak much more, but threaded their way through many a green dell, whose soft influence could not charm away the shock in Margaret's heart.

The buzz of voices, like the murmur of a hive of busy human bees, made itself heard as soon as they emerged on the open village-green where the school was situated. The door was wide open; when they entered, a brisk lady in black bade them welcome. Margaret knew at once it was the present Vicar's wife, and she would have drawn back if possible; but she conquered this feeling, and modestly advanced, meeting many a bright glance of recognition, and hearing many a murmur of 'It's Miss Hale.'

The Vicar's lady heard the name, and her manner became more kindly, but also more patronising. She held out a hand to Mr. Bell.

'Your father, I presume, Miss Hale. I see it by the likeness.'

Margaret stammered out the fact of her father's death. She did not hear what Mrs. Hepworth was saying, and left it to Mr. Bell to reply, looking round, meanwhile, for her old acquaintances.

'Ah! I see you would like to take a class, Miss Hale. First class stand up for a parsing lesson with Miss Hale.'

Poor Margaret felt herself taken in; but it was a way of studying the little eager faces, once well-known, of those who had received baptism from her father. She sat down, holding Susan's hand for a minute or two unobserved, while the first class sought for their books, and the Vicar's lady went as near as a lady could towards holding Mr. Bell by the button, while she explained the Phonetic system to him.

Margaret bent over her book, and at the buzz of children's voices, old times rose up, and her eyes filled with tears. One of the girls was stumbling over the apparently simple word 'a,' uncertain what to call it.

'A, an indefinite article,' said Margaret, mildly.

'I beg your pardon,' said the Vicar's wife, all eyes and ears; 'but we are taught by Mr. Milsome to call "a" an – who can remember?'

'An adjective absolute,' said half-a-dozen voices at once. And Margaret sat abashed. The children knew more than she did.

She spoke no more during the lesson. But after it was over, she went quietly round to one or two old favourites, and talked to them a little. They were growing into great girls; passing out of her memory in their rapid development, as she was vanishing from theirs. Still she was glad to have seen them all again.

When school was over for the day, Mrs. Hepworth proposed to Margaret that she and Mr. Bell should accompany her to the parsonage, and see the – the word 'improvements' had half slipped out of her mouth before she substituted 'alterations.' Margaret did not care a straw about these, but she longed to see the old place once more, even though she shivered away from the pain which she knew she should feel.

The parsonage was so altered, both inside and out, that the real pain was less than she had anticipated. It was not like the same place. The garden, once so daintily trim, was strewn with children's things. The little square matted hall was equally filled with signs of merry healthy rough childhood.

'Ah!' said Mrs. Hepworth, 'you must excuse this untidiness, Miss Hale. When the nursery is finished, I shall insist upon a little order.'

'You have many children, I presume?'

'Seven. Look! we are putting in a new window in Mr. Hepworth's study. Mr. Hepworth is spending an immense deal of money on this house; but really it was scarcely habitable when we came – for so large a family as ours, I mean.' Every room was changed, besides the study, where the new window gave a view of the road, and had many advantages, as Mrs. Hepworth pointed out. From it, her husband's flock might be seen straggling to the tempting beer-house; for the active Vicar kept his eye on the road, even while writing his sermons, and was ready to hurry out after his parishioners, who needed quick legs if they were to take refuge in the 'Jolly Forester' before the teetotal Vicar had arrested them.

The whole family were quick, brisk, loud-talking, kind-hearted, and not troubled with much delicacy of perception. Margaret feared that Mrs. Hepworth would find out that Mr. Bell was making fun of her in the admiration he expressed for

everything that grated on his taste. But no! she took it all literally, and with such good faith, that Margaret could not help remonstrating with him as they walked back to their inn.

‘Don’t scold, Margaret. If she had not shown such exultation in all their improvements, I could have behaved well.’

They were both tired. Margaret was unwilling to go out as she had proposed to do, and have another ramble among the woods and fields. Somehow, this visit to Helstone had not been what she had expected. Households were changed: places were changed – a tree gone here, a road trimmed there, and the green straggling pathway by its side enclosed and cultivated. A great improvement it was called; but Margaret sighed over the grassy wayside of former days. She sat by the window, sadly gazing out upon the gathering shades of night. Mr. Bell slept soundly, after his unusual exercise through the day. He was roused by the entrance of the tea-tray, brought in by a country-girl.

‘Hallo! Who’s there! Margaret? Oh, now I remember. I could not imagine what woman was sitting there in such a doleful attitude. What were you looking at?’ asked Mr. Bell, coming to the window.

‘Nothing,’ said she, rising quickly, and speaking as cheerfully as she could.

‘Nothing indeed! A bleak background of trees, and a great waft of damp air. Shut the window, and come for tea.’

Margaret was silent for some time. She did not attend particularly to what Mr. Bell said, until she began – ‘Mr. Bell, you remember what we were saying about Frederick last night?’

‘Yes, to be sure.’

‘And do you remember that Mr. Lennox said Frederick had been in England about the time of dear mamma’s death?’ asked Margaret, her voice lower than usual.

‘I recollect. I hadn’t known.’

‘I always thought that papa had told you.’

‘No! But what about it, Margaret?’

‘I want to tell you of something I did that was very wrong, about that time,’ said Margaret, suddenly looking up at him with her clear honest eyes. ‘I told a lie;’ and her face became scarlet.

‘That was bad, I admit; though I have told a pretty round number in my life, not all in downright words, as I suppose you did, but in actions, or by leading people to believe a falsehood. A great number of folk who think themselves very good, have connections with lies – left-hand marriages, and second cousins-once-removed. The tainting blood of falsehood runs through us all. I should have guessed you as far from it as most people. What! crying, child? Nay, I dare say you have been sorry, and won’t do it again, and I want you to be cheerful, and not sad, this evening.’

Margaret wiped her eyes, and tried to talk about something else, but suddenly she burst out afresh.

‘Please, Mr. Bell, let me tell you about it. If you knew the truth, perhaps you could put me to rights – though that is not quite it,’ said she, in despair at not being able to express herself exactly.

‘Tell me all about it, child.’

‘It’s a long story; but when Fred came, mamma was very ill, and I was afraid that I might have drawn him into danger; and we had an alarm just after her death, for Dixon met someone in Milton – a man called Leonards, who had known Fred, and seemed tempted by the reward offered for his capture. So I thought I had better hurry

off Fred to London, to consult Mr. Lennox about his chances if he stood trial. He and I went to the railway station; it was dusk, but still light enough to see, and we were too early, and went out to walk in a field close by. I was in a panic about this Leonards. When we were in the field, at sunset, someone came by on horseback in the road alongside, and I saw him look at me, but I did not know who it was at first, the sun was so in my eyes, but then I saw it was Mr. Thornton, and we bowed—'

'And he saw Frederick, of course,' said Mr. Bell, helping her on.

'Yes; and then at the station a man came up – tipsy and reeling – and he tried to collar Fred, and over-balanced himself as Fred wrenched himself away, and fell over the edge of the platform; only about three feet; but oh! Mr. Bell, somehow that fall killed him!'

'How awkward. It was this Leonards, I suppose. And how did Fred get away?'

'Oh! he went off immediately after the fall, which we never thought could have done the poor fellow any harm.'

'Then he did not die directly?'

'No! not for two or three days. And then – oh, Mr. Bell! now comes the bad part,' said she, nervously twining her fingers together. 'A police inspector came and taxed me with having been the companion of the young man, whose push or blow had caused Leonards' death; that was false, you know, but we had not heard that Fred had sailed – he might still be in London and liable to be arrested and shot. All this flashed through my mind, and I said it was not me. That I knew nothing about it. I thought only of saving Frederick.'

'I say it was right. I hope I should have done the same.'

'No, you would not. It was wrong, disobedient, faithless. At that very time Fred was safely out of England, and in my blindness I forgot that there was another witness who could testify to my being there.'

'Who?'

'Mr. Thornton.'

'Well! he would know nothing of this drunken fellow's death. I suppose the inquiry never came to anything.'

'No! the proceedings for the inquest were stopped. Mr. Thornton did know all about it. He was a magistrate, and he found out that it was not the fall that had caused the death. But not before he knew what I had said. Oh, Mr. Bell!' She suddenly covered her face with her hands, as if wishing to hide herself from the recollection.

'Did you ever explain to him?'

'No! How could I? He knew nothing of Frederick. To regain his good opinion, was I to tell him our family secrets? Fred's last words had been to enjoin me to keep his visit a secret from all. You see, papa never told even you. No! I could bear the shame – I thought I could at least. I did bear it. Mr. Thornton has never respected me since.'

'He respects you, I am sure,' said Mr. Bell. 'To be sure, it accounts a little for— But he always speaks of you with regard and esteem, though now I understand certain reservations in his manner.'

Margaret did not speak. By-and-by she said:

'Will you tell me what you mean by "reservations" ?'

'Oh! simply he has annoyed me by not joining in my praises of you. Like an old fool, I thought that everyone would agree with me, and he evidently could not agree. I was puzzled at the time. But he must be perplexed, if the affair has never been in the least explained. First, your walking out with a young man in the dark—'

‘But it was my brother!’ said Margaret.

‘True. But how was he to know that?’

‘I don’t know. I never thought of anything of that kind,’ said Margaret, reddening.

‘And perhaps he never would, but for the lie – which I think was necessary.’

‘It was not. I bitterly repent it.’

There was a long pause. Margaret was the first to speak.

‘I am not likely ever to see Mr. Thornton again.’

‘There are many things more unlikely, I should say,’ replied Mr. Bell.

‘But I believe I never shall. Still, somehow one does not like to have sunk so low in – in a friend’s opinion as I have done in his.’ Her eyes were full of tears, but her voice was steady. ‘And now that Frederick has given up all hope, and cannot return to England, it would be only doing myself justice to have all this explained. Please, if you can, if there is a good opportunity, will you tell him the whole circumstances, and tell him also that I gave you leave to do so, because I felt that for papa’s sake I should not like to lose his respect, though we may never be likely to meet again?’

‘Certainly. I think he ought to know. I do not like you to rest even under the shadow of an impropriety; he would not know what to think of seeing you alone with a young man.’

‘As for that,’ said Margaret, rather haughtily, ‘It is not to clear myself of any suspicion of improper conduct that I wish to have him told – if I thought that he had suspected me, I should not care for his good opinion. It is so that he may learn how I was tempted, and why I told that falsehood.’

‘Which I don’t blame you for.’

‘We will not talk of that any more, if you please. It is done – my sin is sinned. I have now to put it behind me, and be truthful for evermore, if I can.’

‘Very well. If you like to be uncomfortable and morbid, be so. I always keep my conscience as tight shut up as a jack-in-a-box, for when it jumps into existence it surprises me by its size. So I coax it down again. “Wonderful,” say I, “to think that you have been concealed so long. Pray, sir, instead of growing larger every instant, would you once more compress yourself into your former dimensions?” And when I’ve got him down, don’t I clap the seal on him!’

But it was no smiling matter to Margaret. Her thoughts ran upon her conviction that Mr. Thornton was disappointed in her. She did not feel as if any explanation could ever reinstate her – not in his love, for she had resolved never to dwell upon that, and she kept rigidly to her resolution – but in his respect and high regard.

She kept choking and swallowing all the time that she thought about it. She tried to comfort herself with the idea that what he imagined her to be, did not alter the fact of what she was. But it was a truism, and broke down under the weight of her regret.

Mr. Bell thought that she was tired, and sent her early to her room. Before she went to bed, she sat long by the open window, gazing out at the stars that arose, twinkled and disappeared behind the great shadows of the trees. She could see a candle burning in her old bedroom, which was now the nursery. A sense of change, of individual nothingness, over-powered her. Nothing had been the same; and this slight, all-pervading instability had given her greater pain than if all had been changed entirely.

‘I begin to understand now what heaven must be – and, oh! the grandeur and repose of the words – “The same yesterday, today, and for ever.” “From everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God.” I am so tired – so tired of being whirled on through all these phases of my life, in which nothing abides by me, no creature, no place; it is like the circle in which the victims of earthly passion eddy continually. If I were a Roman Catholic and could deaden my heart, I might become a nun. But I should pine after my kind; no, not my kind, so much as individuals. Perhaps it ought to be so, perhaps not. I cannot decide tonight.’

Wearily she went to bed, wearily she arose in four or five hours’ time. But with the morning came hope, and a brighter view of things.

‘After all it is right,’ said she, hearing the voices of children at play while she was dressing. ‘If the world stood still, it would become corrupt. The progress all around me is right and necessary. I must not think so much of how circumstances affect me myself, but how they affect others, if I wish to have a right judgment, or a hopeful trustful heart.’ And with a smile ready, she went into the parlour and greeted Mr. Bell.

‘Ah, Missy! I’ve got a little piece of news for you. What do you think of an invitation to dinner? I’ve had the Vicar here already, in the dewy morning, on his way to the school, and we are asked to dine there today.’

‘But Edith expects me back – I cannot go,’ said Margaret, thankful to have so good an excuse.

‘Yes! I know; so I told him. Still it is open, if you would like it.’

‘Oh, no!’ said Margaret. ‘Let us keep to our plan. It is very good and kind of them; but indeed I could not go.’

But before they left, she stole round to the back of the Vicarage garden, and gathered a little straggling piece of honeysuckle. As she returned across the common, the place was reinvested with the old enchanting atmosphere. The sounds of life were more musical than anywhere else in the whole world, the light more golden, the life more tranquil and full of dreamy delight. Margaret said to herself:

‘And I too change perpetually – now disappointed and peevish, and now suddenly discovering the real beauty of the place. Oh, Helstone! I shall never love any place like you.’

A few days afterwards, she had found her level, and decided that she was very glad to have seen it again, and that to her it would always be the prettiest spot in the world; but so full of associations that she would shrink back from such another visit as that which she had paid with Mr. Bell.

CHAPTER 47

SOMETHING WANTING

About this time Dixon returned from Milton, bringing endless pieces of gossip: how Martha had gone to live with Miss Thornton, on the latter's marriage, with an account of bridesmaids, dresses and breakfasts; how people thought that Mr. Thornton had made too grand a wedding of it, considering he had lost a deal by the strike, and had had to pay so much for the failure of his contracts; how little money the Hales' furniture had fetched at the sale; how Mrs. Thornton had come one day and got two or three good bargains, and Mr. Thornton had come the next, and in his desire to buy one or two things, had bid against himself, much to the enjoyment of the bystanders. Mr. Bell had sent all sorts of orders about the books which she could not understand, his letters were so puzzling.

Dixon had not much to tell about the Higginsons. Her memory had an aristocratic bias. Nicholas was very well, she believed. He had been several times at the house asking for news of Miss Margaret – the only person who ever did ask, except once Mr. Thornton. And Mary? oh! she was very well, a great, stout, slatternly thing! She did hear that Mary had gone to work at Mr. Thornton's mill, because her father wished her to know how to cook; but what nonsense that could mean she didn't know. Margaret rather agreed with her that the story was incoherent.

Still, it was pleasant to have someone with whom she could talk of Milton. Dixon was not over-fond of the subject, preferring to dwell upon speeches of Mr. Bell's which had suggested that he would make Margaret his heiress. But her young lady gave her no encouragement in her enquiries.

All this time, Margaret had a strange undefined longing to hear that Mr. Bell had gone to pay one of his business visits to Milton, and had been able to speak to Mr. Thornton about her explanation. Mr. Bell was no great correspondent, and when he wrote she read his notes with a little feeling of disappointment. He was not going to Milton; he said nothing about it at any rate.

Well! she must be patient. Mr. Bell's letters were hardly like his usual self; they were short, and complaining, with an unusual touch of bitterness and weariness. Margaret thought that he could not be well; but when she enquired about his health, he sent her a short note, saying there was an old-fashioned complaint called the spleen; that he was suffering from that, and it was for her to decide if it was more mental or physical; but that he should like to indulge himself in grumbling, without being obliged to send a bulletin every time. After this note, Margaret made no more enquiries about his health.

One day Edith let out accidentally a fragment of a conversation which she had had with Mr. Bell, which implied that he had some notion of taking Margaret to see Frederick at Cadiz in the autumn. She cross-questioned Edith, till the latter was weary, and declared that there was nothing more to remember; all he had said was that he half-thought he should go. Edith hoped Margaret did not want to leave them. And then, having nothing else particular to do, she cried, and said that she knew she cared much more for Margaret than Margaret did for her. Margaret comforted her, but she could hardly explain how this idea of Spain delighted her. Edith was in the mood to think that any pleasure enjoyed away from her was an affront.

So Margaret resorted to asking Dixon if she would not like to see Master Frederick and his new wife?

‘She’s a Papist, Miss, isn’t she?’

‘I believe so,’ said Margaret, a little damped.

‘And they live in a Popish country?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then I’m afraid I must say that my soul is dearer to me than even Master Frederick. I should be in a perpetual terror, Miss, lest I should be converted.’

‘Oh’ said Margaret, ‘If I go, I can travel without you. Dear old Dixon, you shall have a long holiday, if we go. But I’m afraid it is a big “if.”’

Now Dixon did not like this speech. In the first place, she did not like being called ‘dear old Dixon’. She knew that Miss Hale used ‘old’ as a term of endearment; but Dixon winced away from it, thinking herself, at not much past fifty, to be in the very prime of life. Secondly, she had a secret lurking curiosity about Spain, and Popish mysteries. So, after clearing her throat, she asked Miss Hale whether she might be safe from conversion if she took care never to enter one of their churches? Master Frederick, to be sure, had gone over unaccountable.

‘I fancy that was because of love,’ said Margaret, sighing.

‘Indeed, Miss!’ said Dixon. ‘I can protect myself from churches; but love steals in unawares! I think it’s as well I should not go.’

Margaret was afraid of thinking too much about this Spanish trip. But it took her mind off Mr. Thornton. Mr. Bell appeared to have no immediate plan to go to Milton, and some secret restraint prevented Margaret from asking him when he might visit. Nor did she feel at liberty to ask about his idea of visiting Spain; for he had never mentioned it at Helstone. It was probably just the fancy of a moment – but what a bright fancy!

One of the great pleasures of Margaret’s life at this time was Edith’s boy. He was the pride and plaything of both father and mother, as long as he was good; but he had a strong will, and as soon as he burst out into a stormy passion, Edith would throw herself back in despair and fatigue, sighing, ‘Oh dear, what shall I do with him! Do, Margaret, please ring the bell for Hanley.’

But Margaret almost liked him better in these moods. She would carry him off into a room, where they two alone battled it out; she with a firm power which subdued him into peace, exerting every charm and wile she possessed on the side of right, until he would rub his little tear-smearred face all over hers, caressing her till he often fell asleep on her shoulder. Those were Margaret’s sweetest moments. They gave her a taste of the feeling that she believed would be denied to her for ever.

Mr. Henry Lennox’s frequent presence added a new element to the household life. Margaret thought him colder, if more brilliant than formerly; but his intellectual tastes and knowledge gave flavour to the otherwise rather insipid conversation. Margaret saw glimpses in him of a slight contempt for his brother and sister-in-law, and for their mode of life, which he seemed to consider as frivolous and purposeless. He once asked his brother, in Margaret’s presence, whether he meant entirely to give up his profession. On Captain Lennox’s reply, that he had quite enough to live upon, Mr. Lennox’s lip curled as he said, ‘And is that all you live for?’

But the brothers were much attached to each other. Mr. Lennox was pushing on in his profession; cultivating all those connections that might be of use to him; keen-sighted, sarcastic, and proud. Since their one long conversation about Frederick’s affairs, she had made only small talk with him. But this was enough to wear off the

shyness on her side, and any mortified vanity on his. She thought that he rather avoided being alone with her; she fancied that he perceived that they had drifted strangely apart in many of their opinions, and all their tastes.

And yet, when he had spoken unusually well, she felt that his eye sought her out first of all, if but for an instant; and that, in the family discussion, her opinion was the one to which he listened with deference – the more complete, because it was reluctantly paid, and concealed as much as possible.

CHAPTER 48

'NE'ER TO BE FOUND AGAIN'

The elements of Mrs. Lennox's dinner-parties were these; her friends contributed the beauty, Captain Lennox the easy knowledge of the subjects of the day, and Mr. Henry Lennox and his friends brought the wit and cleverness to the conversation.

These dinners were delightful; but even here Margaret felt dissatisfied. Every talent, every feeling, even every tendency towards virtue was used as materials for fireworks; the hidden, sacred fire exhausted itself in sparkle and crackle. They talked about art in a merely sensuous way, dwelling on effects, instead of allowing themselves to learn what it has to teach. They lashed themselves up into enthusiasm about high subjects in company, and never thought about them when they were alone; they squandered their capabilities of appreciation into a mere flow of appropriate words.

One day, after the gentlemen had come into the drawing-room, Mr. Lennox drew near to Margaret.

'You did not look pleased at what Shirley was saying at dinner.'

'Didn't I? My face must be very expressive,' replied Margaret.

'It always was.'

'I did not like,' said Margaret, hastily, 'his way of advocating what he knew to be wrong, even in jest.'

'But it was very clever. Do you remember the happy epithets?'

'Yes.'

'And you despise them, you would like to add. Pray don't scruple, though he is my friend.'

'There! that is the exact tone in you, that--' She stopped short.

He waited to see if she would finish her sentence; but she only reddened, and turned away. He said in a very low, clear voice:

'If my tones, or modes of thought, are what you dislike, will you tell me so, and give me the chance of learning to please you?'

All these weeks there was no news of Mr. Bell's going to Milton. He must have transacted his business there by writing, Margaret thought. She knew that if he could, he would avoid going to a place which he disliked, and would not understand the secret importance which she affixed to the explanation being given by word of mouth. It was now August, and he had not mentioned the Spanish journey; so Margaret tried to reconcile herself to the fading away of this illusion.

But one morning she received a letter, saying that next week he meant to come up to town; he wanted to see her about a plan which he had; and to treat himself to a little doctoring, as he had begun to think that perhaps his health was more in fault than he, when he found himself irritable and cross. There was a tone of forced cheerfulness in the letter, as Margaret noticed afterwards; but at the time her attention was taken up by Edith's exclamations.

'Coming up to town! Oh, dear! and I am so worn out by the heat that I don't believe I have strength for another dinner. Besides, everybody has left town.'

‘I’m sure Mr. Bell would much rather dine with us alone than with the most agreeable strangers, especially if he is not well. I am glad he has owned it at last. I was sure he was ill, and yet he would not answer me when I asked him.’

‘Oh! he is not very ill, or he would not think of Spain.’

‘He never mentions Spain.’

‘No! but his plan must relate to that. Dear Margaret! You’ll be persuaded to stay there; and then what shall I do? Oh! I wish I could find somebody for you to marry here!’

‘I shall never marry.’

‘Nonsense! Why, Cosmo says that he knows ever so many men who will be glad to visit here for your sake.’

Margaret drew herself up haughtily. ‘Do you know, Edith, I sometimes think your Corfu life has taught you just a shade of coarseness.’

Edith began to sob so bitterly, and to declare so vehemently that Margaret had lost all love for her, that Margaret came to think that she had been too harsh in relieving her own wounded pride; and ended by being Edith’s slave for the rest of the day, while that little lady lay like a victim on the sofa.

Mr. Bell did not appear. There came a letter from Wallis, his servant, stating that his master had not been feeling well for some time, so had put off his journey; and that at the very time when he should have set out for London, he had been seized with an apoplectic fit. Wallis added the opinion of the medical men – that Mr. Bell could not survive the night; and that probably by the time Miss Hale received this letter his poor master would be no more.

Margaret received the letter at breakfast-time, and turned very pale as she read it. Silently putting it into Edith’s hands, she left the room.

Edith was terribly shocked, and cried in a sobbing, frightened, childish way, much to her husband’s distress. It was the first time his wife had been brought into near contact with death. Here was a man who was to have dined with them today, lying dead or dying! It was some time before Edith could think of Margaret. When she went up to her room, Dixon was packing, and Margaret was hastily putting on her bonnet, her hands trembling so that she could hardly tie the strings.

‘Oh, dear Margaret! how shocking! Are you going out? Cosmo would telegraph or do anything you like.’

‘I am going to Oxford. There is a train in half-an-hour. Dixon has offered to go with me. I must see Mr. Bell again. Besides, he may be better, and want some care. He has been like a father to me. Don’t stop me, Edith.’

‘But Mamma won’t like it. Come and ask her about it, Margaret. You don’t know where you’re going. In his Fellow’s rooms! Come to mamma, and do ask her.’

Margaret yielded, and missed her train. Mrs. Shaw became bewildered and hysterical, and precious time slipped by. But there was another train in a couple of hours; and after various discussions on propriety, it was decided that Captain Lennox should accompany Margaret by the next train. Her father’s friend, her own friend, was lying at the point of death; and this thought made her assert firmly her right to independence of action.

It was always a comfort to her to think that she had gone, though it was only to hear that he had died in the night. She saw the rooms that he had occupied, and associated them ever after most fondly in her memory with the idea of her father, and his cherished and faithful friend.

They had promised Edith that if all had ended as they feared, they would return to dinner; so that Margaret's lingering look around the room, in which her father had died, had to be interrupted, and a quiet farewell taken of the kind old face.

Captain Lennox fell asleep on their journey home; and Margaret could cry at leisure, and bethink her of this fatal year, and all its woes. One grief had come after another, re-opening wounds and feelings scarcely healed.

But at the sound of the tender voices of her aunt and Edith, and merry little Sholto's glee at her arrival, Margaret roused herself from her heavy trance. She had Edith's place on the sofa; Sholto was taught to carry aunt Margaret's cup of tea very carefully to her; and by the time she went up to dress, she could thank God for having spared her dear old friend a long or painful illness.

When solemn night came, and all the house was quiet, Margaret still sat watching the beauty of a London sky on such a summer evening; the faint pink reflection of earthly lights on the soft clouds that float into the white moonlight. This room had been the nursery of her childhood, just when her feelings and conscience had been awakened into full activity. On some such night as this she remembered promising to herself to live as brave and noble a life as any heroine; it had seemed to her then that she had only to will, and such a life would be accomplished. And now she had learnt that not only to will, but also to pray, was a necessary condition in the truly heroic. Trusting to herself, she had fallen.

It was only just that all excuses for her sin should remain for ever unknown to the person in whose opinion it had sunk her lowest. She knew her sin for what it was; Mr. Bell's kindly sophistry that nearly all men were guilty of such sins had never had much weight with her. Her anxiety to have her character excused in Mr. Thornton's eyes, as Mr. Bell had promised to do, was a very small and petty consideration, now that she was afresh taught by death what life should be. She stood alone, in the presence of God, and prayed that she might have strength to speak and act the truth for evermore.

CHAPTER 49

BREATHING TRANQUILLITY

‘Is not Margaret the heiress?’ whispered Edith to her husband, as they were in their room that night. Captain Lennox was, however, quite in the dark; if he had ever heard, he had forgotten; and the Fellow of a small college could not have much to leave. Edith was a little sadder, with her romance blown to pieces.

A week afterwards, she came prancing towards her husband, and made him a low curtsy:

‘I am right, and you are wrong, most noble Captain. Margaret has had a lawyer’s letter, and she is legatee – the legacies being about two thousand pounds, and the remainder property in Milton worth about forty thousand.’

‘Indeed! and how does she take her good fortune?’

‘Oh, it seems she knew all along; only she had no idea it was so much. She looks very white and pale, and says she’s afraid of it; but that’s nonsense, you know. I left mamma pouring congratulations down her throat.’

It seemed to be supposed, by general consent, that Mr. Lennox would naturally be Margaret’s legal adviser. She was so ignorant of all forms of business that in nearly everything she had to refer to him. He chose her attorney, and brought her papers to be signed. He was never so happy as when teaching her of these mysteries of the law.

‘Henry,’ said Edith one day, archly; ‘do you know what I hope and expect all these long conversations with Margaret will end in?’

‘No, I don’t,’ said he, reddening, but speaking coolly. ‘What you are thinking of, may or may not happen; but this time, before I commit myself, I will see my ground clear. It may not be very civil, Edith, but if you meddle in it you will mar it. She is only just beginning to thaw a little towards me. She has the making of a Cleopatra in her, if only she were more pagan.’

There was no Spain for Margaret that autumn. Instead of Cadiz, she had to content herself with Cromer, where her aunt Shaw and the Lennoxes were bound. They wished her to accompany them, and made only lazy efforts to consider her own separate wish. Perhaps Cromer would be best: she needed bodily strengthening.

Among other hopes that had vanished, was the hope that Mr. Bell would have given Mr. Thornton the facts of the family circumstances which had preceded Leonards’ unfortunate accident and death. Whatever opinion Mr. Thornton held of her, she had wished it to be based upon a true understanding of what she had done, and why she had done it. It would have given her rest on a point on which she should now all her life be restless.

It was now so long since these occurrences, that there was no way of explaining them save the one which she had lost by Mr. Bell’s death. She must just submit, like many another, to be misunderstood; but her heart did not ache the less with longing that some time, he might know the truth. But this wish was vain; and when she had schooled herself into this conviction, she turned with all her heart and strength to the life that lay immediately before her, and resolved to strive and make the best of that.

She used to sit long hours upon the beach at Cromer, gazing intently on the waves as they chafed against the pebbly shore – or she looked out upon the more

distant heave, and sparkle against the sky, and was soothed without knowing how. She sat there, on the ground, her hands clasped round her knees, while her aunt Shaw went shopping, and Edith and Captain Lennox rode far and wide. When the family gathered at dinner-time, Margaret was so silent and absorbed that Edith agreed with her husband that Mr. Henry Lennox should be asked to visit Cromer for a week in October.

But all this time for thought enabled Margaret to put events in their right places. Those hours by the seaside were not lost, as anyone might have seen who could read the look that her face was gradually acquiring. Mr. Henry Lennox was excessively struck by the change.

‘The sea has done Miss Hale an immense deal of good,’ said he, on his arrival in their family circle, after Margaret had left the room. ‘She looks ten years younger than she did in Harley Street.’

‘That’s the bonnet I got her!’ said Edith triumphantly.

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Mr. Lennox, in the half-contemptuous, half-indulgent tone he generally used to Edith. ‘No mere bonnet would have made Miss Hale’s eyes so lustrous and yet so soft, or her face so full of peace and light. She is like the Margaret Hale of Helstone, and yet more.’

From this time the clever and ambitious man bent all his powers to gaining Margaret. He loved her sweet beauty. He saw the latent sweep of her mind, which could easily (he thought) be led to embrace all the objects on which he had set his heart. He looked upon her fortune only as a part of her superb self: yet he was fully aware of the rise which it would enable him, the poor barrister, to take. Eventually he would earn such success as would let him pay her back with interest.

He had been to Milton on business connected with her property, and had seen that much additional value was yearly accruing to the land and houses which she owned in that prosperous and growing town. He was glad to find that the present relationship between them, of client and legal adviser, was gradually superseding the recollection of that unlucky day at Helstone. It gave him many private opportunities to talk to her.

Margaret was only too willing to listen as long as he talked of Milton, though he had seen none of the people whom she knew. Her aunt and cousin would speak of Milton with dislike and contempt; just such feelings as Margaret was ashamed to remember she had expressed on first going to live there. But Mr. Lennox almost exceeded Margaret in his appreciation of Milton and its inhabitants. Their energy, their power, their courage in struggling; their lurid vividness of existence, captivated him. He never perceived how selfish and material were too many of the purposes of their mighty endeavour, till Margaret had the candour to point this out, as the tainting sin in so much that was admirable. Still, when she gave short answers on other subjects, Henry Lennox found that some enquiry about Darkshire called back the light into her eye.

When they returned to London Margaret fulfilled one of her sea-side resolves. Before they went to Cromer, she had been as docile to her aunt’s laws as if she were still the scared little stranger who cried herself to sleep that first night in the Harley Street nursery. But she had learnt, in those solemn hours of thought, that she must one day answer for her own life, and what she had done with it; and she tried to settle that most difficult problem for women, how much to be obedient to authority, and how much to assert one’s freedom.

Mrs. Shaw and Edith were both good-tempered; Margaret herself had probably the worst temper of the three. Her quick perceptions and over-lively imagination made her hasty, and her early isolation from sympathy had made her proud. But she had a sweetness of heart which made her manner irresistible; and now, chastened by what the world called her good fortune, she charmed her reluctant aunt into allowing her the right to follow her own ideas of duty.

‘Only don’t be strong-minded,’ pleaded Edith. ‘Mamma wants you to have a footman of your own; and I’m sure you’re very welcome, for they’re great plagues. Only darling, don’t have a strong mind; it’s the only thing I ask. Footman or no footman, don’t be strong-minded.’

‘Don’t be afraid, Edith. I’ll faint on your hands at the first opportunity; and then, what with Sholto playing with the fire, and the baby crying, you’ll begin to wish for a strong-minded woman, equal to any emergency.’

‘And you’ll not grow too good to joke and be merry?’

‘Not I. I shall be merrier than I have ever been, now I have got my own way.’

‘And you’ll let me buy your dresses for you?’

‘I mean to buy them for myself, though you shall come with me if you like.’

‘Oh! I was afraid you’d dress in brown and dust-colour, so as not to show the dirt you’ll pick up in all those places. I’m glad you’re going to keep one or two vanities.’

‘I’m going to be just the same, Edith. Only as I have neither husband nor child to give me natural duties, I must make myself some, in addition to ordering my gowns.’

In the family conclave, which was made up of Edith, her mother, and her husband, it was decided that perhaps all these plans of hers would only secure her the more for Henry Lennox. They kept her out of the way of other eligible men; and she never seemed to take much pleasure in the society of anyone but Henry, outside their own family. Admirers attracted by the reputation of her fortune were swept away, by her unconscious smiling disdain, into the paths of other beauties less fastidious. Henry and she grew slowly into closer intimacy; but neither he nor she would tolerate the slightest notice of their friendship.

CHAPTER 50

CHANGES AT MILTON

Meanwhile at Milton, the chimneys smoked, the ceaseless roar and mighty beat and whirl of machinery strove perpetually. Senseless and purposeless were wood and iron and steam in their endless labours; but they were rivalled in tireless endurance by the strong crowds, who, with sense and with purpose, were restlessly seeking after – what? In the streets there were few loiterers – none walking for mere pleasure. Men sought news with fierce avidity; and jostled each other aside in the Exchange, as they did in life, in the deep selfishness of competition.

There was gloom over the town. Few came to buy, and those who did were looked at suspiciously by the sellers; for credit was insecure, and the most stable might have their fortunes affected by the sweep in the great neighbouring port among the shipping houses. Hitherto there had been no failures in Milton; but, from the immense speculations that had made a bad end in America, and nearer home, it was known that some Milton houses of business must suffer severely. When men spoke together, they dwelt rather on the names of those who were safe than those who were likely to go under; for at such times idle rumour may bring down some who might otherwise weather the storm; and one going down drags many after.

‘Thornton is safe,’ say they. ‘His business is large – extending every year; but he’s prudent for all his daring.’ Then one man draws another aside, and says quietly, ‘Thornton’s business is large; but he has spent his profits in extending it and buying new machinery; he has no capital laid by.’

The truth was, Mr. Thornton was hard pressed. He felt it acutely. It wounded his pride in the commercial character which he had established for himself. He attributed this to no special merit of his own, but to the power which he believed that commerce gave to every honest and persevering man to raise himself to a position of influence. Far away, East and West, his name was to be regarded, and his wishes to be fulfilled, and his word pass like gold. That was his idea of merchant-life. He was like many others – alive to distant, and dead to near things. He sought to become the head of a firm that should be known abroad for generations; and it had taken him long silent years to come even to a glimmering of what he might be, even in his own town, among his own people. He and they had led parallel lives – close, but never touching – till his acquaintance with Higgins. Once brought face to face, master and workman had begun to recognise that ‘we have all of us one human heart.’

It was the fine point of the wedge. Now, the apprehension of losing some of the workmen whom he had so lately begun to know – and of having plans, very close to his heart, roughly nipped off without trial – gave a new poignancy to the subtle fear that came over him from time to time. Until now, he had never recognised how deep was the interest he had lately grown to feel in his position as manufacturer, simply because it led him into such close contact, and gave him so much power, among a race of people strange, shrewd, ignorant; but full of character and strong human feeling.

He reviewed his position. The strike more than a year and a half ago, when he was young, had prevented his completing some of the large orders he had then on hand. He had locked up a good deal of his capital in new and expensive machinery,

and he had also bought cotton for the fulfilment of these orders. He had not been able to complete them partly due to the utter lack of skill of the imported Irish hands, whose work was unfit to be sent forth by a house which prided itself on turning out only first-rate articles. For many months, the embarrassment caused by the strike had been an obstacle in Mr. Thornton's way; and when he saw Higgins, he could have spoken angrily to him just because of this sense of injury.

But when he became conscious of this resentment, he resolved to curb it. He must convince himself that he was master over his own anger, by being particularly careful to allow Higgins access to him whenever business permitted. And by-and-bye, he lost all sense of resentment in wonder how it was that two men like himself and Higgins, living by the same trade, working at the same object, could look upon each other's position and duties in so strangely different a way. Their meetings did not prevent all future clash of opinion, but they enabled both master and man to treat each other with far more sympathy and patience. In addition, both Mr. Thornton and his workmen discovered their ignorance about facts known to one side, but not to the other.

But now had come one of those periods of bad trade, when the falling market brought down the value of all large stocks. Mr. Thornton's fell to nearly half. No orders were coming in, so he lost the interest of the capital he had locked up in machinery; indeed, it was difficult to get payment for the orders he completed; yet there was the constant drain of expenses. Then the bills became due for the cotton he had purchased; and money being scarce, he could only borrow at exorbitant interest.

He did not despair. He exerted himself day and night to foresee and provide for all emergencies. He was as calm and gentle to the women in his home as ever; to the workmen in his mill he spoke little, but they knew him by this time; and many a curt answer was received by them with sympathy for the care they saw pressing upon him, rather than their previous antagonism.

'Th' measter's a deal to potter him,' said Higgins one day, as he heard Mr. Thornton's sharp inquiry as to why a command had not been obeyed; and caught the sound of his suppressed sigh. Higgins and another man stopped over-hours that night, unknown to anyone, to get the neglected piece of work done; and Mr. Thornton assumed that the overlooker, to whom he had given the command, had done it himself.

'Eh! I reckon I know who'd ha' been sorry for to see our measter sitting so like a piece o' grey calico! Th' oud parson would ha' fretted his heart out, if he'd seen the measter so woeful,' thought Higgins, one day, as he was approaching Mr. Thornton in Marlborough Street.

'Measter,' said he, causing that gentleman to look up with a sudden annoyed start, as if his thoughts had been far away. 'Have yo' heerd aught of Miss Marget lately?'

'Miss who?' replied Mr. Thornton.

'Miss Hale – th' oud parson's daughter – yo' known who I mean, if yo'll only think a bit.' (There was nothing disrespectful in his tone.)

'Oh yes!' and suddenly, the wintry frost-bound look of care left Mr. Thornton's face, as if some soft summer gale had blown anxiety away from his mind. 'She's my landlord now, you know, Higgins. I hear of her through her agent, every now and then. She's well and among friends – thank you, Higgins.' That lingering 'thank you', which came with so much warmth of feeling, let in a new light to the acute Higgins.

It might be but a will-o'-th'-wisp, but he thought he would follow it and see where it led him.

'And she's not gotten married, measter?'

'Not yet.' The face was cloudy once more. 'There is some talk of it, as I understand.'

'Then she'll not be coming to Milton again, I reckon.'

'No!'

'Stop a minute, measter.' Going up confidentially close, he said, 'Is th' young gentleman cleared?' and winked his eye, which only made things more mysterious to Mr. Thornton.

'Th' young gentleman – Master Frederick – her brother as was over here, yo' known.'

'Over here?'

'Ay, to be sure, at th' missus's death. Yo' need na be feared of my telling; for Mary and me, we knowed it all along, from Mary working in th' house.'

'And he was over. It was her brother!'

'Sure enough. I reckoned yo' knowed it or I'd never ha' let on. Yo' knowed she had a brother?'

'Yes, I know all about him. And he was over at Mrs. Hale's death?'

'Nay! I'm not going to tell more. I've maybe gotten them into mischief already. I nobbut wanted to know if they'd gotten him cleared?'

'I don't know. I only hear of Miss Hale now as my landlord, and through her lawyer.'

He broke away to go on his business, leaving Higgins baffled in his endeavour.

'It was her brother,' said Mr. Thornton to himself. 'I am glad. I may never see her again; but it is a comfort – a relief – to know that much. I knew she could not be unmaidenly; and yet I yearned for conviction. Now I am glad!'

It was a little golden thread running through the dark web of his present fortunes, which were growing ever gloomier. His agent had trusted a firm in the American trade, which had just gone down along with several others like a pack of cards. Could he still stand?

Night after night he took papers into his private room, and sat up long after the family were gone to bed. He thought that no one knew of this. But one morning, when daylight was stealing in through the crevices of his shutters, and he, in hopeless indifference, was thinking that he could do without the hour or two of rest which was all that was possible – the door opened, and his mother stood there, dressed as she had been the day before. She had not lain down to sleep any more than he. Their eyes met. Their faces were cold and rigid, and wan.

'Mother! why are you not in bed?'

'Son John,' said she, 'do you think I can sleep with an easy mind, while you keep awake full of care? You have not told me what your trouble is; but sore trouble you have had these many days past.'

'Trade is bad.'

'And you dread—'

'I dread nothing,' replied he, lifting his head. 'I know now that no man will suffer by me. That was my anxiety.'

'But how do you stand? Will it be a failure?'

Her steady voice trembled.

'Not a failure. I must give up business, but I can pay all men. I might redeem myself – I am sorely tempted—'

‘How? Oh, John! try anything to keep up your name. How?’

‘By a speculation offered to me, full of risk. If successful, no one need ever know the strait I am in. If it fails—’

‘If it fails?’ She held her breath.

‘Honest men are ruined by a rogue,’ said he gloomily. ‘As I stand now, my creditors’ money is safe; but I don’t know where to find my own – I may be penniless. Therefore, it is my creditors’ money that I would be risking.’

‘But if it succeeded, they need never know. Is it so desperate a speculation? If it succeeded, you would have injured no one.’

‘No; but I should have run the risk of ruining many for my own selfish ends. Mother, I have decided! You won’t much grieve over our leaving this house, shall you, dear mother?’

‘No! but to have you other than what you are will break my heart. What can you do?’

‘Be always the same John Thornton in whatever circumstances; endeavouring to do right, and making great blunders; and then trying to be brave in setting to afresh. But it is hard, mother. I have so worked and planned, and I have discovered new powers too late – now all is over. I am too old to begin again with the same heart. It is hard, mother.’

He turned away from her, and covered his face.

‘I can’t think,’ said she, with gloomy defiance in her tone, ‘how it comes about. Here is a good, just, tender heart – and he fails in all he sets his mind upon: he finds a woman to love, and she cares nothing for his affection; he labours, and his labour comes to nought. Other people prosper and grow rich, and hold their paltry names high and dry above shame.’

‘Shame never touched me,’ said he, in a low tone: but she went on.

‘I don’t believe there is such a thing as justice in the world, now you are come to this; my own John Thornton, though you and I may be beggars together – my own dear son!’

She kissed him through her tears.

‘Mother!’ said he, holding her gently in his arms, ‘who has sent me my lot in life?’

She shook her head. She would have nothing to do with religion just then.

Seeing that she would not speak, he went on. ‘I, too, have been rebellious; but I am striving to be so no longer. Help me, as you helped me when I was a child. Then, when my father died, and we were sorely short of comforts, you said brave, noble, trustful words, mother, which I have never forgotten. Speak to me again in the old way. Do not let us think that the world has too much hardened our hearts. I say the old words to myself, but they would come differently from you, remembering all your cares and trials.’

‘I have had many,’ said she, sobbing, ‘but none so sore as this. To see you cast down from your rightful place! I could say it for myself, John, but not for you! God has seen fit to be very hard on you, very.’

She shook with convulsive sobs, until the silence struck her at last. She looked up. Her son sat by the table, his arms thrown half across it, his head face downwards.

‘Oh, John!’ she said, and she lifted his face up. Such a strange look of gloom was on it, that for a moment it struck her that this look was the forerunner of death; but, as the rigidity melted out of his face and his colour returned, she saw that he was

himself once again, and she was conscious only of the great blessing of his existence. She thanked God for this, with a fervour that swept away all rebellious feelings.

He went and opened the shutters, and let the light of dawn flood the room. The wind was in the east; the weather was piercing cold, as it had been for weeks; there would be no demand for light summer goods this year.

It was a great comfort to have had this conversation with his mother; and to feel sure that they understood each other's feelings, and were, if not in harmony, at least not in discord with each other. Fanny's husband Mr. Watson was vexed at Thornton's refusal to take any share in the speculation which he had offered him, and which he himself had taken up.

There was nothing for it at last, but that which Mr. Thornton had dreaded for many weeks. He had to give up the business in which he had been so long engaged with so much honour and success; and look out for a subordinate situation. Marlborough Mills and the house must be, if possible, re-let.

There was an immediate choice of situations offered to Mr. Thornton. Mr. Hamper would have been glad to have secured him as a steady and experienced partner for his son, whom he was setting up in a neighbouring town; but the young man was uneducated about any other responsibility than that of getting money, and brutalised in both his pleasures and his pains. Mr. Thornton declined having any share in the partnership. He would sooner consent to be only a manager, than have to fall in with the tyrannical humours of a partner with whom he felt sure that he should quarrel.

So he waited with profound humility, as the news swept through the Exchange of the enormous fortune which his brother-in-law had made by his daring speculation. It was a nine days' wonder, bringing the world's admiration. No one was considered so wise and far-seeing as Mr. Watson.

CHAPTER 51

MEETING AGAIN

It was a hot summer's evening. Edith came into Margaret's bedroom, dressed for dinner. She found Dixon laying out Margaret's dress on the bed; but no Margaret.

'Oh, Dixon! not those horrid blue flowers with that dead gold-coloured gown. What taste! Wait a minute, and I will bring you some pomegranate blossoms.'

'It's not a dead gold-colour, ma'am. It's a straw-colour. And blue always goes with straw-colour.' But Edith had brought the scarlet flowers before Dixon had finished.

'Where is Miss Hale?' asked Edith pettishly. 'I can't think how my aunt Hale allowed her to get into such rambling habits when she was in Milton! I'm always expecting to hear of her having met with something horrible in those wretched places she pokes herself into. I should never dare to go down some of those streets without a servant. They're not fit for ladies.'

Dixon was still huffed about her despised taste; so she replied, rather shortly:

'It's no wonder to my mind, when they're such fearful, delicate, dainty ladies – it's no wonder to me that there are no longer any saints on earth—'

'Oh, Margaret! here you are! I have been so wanting you. Only think what that tiresome Henry has done. Just when my party was made up so beautifully – there has Henry come, with an apology it is true, and using your name for an excuse, has asked me if he may bring that Mr. Thornton of Milton – your tenant, you know – who is in London about some law business. It will spoil my number at dinner.'

'I don't mind dinner. I don't want any,' said Margaret, in a low voice. 'Dixon can get me a cup of tea here, and I will be in the drawing-room by the time you come up. I shall really be glad to lie down.'

'No, no! that will never do. You do look wretchedly white, to be sure; but that is just the heat, and we can't do without you. You know we planned you to talk about Milton to Mr. Colthurst. Oh! and this man comes from Milton. I believe it will be capital, after all. Mr. Colthurst can pump him, and it will be great fun to trace out your experiences, and this Mr. Thornton's wisdom, in Mr. Colthurst's next speech in parliament. Really, it is a happy hit of Henry's. I asked him if Mr. Thornton was a man one would be ashamed of; and he replied, "Not if you've any sense, my little sister." So I suppose he is able to sound his h's – eh, Margaret?'

'Mr. Lennox did not say why Mr. Thornton was come up to town? Was it connected with the property?' asked Margaret, in a constrained voice.

'Oh! he's failed, or something of the kind, as Henry told you that day you had such a headache. There, that's capital, Dixon. Miss Hale does us credit, does she not? I wish I was as tall as a queen, and as brown as a gipsy, Margaret.'

'But about Mr. Thornton?'

'Oh, I really have such a terrible head for law business. Henry will tell you all about it. I gathered that Mr. Thornton is very badly off, and a very respectable man, and that I'm to be very civil to him; so I came to ask you to help me. And now come down with me.'

Henry Lennox arrived early. Margaret, reddening, began to ask him about Mr. Thornton.

‘He came to London about sub-letting the property – Marlborough Mills, and the house and premises. He is unable to keep it on; and there are leases to be looked over, and agreements to be drawn up. I hope Edith will receive him properly; she was rather put out when I begged an invitation for him. But I thought you would like to have some attention shown him: and one would wish to be scrupulous in paying every respect to a man who is going down in the world.’

As he ended he sprang up, and introduced Mr. Thornton, who had that moment entered, to Edith and Captain Lennox.

Margaret looked anxiously at Mr. Thornton. It was more than a year since she had seen him; and he had changed in that time. His fine figure and his height gave him a distinguished appearance, with a natural ease of motion; but his face looked older and care-worn. Yet a noble composure sat upon it, indicating an inner dignity and manly strength.

He was aware from his first glance that Margaret was there; he had seen her intent look as she listened to Mr. Henry Lennox; and he came up to her with the perfectly regulated manner of an old friend. With his first calm words a vivid colour flashed into her cheeks, which never left them again during the evening. She did not seem to have much to say to him. She disappointed him by the quiet way in which she asked the necessary questions about her old acquaintances in Milton. Others came in, and he fell back to talk to Mr. Lennox.

‘You think Miss Hale looking well,’ said Mr. Lennox, ‘don’t you? Milton didn’t agree with her, I imagine; for when she first came to London, I had never seen anyone so much changed. Tonight she is looking radiant. But she is much stronger. Last autumn she was fatigued with a walk of a couple of miles. On Friday evening we walked up to Hampstead and back.’

‘We!’ Who? They two alone?

Mr. Colthurst was a very clever man, and a rising member of parliament. He was struck by a remark which Mr. Thornton made at dinner, and enquired of Edith who that gentleman was. To her surprise, she found that Mr. Thornton of Milton was not such an unknown name to him as she had imagined. Her dinner was going off well. Henry was in good humour, and displayed his dry caustic wit admirably. Mr. Thornton and Mr. Colthurst found one or two mutual subjects of interest. Margaret looked beautiful in the pomegranate flowers; and if she spoke little, Edith was not annoyed, for the conversation flowed on smoothly without her.

Margaret was watching Mr. Thornton’s face. He never looked at her; so she might study him unobserved, and note the changes in him. Only once, at some witty remark of Mr. Lennox’s, his face flashed out into the old look of intense enjoyment; the merry brightness returned to his eyes, the lips just parted to suggest the brilliant smile of former days; and for an instant, his glance instinctively sought hers. But when their eyes met, his whole countenance changed; he was grave and anxious once more. He resolutely avoided looking near her again during dinner.

When the gentlemen joined the ladies in the drawing-room, Mr. Colthurst and Mr. Thornton were in close conversation. Mr. Lennox drew near to Margaret, and said in a low voice:

‘I really think Edith owes me thanks. You’ve no idea what an agreeable, sensible fellow this tenant of yours is. He has been the very man to give Colthurst the facts he wanted. I can’t conceive how he contrived to mismanage his affairs.’

‘With his powers and opportunities you would have succeeded,’ said Margaret. He did not quite relish the tone in which she spoke, although the words echoed his

own thought. As he was silent, they caught some of the conversation going on between Mr. Colthurst and Mr. Thornton.

‘I assure you, I heard it spoken of with great interest as to its result. I heard your name frequently mentioned during my stay in the neighbourhood.’ Then they lost some words; and when next they could hear, Mr. Thornton was speaking.

‘I have not the elements for popularity. I fall slowly into new projects; and I find it difficult to let myself be known, even by those whom I desire to know. Yet, even with all these drawbacks, I felt that I was on the right path, and that, starting from a kind of friendship with one, I was becoming acquainted with many. The advantages were mutual: we were both unconsciously and consciously teaching each other.’

‘You say “were.” I trust you are intending to pursue the same course?’

‘I must stop Colthurst,’ said Henry Lennox, hastily. And by an abrupt question, he turned the current of the conversation, so as not to give Mr. Thornton the mortification of acknowledging his failure. But as soon as the newly-started subject had come to a close, Mr. Thornton resumed the conversation just where it had been interrupted, and gave Mr. Colthurst his reply.

‘I have been unsuccessful in business, and have had to give up my position as a master. I am on the look out for a situation in Milton, where I may be employed by someone who will be willing to let me go my own way in such matters as these. I have no rash go-ahead theories. I wish only to have consultation with the hands beyond the mere “cash nexus.” But I might as well be attempting to move the earth, to judge by the way some of our manufacturers shake their heads and look grave as soon as I mention the experiments that I should like to try.’

‘You call them “experiments”?’ said Mr. Colthurst.

‘Because I believe them to be such. I am not sure of the consequences that may result from them. But I am sure they ought to be tried. I believe that no mere institutions, however wise, can attach class to class as they should be attached, unless the individuals of the different classes come into actual personal contact. A working man can hardly know how much his employer may have laboured in his study at plans for the benefit of his workpeople. A complete plan emerges like a piece of machinery, and the hands accept without understanding the intense effort required to bring it to perfection. But I would take an idea, which should be worked out through personal discussion; it might not go well at first, but at every hitch interest would be felt by an increasing number of men, and at last its success would be desired by all who had helped to form the plan. We should understand each other better, and I’ll venture to say we should like each other more.’

‘And you think this may prevent the recurrence of strikes?’

‘Not at all. At best, it may render strikes less bitter and venomous than they have hitherto been. A more hopeful man might imagine that closer communication between classes might do away with strikes. But I am not a hopeful man.’

Suddenly, as if a new idea had struck him, he crossed over to where Margaret was sitting, and began, without preface, as if he knew she had been listening to all that had passed:

‘Miss Hale, I had a round-robin from some of my men – I suspect in Higgins’s handwriting – stating their wish to work for me, if ever I was in a position to employ men again on my own behalf. That was good, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes. I am glad of it,’ said Margaret, looking up straight into his face with her speaking eyes, and then dropping them under his eloquent glance. He gazed back at her for a minute, as if he did not know exactly what he was about.

Then he sighed; and saying, ‘I knew you would like it,’ he turned away, and never spoke to her again until he bid her a formal ‘good night.’

As Mr. Lennox took his departure, Margaret said hesitantly, with a blush that she could not repress, ‘Can I speak to you tomorrow? I want your help about – something.’

‘Certainly. It will be a pleasure. At eleven? Very well.’

Henry Lennox’s eye brightened with exultation. How she was learning to depend upon him! It seemed as if any day now might give him the certainty that she would accept him. Without that, he had determined never to offer to her again.

CHAPTER 52

'PACK CLOUDS AWAY'

Edith went about on tip-toe, and quietened Sholto that next morning, as if any sudden noise would interrupt the conference that was taking place in the drawing-room. Two o'clock came; and they still sat there with closed doors. Then there was a man's footstep running downstairs; and Edith peeped out of her room.

'Well, Henry?' said she.

'Well!' said he, rather shortly.

'Come in to lunch!'

'No, thank you, I can't. I've lost too much time here already.'

'Then it's not all settled,' said Edith despondingly.

'No! It never will be settled, if the "it" is what I think you mean. That will never be, Edith, so give up thinking about it.'

'But it would be so nice for us all,' pleaded Edith. 'I should always feel comfortable about the children, if I had Margaret settled near me. I am afraid of her going off to Cadiz.'

'I will try, when I marry, to look out for a young lady who has knowledge of the management of children. That is all I can do. Miss Hale would not have me. And I shall not ask her.'

'Then what have you been talking about?'

'A thousand things you would not understand: investments, and leases, and value of land.'

'Oh, go away, if that's all – such weary things.'

'Very well. I'm coming again tomorrow, and bringing Mr. Thornton with me, to have some more talk with Miss Hale.'

'Mr. Thornton! What has he to do with it?'

'He is Miss Hale's tenant,' said Mr. Lennox, turning away. 'And he wishes to give up his lease.'

'Oh! very well. I can't understand details, so don't give them me.'

'The only detail I want you to understand is, to let us have the back drawing-room undisturbed, as it was today, with nobody coming in or out. The arrangements we have to make tomorrow are important.'

No one ever knew why Mr. Lennox did not keep his appointment on the following day. Mr. Thornton came true to his time; and, after keeping him waiting for nearly an hour, Margaret came in looking very white and anxious.

She began hurriedly:

'I am so sorry Mr. Lennox is not here – he could have done it so much better than I can. He is my adviser in this.'

'I am sorry that I came, if it troubles you. Shall I go to Mr. Lennox's chambers and try and find him?'

'No, thank you. I wanted to tell you how grieved I was to find that I am to lose you as a tenant. But, Mr. Lennox says, things are sure to brighten—'

'Mr. Lennox knows little about it,' said Mr. Thornton quietly. 'Happy and fortunate as he is, he does not understand what it is to find oneself no longer young – yet thrown back to the starting-point which requires the hopeful energy of youth; to

feel half of life gone, and nothing done – nothing remaining of wasted opportunity, but the bitter recollection that it has passed. Miss Hale, I would rather not hear Mr. Lennox's opinion of my affairs. Those who are happy and successful themselves are too apt to make light of the misfortunes of others.'

'You are unjust,' said Margaret, gently. 'Mr. Lennox has only spoken of the great probability which he believes there to be of your redeeming – your more than redeeming what you have lost – pray don't speak till I have ended!'

Collecting herself, she went on rapidly turning over some law papers and accounts in a trembling hurried manner. 'Oh! here it is! He drew me out a proposal – I wish he was here to explain it – showing that if you would take some money of mine, eighteen thousand and fifty-seven pounds, lying just at this moment unused in the bank, and bringing me in only two and a half per cent – you could pay me much better interest, and might go on working Marlborough Mills.' Her voice had cleared itself and become more steady.

Mr. Thornton did not speak, and she went on looking for a paper on which were written down the proposals for security; for she was most anxious to have it all looked upon in the light of a mere business arrangement, in which the principal advantage would be on her side.

While she sought for this paper, her very heart-pulse was arrested by the tone in which Mr. Thornton spoke. His voice was hoarse, and trembling with tender passion, as he said–

'Margaret!'

For an instant she looked up; and then sought to veil her luminous eyes by dropping her forehead on her hands. Again, stepping nearer, he besought her with another tremulous eager call.

'Margaret!'

Still lower went the head; more closely hidden was the face, bending almost to the table. He knelt by her side, to bring his face to a level with her ear; and whispered:

'Take care. – If you do not speak – I shall claim you as my own in some strange presumptuous way. – Send me away at once, if I must go. – Margaret!'

At that third call she turned her face, still covered with her small white hands, towards him, and laid it on his shoulder, hiding it even there; and it was too delicious to feel her soft cheek against his, for him to wish to see either deep blushes or loving eyes. He clasped her close. But they both kept silence. At length she murmured in a broken voice:

'Oh, Mr. Thornton, I am not good enough!'

'Not good enough! Don't mock my own deep feeling of unworthiness.'

After a minute or two, he gently disengaged her hands from her face, and laid her arms as they had once before been placed to protect him from the rioters.

'Do you remember, love?' he murmured. 'And how I requited you with my insolence the next day?'

'I remember how wrongly I spoke to you – that is all.'

'Look here! Lift up your head. I have something to show you!' She slowly faced him, glowing with beautiful shame.

'Do you know these roses?' he said, drawing out his pocket-book, in which were treasured up some dead flowers.

'Did I give them to you?'

'No! Vanity; you did not. You may have worn sister roses very probably.'

She looked at them, wondering; then smiled as she said, 'They are from Helstone, are they not? I know the deep indentations round the leaves. Oh! have you been there?'

'I wanted to see the place where Margaret grew to what she is, even at the worst time of all, when I had no hope of ever calling her mine. I went there on my return from Havre.'

'You must give them to me,' she said, trying to take them out of his hand with gentle violence.

'Very well. Only you must pay me for them!'

'How shall I ever tell Aunt Shaw?' she whispered, after some time of delicious silence.

'Let me speak to her.'

'Oh, no! I owe it to her – but what will she say?'

'I can guess. Her first exclamation will be, "That man!"'

'Hush!' said Margaret, 'or I shall try and show you your mother's indignant tones as she says, "That woman!"'

The End

[The Social and Industrial Context of *North and South*](#)

Nineteenth Century Manchester

In her description of Milton, Elizabeth Gaskell drew on her knowledge of Manchester, its slums, mills, workers and industrialists. While she does not describe specific Manchester buildings or areas in the book, the city she lived in was undoubtedly her inspiration for the fictional town.

In the 50 years before the publication of *North and South* in 1854, Manchester had undergone a period of extraordinary expansion. At the time Elizabeth Gaskell was writing, its population had doubled in the previous 20 years. The definition of “Manchester” varies, as there are so many closely surrounding townships like Salford; but in 1861 the population of the Parish of Manchester was 529,245.[1]

Manchester had previously been a busy textile town, but in the 19th century it boomed with the increased mechanisation of the cotton industry. By the 1850’s the city had been nicknamed ‘Cottonopolis’; the area was the centre of the cotton spinning trade not just in England but in the world. People poured in from the surrounding countryside and from further afield, especially from Ireland, seeking for work.

The city was transformed. Not only mills were built – many of them imposing multi-storeyed buildings – but also vast Italianate warehouses and grand civic, financial and religious buildings such as the [Athenaeum](#) (now part of Manchester’s Art Gallery; this and the next two links are to images on Wikimedia Commons). Two great buildings completed in 1856 typify the Manchester style: the [Free Trade Hall](#) and the almost equally palatial [Watts Warehouse](#) (now the Britannia Hotel). In 1861 the *Building News* wrote of Manchester, ‘There has been nothing to equal it since the building of Venice.’

The obverse of this expansion was the overcrowding of existing housing and the throwing up of a multitude of substandard buildings to accommodate all the workers flooding into the city. Living conditions for the poor were cramped, squalid, poorly ventilated and frequently disease-ridden. Engels famously described the squalor of Manchester workers’ houses in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845):

‘...under the railway bridge there stands a court, the filth and horrors of which surpass all the others by far... this chaos of small one-storied, one-roomed huts, in most of which there is no artificial floor; kitchen, living and sleeping-room all in one. In such a hole, scarcely five feet long by six broad, I found two beds – and such bedsteads and beds! – which, with a staircase and chimney-place, exactly filled the room. In several others I found absolutely nothing, while the door stood open, and the inhabitants leaned against it. Everywhere before the doors refuse and offal; that any sort of pavement lay underneath could not be seen but only felt, here and there, with the feet....

‘... New houses were thrown up by the score to house the influx of workers from the countryside, surrounding towns and Ireland; yet these houses were badly designed with no thought to ventilation, sanitation or even access to clean water.’[2]

Watercourses were polluted with effluent from tanneries and human waste; pigs wandered in the streets. Meanwhile, Engels wrote, the middle classes lived comfortable separate lives –

‘...in fine, comfortable homes, passed once every half or quarter hour by omnibuses going into the city. And the finest part of the arrangement is this, that the members of this moneyed aristocracy can take the shortest road through the middle of all the labouring districts to their places of business without ever seeing that they are in the midst of the grimy misery that lurks to the right and the left.’[2]

A cholera epidemic had swept through the city in 1831-1832, and sanitary conditions improved only slowly thereafter. It was not until the 1850s that clean drinking water was piped into the city from the Longdendale reservoirs in Derbyshire (and most people had to queue at street standpipes to obtain it). TB was a major source of death, and infant mortality was high – in 1839, almost a quarter of babies died before the age of one.[3]

The mill-workers in Gaskell’s book do not live in the worst of the conditions described by Engels. Nonetheless, their ill-health, poverty and hand-to-mouth existence is made clear.

Mills and Masters

In 1782 there were only two cotton mills in Manchester. It was mechanisation that brought the town’s growth and prosperity. Early mills used water power, but steam engines began to predominate from about 1800. By this time, there were over 50 cotton-spinning firms in the town – the largest being an eight-storey mill owned by A & G Murray.

Manchester mills specialised in spinning fine yarn, which sold for high prices. By 1830, British cotton accounted for 51% of the country’s total export trade.

The industry continued to grow, booming in the middle years of the 19th century, but then began to decline slightly due to the high rents in Manchester and the difficulty of finding cheap labour. However, the spinning industry was to reach its peak volume in 1926, with over 50 million spindles at work in Greater Manchester, before the depression of the 1920’s started its more lasting decline.

Early mills concentrated on spinning rather than weaving, which was less easily mechanised. The spinning mills were often vast brick buildings of six to eight storeys, each employing hundreds or even thousands of workers. However, from the 1820s onwards, powerloom weaving became more widespread. Weaving typically took place in separate, low weaving sheds; a large shed might contain 600 looms. Some factories combined both operations in the same building but this was not common practice in Manchester mills.

John Thornton’s mill in *North and South* is certainly a spinning mill (in Chapter 12 his mother refers to the spinning operations) but it is not made clear whether weaving also takes place there. However, Nicholas Higgins refers to himself as a ‘poor weaver,’ (chapter 17), yet is able to get work in Thornton’s mill. Both spinning and weaving were skilled jobs requiring knowledge, dexterity and constant attention. Higgins refers to his neighbour Boucher as a ‘poor good-for-naught as can only

manage two looms as a time'; four was the norm. In spinning, one man, with the aid of two boys, might be in charge of 1600 spindles at once.

Many spinning mills were built in Ancoats, on the northern side of Manchester's city centre. Some still exist; a number have been converted to housing and other purposes. There is an article on these mills at The Revealing Histories website:

<http://revealinghistories.org.uk/why-was-cotton-so-important-in-north-west-england/places/cotton-mills-ancoats-manchester.html>

Work in the mills was hard. Hands were expected to work long hours (typically up to 80 hours a week) and were punished for standing idle at work, for the masters needed to maximise their output to recoup the expense of the machinery. John Thornton's employees seem to have been better off than many; in chapter 15 of *North and South* he speaks of them working 10 hours a day. Wages varied – Nicholas Higgins talks of earning 16 shillings (80 pence) a week, a fairly typical wage for a man at the time, but women and children were paid less.

As far as child employment went, conditions had improved since the early 19th century; the 1833 Factory Act ruled that no children under the age of 9 could work in factories, and working hours for older children were limited. Previous to that, even 5 year olds could be employed in mills.

The 1844 Factory Act limited working hours further, to six and a half hours a day for children under 13, and twelve hours a day for those aged 13 to 17. This Act also imposed health and safety measures; for instance, no young person could clean a machine while it was in motion – previously a major cause of injury and death. Most poor urban children did not attend school; at best they might go to Sunday school. A few 'Ragged Schools' gave poor children a very basic education; there were at least two of these in Manchester in 1853, and the Boucher children in *North and South* might be supposed to have attended such a school.

Despite the improved conditions after 1844, cotton mills were still noisy, polluting and dangerous places to work. Bessy Higgins was not unusual in suffering lung disease from inhaling cotton fibres. This condition is known as byssinosis, although exposure to fibres can also exacerbate TB, bronchitis and asthma. Eye inflammation, and deafness from the excessive noise of the machinery, were also common.

Outside the factory, smoke pollution contributed to a high level of respiratory disease in the city's population, and the fogs and smogs also played a part in the high incidence of rickets. [4] The Smoke Nuisance Abatement (Metropolis) Bill of 1853, referred to in Chapter 10 of *North and South*, was only partially successful. Smoke-reducing measures in the mills were possible (by modifying furnaces or flues) but expensive, and reduced the efficiency of boilers. Many smaller mills struggled to afford them.

Cotton manufacture was not an easy path to riches. Business troubles like John Thornton's were a common occurrence. Stephen Mosley has written:

'While the Lancashire cotton industry was the 'engine of growth' driving Britain's Industrial Revolution, textile manufacturing in the early nineteenth century was an extremely volatile and risky business. Booms and slumps characterised

economic growth during the period, and between the years 1836-42 there were no fewer than 241 bankruptcies among Manchester's cotton firms... It was said in 'Cottonopolis' that 'three men fall to every one that rises'. '[5]

Elizabeth Gaskell's mill owners, as described (and represented) by John Thornton, are men of pride, power, energy and invention, fiercely independent of London government. In chapter 10 of *North and South*, John Thornton says:

'This imagination of power, this practical realisation of a gigantic thought, came out of one man's brain in our good town. That very man has it within him to mount, step by step, on each wonder he achieves to higher marvels still. And I'll be bound to say, we have many among us who, if he were gone, could spring into the breach and carry on the war which compels, and shall compel, all material power to yield to science.'

Thornton is talking here of the inventor of the steam hammer; and Elizabeth Gaskell most probably had in mind the engineer James Nasmyth. A Scot born in 1808, Nasmyth formed a business partnership with Holbrook Gaskell, the cousin of Elizabeth's husband. Together they set up the Bridgwater Foundry near Manchester, where they built the first steam hammer in Britain. This was used in the forging of especially large machine parts. As well as the steam hammer, Nasmyth invented the pile-driver, widely used in construction.

As John Thornton goes on to say in the book, his eulogy of Manchester's talent was no boast; it was a matter of fact. Manchester at the time was a magnet for innovative and influential engineers – for example, Joseph Whitworth, maker of precision machine tools; Richard Roberts, who developed the cast iron powerloom; and Eaton Hodgkinson, whose iron beams made possible the construction of larger and safer factories.

John Thornton's 'many among us' could also include William Fairbairn, a Scot and friend of the Gaskells who moved to Manchester in 1813. An eminent engineer who built locomotives, bridges and factory boilers, he was in addition a mill-wright and an enlightened employer, with over 2000 hands employed at his works on Canal Street in the 1840s. He gave his workers a nine-hour day, unasked (at other places they might be working 14 hours a day, 6 days a week) and introduced innovations for safer and faster working.

He was not the only mill-owner whom Elizabeth Gaskell may have drawn on for her book. She was friendly with the Greg family, who owned several mills in the area including Quarry Bank Mill at Styal, Cheshire. Samuel Greg had built a model village for his workers at Styal (18 km south of Manchester): both village and factory now belong to the National Trust and provide a fascinating insight into mills and workers' conditions.

(<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/quarry-bank>)

Although the Gregs built their house close to their mill at Quarry Bank, living next to the factory (as John Thornton does in the novel) seems to have been unusual. Manchester mill-owners tended to live out of town in villages like Alderley Edge, especially after the construction of railway lines through Cheshire in the 1840's.

About the factory masters of this time, Boyd Hilton has written:

‘For every tyrannical and philistine Josiah Bounderby [in Dickens’ *Hard Times*] there was probably a John Thornton, honest, responsible, and caring of his workforce... these textile masters... were mainly second and third generation entrepreneurs whose political time had come.

‘The 1832 Reform Act ensured them a parliamentary vote, the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 handed them control over local government, and the movement for the repeal of the Corn Laws provided cohesion and a sense of irresistible righteousness.

‘Politically they were divided (with a modest preponderance towards the Liberal Party), and they differed on most issues other than free trade.... Even so, they were broadly at one in their basic values. They had no desire to overthrow the existing political system, being conscious of their growing muscle within it.... they bristled with civic pride and municipal responsibility...

‘The cotton masters equally resisted metropolitanization. South Lancashire and North Cheshire formed their world, a cohesive world within which they mainly intermarried and were culturally self-sufficient.’ [6]

Trade Unions and Strikes

In the early 19th century Manchester was famous (or notorious) for its radical politics and the strength of its working class movements. The city was a centre for Chartism; the Charter demanded a vote for every man over 21, along with other proposals to ensure a fair and democratic parliamentary system. At the time only about one in seven men – those with sufficient property – could vote. After a mass demonstration in 1848 in London, the Chartism movement declined, so that it was no longer such a powerful force when Elizabeth Gaskell was writing *North and South*. Her strikers demand only fair pay rather than electoral reform – unlike the strikers of the 1842 General Strike (see below), who turned out for the Charter as well as for better wages.

Throughout the first half of the century, trade unions had been gaining strength. The unions began as clubs of cotton spinners and other skilled workers in the 1790’s. In 1810 there was a strike of cotton spinners, and subsequently more formal organisation of the unions was attempted to defend the rights of working men.

At the time of Elizabeth Gaskell’s book the unions were still in flux and not yet the great national institutions they were to become, but they had considerable and growing local influence. In 1854, the year of *North and South*’s serialisation, a ‘Trades Defence Association of Manchester’ was set up; and in the same year the Chartist Ernest Jones organised a ‘Labour Parliament’ General Assembly in Manchester, with 40 to 50 delegates attending. In 1868 the first Trades Union Congress would be held in the city.

The General Strike of 1842, which swept through Manchester and other industrial centres, was probably used by Elizabeth Gaskell for her descriptions of the strike in *North and South*. The 1842 strike was sparked when cotton-masters announced that they would be reducing workers’ wages by 25 % because of poor trading conditions. As many as 20,000 workers gathered in Ashton and Stalybridge and marched through Manchester, turning out mills and factories along the way. At first the crowd was generally well-ordered, but there were violent incidents on both

sides; for instance, when one mill-owner turned hosepipes on the marchers, they retaliated by using lumps of coal to smash the windows. A police station was ransacked and shops were raided for food. The violence increased when the police confronted the marchers with truncheons, and were attacked with stones, until the police eventually ran off. [7]

Dissenters

In *North and South*, Margaret Hale and her family move north because her father, a parson, decides that he can no longer be a member of the Anglican Church, and so resigns from his Hampshire parish to take up a job tutoring in a distant city.

People who disagreed with the established Church and its doctrines were known as Dissenters, a broad term which included Quakers, Baptists and Unitarians. As a Dissenter in the novel, Mr. Hale would have felt unable to subscribe to all the tenets of the Anglican Church – known as the Thirty-Nine Articles. These included such doctrines as belief in original sin, the holy trinity, and the idea that Christ went down into Hell and was resurrected.

At this time, Anglican Ministers were required to swear loyalty to the Thirty-Nine Articles; and students could not attend Oxford or Cambridge Universities without making a similar oath. Mr. Hale was thus barred from taking up any post in his old Oxford College. A move north made sense for him not just because of his wish to go as far as possible from his old parish, but because Dissenters had strong support in the North of England. Manchester had many dissenting churches.

As a child, Elizabeth Gaskell attended both a Unitarian chapel and Anglican Church. Her husband William was himself a Dissenter, a Unitarian minister. However, in *North and South*, Margaret Hale's sympathies remain with the Anglican Church. The author was even-handed in this as in other aspects of her novel.

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