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Chapter I

“Haste to the Wedding”

*Wooed and married and a’.**

“EDITH!” SAID MARGARET gently. “Edith!”

But, as Margaret half suspected, Edith had fallen asleep. She lay curled up on the sofa in the back 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 damask sofa in a back 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, and all along Edith had been remarked upon by everyone, except Margaret, for her prettiness; but Margaret had never thought about it until the last few days, when the prospect of soon losing her companion seemed to give force to every sweet quality and charm which Edith possessed. They had been talking about wedding dresses and wedding ceremonies; and Captain Lennox, and what he had told Edith about her 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), and what gowns she should want in the visits to Scotland, which would immediately succeed her marriage; but the whispered tone had latterly become more drowsy; and Margaret, after a pause of a few minutes, found, as she fancied, that in spite of the buzz in the next room, Edith had rolled herself up into a soft ball of muslin and ribbon, and silken curls, and gone off into a peaceful little after-dinner nap.

Margaret had been on the point of telling her cousin of some of the plans and visions which she entertained as to her 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 considered as her home. But in default of a listener, she had to brood over the change in her life silently as heretofore. It was a happy brooding, although tinged with regret at being separated for an indefinite time from her gentle aunt and dear cousin. As she thought of the delight of filling the important post of only daughter in Helstone Parsonage, pieces of the conversation out of the next room came upon her ears. Her Aunt Shaw was talking to the five or six ladies who had been dining there, and whose husbands were still in the dining room. They were the familiar acquaintances of the house, neighbours whom Mrs Shaw called friends, because she happened to dine with them more frequently than with any other people, and because if she or Edith wanted anything from them, or they from her, they did not scruple to make a call at each other's houses before luncheon. These ladies and their husbands were invited, in their capacity of friends, to eat a farewell dinner in honour of Edith's approaching marriage. Edith had rather objected to this arrangement, for Captain Lennox was expected to arrive by a late train this very evening; but, although she was a spoilt child, she was too careless and idle to have a very strong will of her own, and gave way when she found that her mother had absolutely ordered those extra delicacies of the season which are always supposed to be efficacious against immoderate grief at farewell dinners. She contented herself by leaning back in her chair, merely playing with the food on her plate, and looking grave and absent; while all around her were enjoying the mots of Mr Grey, the gentleman who always took the bottom of the table at Mrs Shaw's dinner parties, and asked Edith to give them some music in the drawing room. Mr Grey was particularly agreeable over this farewell dinner, and the gentlemen stayed downstairs longer than usual. It was very well they did – to judge from the fragments of conversation which Margaret overheard.

“I suffered too much myself; not that I was not extremely happy with the poor dear General, but still disparity of age is a drawback; one that I was resolved Edith should not have to encounter. Of course, without any maternal partiality, I foresaw that the dear child was likely to marry early; indeed, I had often said that I was sure she would be married before she was nineteen. 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 given way to the presentiment, as she expressed it, and had rather urged on the marriage, although it was below the expectations which many of Edith's acquaintances had formed for her, a 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. Mrs Shaw enjoyed the romance of the present engagement rather more than her daughter. Not but that Edith was very thoroughly and properly in love; still she would certainly have preferred a good house in Belgravia to all the picturesqueness of the life which Captain Lennox described at Corfu. The very parts which made Margaret glow as she listened, Edith pretended to shiver and shudder at, partly for the pleasure she had in being coaxed out of her dislike by her fond lover, and partly because anything of a gypsy or makeshift life was really distasteful to her. Yet had anyone come with a fine house, and a fine estate, and a fine title to boot, Edith would still have clung to Captain Lennox while the temptation lasted; when it was over, it is possible she might have had little qualms of ill-concealed regret that Captain Lennox could not have united in his person everything that was desirable. In this she was but her mother's child, who, after deliberately marrying General Shaw with no warmer feeling than respect for his character and establishment, 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 to me, but which I shall never wear again.”

“She is a lucky girl,” replied another voice, which Margaret knew to be that of Mrs Gibson, a lady who was taking a double interest in the conversation from the fact of one of her daughters having been married within the last few weeks. “Helen had set her heart upon an Indian shawl, but really when I found what an extravagant price was asked, I was obliged to refuse her. She will be quite envious when she hears of Edith having Indian shawls. What kind are they? Delhi? With the lovely little borders?”

Margaret heard her aunt's voice again, but this time it was as if she had raised herself up from her half-recumbent position and were looking into the more dimly lighted back drawing room. "Edith! Edith!" cried she, and then she sank as if wearied by the exertion. Margaret stepped forward.

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

All the ladies said "Poor child!" on receiving this distressing intelligence about Edith, and the minute lapdog in Mrs Shaw's arms began to bark as if excited by the burst of pity.

"Hush, Tiny! You naughty little 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 very top of the house, where Newton was busy getting up some laces which were required for the wedding. While Newton went (not without a muttered grumbling) to undo the shawls, which had already been exhibited four or five times that day, Margaret looked round upon the nursery; 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 and ceremonious 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 below an infinite depth of stairs, for unless she were up in the sky (the child thought), they must be deep down in the bowels of the earth. At home – before she came to live in Harley Street – her mother's dressing room had been her nursery; and, as they kept early hours in the country parsonage, 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 bedclothes, in that first night; and how she was bidden not to cry by the nurse, because it would disturb Miss Edith; and how she had cried as bitterly, but more quietly, till her newly seen, grand, pretty aunt had come softly upstairs with Mr Hale to show him his little sleeping daughter. Then the little

Margaret had hushed her sobs, and tried to lie quiet as if asleep, for fear of making her father unhappy by her grief, which she dared not express before her aunt, and which she rather thought it was wrong to feel at all after the long hoping, and planning, and contriving they had gone through at home, before her wardrobe could be arranged so as to suit her grander circumstances, and before Papa could leave his parish to come up to London, even for a few days.

Now she had got to love the old nursery, though it was but a dismantled place, and she looked all round with a kind of cat-like regret at the idea of leaving it for ever in three days.

“Ah, Newton!” said she. “I think we shall all be sorry to leave this dear old room.”

“Indeed, miss, I shan’t for one. My eyes are not so good as they were, and the light here is so bad that I can’t see to mend laces except just at the window, where there’s always a shocking draught – enough to give one one’s death of cold.”

“Well, I dare say you will have both good light and plenty of warmth at Naples. You must keep as much of your darning as you can till then. Thank you, Newton, I can take them down – you’re busy.”

So Margaret went down laden with shawls, and snuffing up their spicy Eastern smell. Her aunt asked her to stand as a sort of lay figure on which to display them, as Edith was still asleep. No one thought about it, but Margaret’s tall, finely made figure, in the black silk dress which she was wearing as mourning for some distant relative of her father’s, set off the long, beautiful folds of the gorgeous shawls that would have half-smothered Edith. Margaret stood right 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 over the chimney piece, and smiled at her own appearance there – the familiar features in the usual garb of a princess. She touched the shawls gently as they hung around her, and took a pleasure in their soft feel and their brilliant colours, and rather liked to be dressed in such splendour – enjoying it much as a child would do, with a quiet, pleased smile on her lips. Just then the door opened, and Mr Henry Lennox was suddenly announced. Some of the ladies started back, as if half-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 as a sort of block for the shawls, but looking at Mr Lennox with a bright, amused face, as if sure of his sympathy in her sense of the ludicrousness at being thus surprised.

Her aunt was so much absorbed in asking Mr Henry Lennox – who had not been able to come to dinner – all sorts of questions about his brother the bridegroom, his sister the bridesmaid (coming with the Captain from Scotland for the occasion) and various other members of the Lennox family, that Margaret saw she was no more wanted as shawl-bearer, and devoted herself to the amusement of the other visitors, whom her aunt had for the moment forgotten. Almost immediately, Edith came in from the back drawing room, winking and blinking her eyes at the stronger light, shaking back her slightly ruffled curls and altogether looking like the Sleeping Beauty just startled from her dreams. Even in her slumber she had instinctively felt that a Lennox was worth rousing herself for, and she had a multitude of questions to ask about dear Janet, the future, unseen sister-in-law, for whom she professed so much affection that if Margaret had not been very proud she might have almost felt jealous of the mushroom rival. As Margaret sank rather more into the background on her aunt's joining the conversation, she saw Henry Lennox directing his look towards a vacant seat near her; and she knew perfectly well that as soon as Edith released him from her questioning, he would take possession of that chair. She had not been quite sure, from her aunt's rather confused account of his engagements, whether he would come that night; it was almost a surprise to see him; and now she was sure of a pleasant evening. He liked and disliked pretty nearly the same things that she did. Margaret's face was lightened up into an honest, open brightness. By and by he came. She received him with a smile which had not a tinge of shyness or self-consciousness in it.

“Well, I suppose you are all in the depths of business – ladies' business, I mean. Very different to my business, which is the real true law business. Playing with shawls is very different work to drawing up settlements.”

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

"I have no doubt they are. Their prices are very perfect, too. Nothing wanting."

The gentlemen came dropping in one by one, and the buzz and noise deepened in tone.

"This is your last dinner party, is it not? There are no more before Thursday?"

"No. I think after this evening we shall feel at rest, which I am sure I have not done for many weeks; at least, that kind of rest when the hands have nothing more to do, and all the arrangements are complete for an event which must occupy one's head and heart. 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 more than a month past, "I wonder if a marriage must always be preceded by what you call a whirlwind, or whether in some cases there might not rather be a calm and peaceful time just before it."

"Cinderella's godmother ordering the trousseau, the wedding-breakfast, writing the notes of invitation, for instance," said Mr Lennox, laughing.

"But are all these quite necessary troubles?" asked Margaret, looking up straight at him for an answer. A sense of indescribable weariness of all the arrangements for a pretty effect, in which Edith had been busied as supreme authority for the last six weeks, oppressed her just now, and she really wanted someone to help her to a few pleasant, quiet ideas connected with a marriage.

"Oh, of course," he replied with a change to gravity in his tone. "There are forms and ceremonies to be gone through, not so much to satisfy oneself, as to stop the world's mouth, without which stoppage there would be very little satisfaction in life. But how would you have a wedding arranged?"

"Oh, I have never thought much about it; only I should like it to be a very fine summer morning; and I should like to walk to church through

the shade of trees; and not to have so many bridesmaids, and to have no wedding-breakfast. I dare say I am resolving against the very things that have given me the most trouble just now.”

“No, I don’t think you are. The idea of stately simplicity accords well with your character.”

Margaret did not quite like this speech; she winced away from it more from remembering former occasions on which he had tried to lead her into a discussion (in which he took the complimentary part) about her own character and ways of going on. She cut his speech rather short by saying:

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

“Tell me about Helstone. You have never described it to me. I should like to have some idea of the place you will be living in when ninety-six Harley Street will be looking dingy and dirty, and dull, and shut up. Is Helstone a village, or a town, in the first place?”

“Oh, only a hamlet; I don’t think I could call it a village at all. There is the church and a few houses near it 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. You should not have said that.”

“I am penitent,” he answered. “Only it really sounded like a village in a tale rather than in real life.”

“And so it is,” replied Margaret eagerly. “All the other places in England that I have seen seem so hard and prosaic-looking after the New Forest. Helstone is like a village in a poem – in one of Tennyson’s poems. But I won’t try and describe it any more. You would only laugh at me if I told you what I think of it – what it really is.”

“Indeed, I would not. But I see you are going to be very resolved. Well, then, tell me that which I should like still better to know: what the parsonage is like.”

“Oh, I can’t describe my home. 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 round 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 both, the latter especially.”

“But indeed I cannot tell you about my own home. I don’t quite think it is a thing to be talked about, unless you knew it.”

“Well, then” – pausing for a moment – “tell me what you do there. Here you read, or have lessons, or otherwise improve your mind, till the middle of the day, take a walk before lunch, go on a drive with your aunt after and have some kind of engagement in the evening. There, now fill up your day at Helstone. Shall you ride, drive or walk?”

“Walk, decidedly. We have no horse, not even for Papa. He walks to the very extremity of his parish. The walks are so beautiful, it would be a shame to drive – almost a shame to ride.”

“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 – race balls – 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 employ yourself in.”

“I hope you will. Then you will see for yourself how beautiful Helstone is. Now I must go. Edith is sitting down to play, and I just know enough of music to turn over the leaves for her; and besides, 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 hesitating whether to come in. She threw down her music and rushed out of the room, leaving Margaret standing confused and blushing to explain to the astonished guests what vision

had shown itself to cause Edith's sudden flight. Captain Lennox had come earlier than was 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. His brother shook hands with him, and Mrs Shaw welcomed him in her gentle, kindly way, which had always something plaintive in it, arising from the long habit of considering herself a victim to an uncongenial marriage. Now that, the General being gone, she had every good of life, with as few drawbacks as possible, she had been rather perplexed to find an anxiety, if not a sorrow. She had, however, of late settled upon her own 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. Mrs Shaw had as strong wishes as most people, but she never liked to do anything from the open and acknowledged motive of her own goodwill and pleasure; she preferred being compelled to gratify herself by some other person's command or desire. She really did persuade herself that she was submitting to some hard external necessity, and thus she was able to moan and complain in her soft manner, all the time she was in reality doing just what she liked.

It was in this way she began to speak of her own journey to Captain Lennox, who assented, as in duty bound, to all his future mother-in-law said, while his eyes sought Edith, who was busying herself in rearranging the tea table and ordering up all sorts of good things, 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 close by his handsome brother; he was the plain one in a singularly good-looking family, but his face was intelligent, keen and mobile; and now and then Margaret wondered what it was that he could be thinking about, while he kept silence, but was evidently observing, with an interest that was slightly sarcastic, all that Edith and she were doing. The sarcastic feeling was called out by Mrs Shaw's conversation with his brother; it was separate from the interest which was excited by what he saw. He thought it a pretty sight to see the two cousins so busy in their little arrangements about the table.

Edith chose to do most herself. She was in a humour to enjoy showing her lover how well she could behave as a soldier's wife. She found out that the water in the urn was cold, and ordered up the great kitchen tea-kettle, the only consequence of which was that when she met it at the door, and tried to carry it in, it was too heavy for her, 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 took to show 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 the most efficacious contrivance, though not so like the gypsy encampment which Edith, in some of her moods, chose to consider the nearest resemblance to a barrack life.

After this evening all was bustle till the wedding was over.

Chapter II

Roses and Thorns

*By the soft green light in the woody glade,
On the banks of moss where thy childhood played;
By the household tree, thro' which thine eye
First looked in love to the summer sky.*

MRS HEMANS*

MARGARET WAS ONCE MORE in her morning dress, travelling quietly home with her father, who had come up to assist at the wedding. Her mother had been detained at home by a multitude of half-reasons, none of which anybody fully understood, except Mr Hale, who was perfectly aware that all his arguments in favour of a grey satin gown, which was midway between oldness and newness, had proved unavailing; and that, as he had not the money to equip his wife afresh, from top to toe, she would not show herself at her only sister's only child'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; but it was nearly twenty years since Mrs Shaw had been the poor, pretty Miss Beresford, and she had really forgotten all grievances except that of the unhappiness arising from disparity of age in married life, on which she could descant by the half-hour. Dearest Maria had married the man of her heart, only eight years older than herself, with the sweetest temper, and that blue-black hair one so seldom sees. Mr Hale was one of the most delightful preachers she had ever heard, and a perfect model of a parish priest. Perhaps it was not quite a logical deduction from all these premises, but it was still Mrs Shaw's characteristic conclusion, as she thought over her sister's lot: "Married for love, what can dearest Maria have to wish for in this world?" Mrs Hale, if she spoke truth, might have answered with a ready-made list, "a silver-grey glacé silk, a white chip

bonnet, oh! 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 to think that their meeting and greeting would take place at Helstone Parsonage, rather than, during the confusion of the last two or three days, in the house in Harley Street, where she herself had had to play the part of Figaro, and was wanted everywhere at one and the same time.* Her mind and body ached now with the recollection of all she had done and said within the last forty-eight hours. The farewells so hurriedly taken, amongst all the other goodbyes, of those she had lived with so long, oppressed her now with a sad regret for the times that were no more; it did not signify what those times had been, they were gone never to return. Margaret’s heart felt more heavy than she could ever have thought it possible in going to her own dear home, the place and the life she had longed for for years – at that time of all times for yearning and longing, just before the sharp senses lose their outlines in sleep. She took her mind away with a wrench from the recollection of the past to the bright, serene contemplation of the hopeful future. Her eyes began to see not visions of what had been, but the sight actually before her: her dear father leaning back asleep in the railway carriage. His blue-black hair was grey now, and lay thinly over his brows. The bones of his face were plainly to be seen – too plainly for beauty, if his features had been less finely cut; as it was, they had a grace if not a comeliness of their own. The face was in repose, but it was rather rest after weariness than the serene calm of the countenance of one who led a placid, contented life. Margaret was painfully struck by the worn, anxious expression; and she went back over the open and avowed circumstances of her father’s life to find the cause for the lines that spoke so plainly of habitual distress and depression.

“Poor Frederick!” thought she, sighing. “Oh! If Frederick had but been a clergyman, instead of going into the navy, and being lost to us all! 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 be at hand to comfort him and Mamma.”

She was ready with a bright smile, in which there was not a trace of fatigue, to greet her father when he awakened. He smiled back again, but faintly, as if it were an unusual exertion. His face returned into its lines of habitual anxiety. He had a trick of half-opening his mouth as if to speak, which constantly unsettled the form of the lips, and gave the face an undecided expression. But he had the same large, soft eyes as his daughter – eyes which moved slowly and almost grandly round in their orbits, and were well veiled by their transparent white eyelids. 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 regularly beautiful; not beautiful at all, was occasionally said. Her mouth was wide; no rosebud that could only open just enough to let out a “yes” and “no” and “an’t please you, sir”. But the wide mouth was one soft curve of rich red lips, and the skin, if not white and fair, was of 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 bright as the morning – full of dimples, and glances that spoke of childish gladness, and boundless hope in the future.

It was the latter part of July when Margaret returned home. The forest trees were all one dark, full, dusky green; the ferns below them caught all the slanting sunbeams; the weather was sultry and broodingly still. Margaret used to tramp along by her father’s side, crushing down the fern with a cruel glee as she felt it yield under her light foot and send up the fragrance peculiar to it, out on the broad commons into the warm, scented light, seeing multitudes of wild, free living creatures, revelling in the sunshine, and the herbs and flowers it called forth. This life – at least these walks – realized all Margaret’s anticipations. She took a pride in her forest. Its people were her people. She made hearty friends with them, learnt and delighted in using their peculiar words, took up her freedom amongst them, nursed their babies, talked or read with slow distinctness to their old people, carried dainty messes to their sick, resolved before long to teach at the school, where her father went every day as to an appointed task, but she was continually tempted off to go and see some individual friend – man, woman or child – in some cottage in the green shade of the forest. Her outdoor life was perfect. Her

indoor life had its drawbacks. With the healthy shame of a child, she blamed herself for her keenness of sight in perceiving that all was not as it should be there. Her mother – her mother always so kind and tender towards her – seemed now and then so much discontented with their situation, thought that the bishop strangely neglected his episcopal duties in not giving Mr Hale a better living and almost reproached her husband because he could not bring himself to say that he wished to leave the parish and undertake the charge of a larger. He would sigh aloud as he answered 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. At each repeated urgency of his wife that he would put himself in the way of seeking some preferment, Margaret saw that her father shrank more and more; and she strove at such times to reconcile her mother to Helstone. Mrs Hale said that the near neighbourhood of so many trees affected her health, and Margaret would try to tempt her forth on to the beautiful, broad, upland, sun-streaked, cloud-shadowed common, for she was sure that her mother had accustomed herself too much to an indoor life, seldom extending her walks beyond the church, the school and the neighbouring cottages. This did good for a time, but when the autumn drew on, and the weather became more changeable, her mother's idea of the unhealthiness of the place increased, and she repined even more frequently that her husband, who was more learned than Mr Hume, a better parish priest than Mr Houldsworth, should not have met with the preferment that these two former neighbours of theirs had done.

This marring of the peace of home by long hours of discontent was what Margaret was unprepared for. She knew, and had rather revelled in the idea, that she should have to give up many luxuries which had only been troubles and trammels to her freedom in Harley Street. Her keen enjoyment of every sensuous pleasure was balanced finely, if not over-balanced, by her conscious pride in being able to do without them all, if need were. But the cloud never comes in that quarter of the horizon from which we watch for it. There had been slight complaints and passing regrets on her mother's part over some trifle connected with Helstone, and her father's position there, when Margaret had been

spending her holidays at home before, but in the general happiness of the recollection of those times, she had forgotten the small details which were not so pleasant.

In the latter half of September, the autumnal rains and storms came on, and Margaret was obliged to remain more in the house than she had hitherto done. Helstone was at some distance from any neighbours of their own standard of cultivation.

"It is undoubtedly one of the most out-of-the-way places in England," said Mrs Hale, in one of her plaintive moods. "I can't help regretting constantly that Papa has really no one to associate with here; he is so thrown away; seeing no one but farmers and labourers from week's end to week's end. If we only lived at the other side of the parish, it would be something; there we should be almost within walking distance of the Stansfields; certainly the Gormans would be within a walk."

"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 at Mr Hume's.

"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, as they call them. 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."

"Very well. Coach-building is a trade all the same, and I think 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, as she crossed some heath, she seemed to be borne onwards, as lightly and easily as the fallen leaf that

was wafted along by the autumnal 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 discouraged her husband, very early in their married life, in his desire of reading aloud to her while she worked. At one time they had tried backgammon as a resource, but as Mr Hale grew to take an increasing interest in his school and his parishioners, he found that the interruptions which arose out of these duties were regarded as hardships by his wife, not to be accepted as the natural conditions of his profession, but to be regretted and struggled against by her as they severally arose. So he withdrew, while the children were yet young, into his library to spend his evenings (if he were 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 governess, and had found the summer's day all too short to get through the reading she had to do before her return to town. Now there were only the well-bound little-read English classics, which were weeded out of her father's library to fill up the small bookshelves in the drawing room. Thomson's *Seasons*, Hayley's *Cowper*, Middleton's *Cicero** were by far the lightest, newest and most amusing. The bookshelves did not afford much resource. Margaret told her mother every particular of her London life, to all of which Mrs Hale listened with interest, sometimes amused and questioning, at others a little inclined to compare her sister's circumstances of ease and comfort 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 upon the leads of the little bow window. Once or twice Margaret found herself mechanically counting the repetition of the monotonous sound, while she wondered if she might venture to put 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 a consciousness that her mother's delicate health, and positive dislike to Helstone, all dated from the time of the mutiny in which Frederick had been engaged – the full account of which Margaret had never heard, and which now seemed doomed to be

buried in sad oblivion – made her pause and turn away from the subject each time she approached it. When she was with her mother, her father seemed the best person to apply to for information; and when with him, she thought that she could speak more easily to her mother. Probably there was nothing much to be heard that was new. In one of the letters she had received before leaving 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 to her; which was dry bones, but not the living intelligence she longed for. Frederick was always spoken of, in the rare times when his name was mentioned, as “Poor Frederick”. His room was kept exactly as he had left it, and was regularly dusted and put into order by Dixon, Mrs Hale’s maid, who touched no other part of the household work, but always remembered the day when she had been engaged by Lady Beresford as ladies’ maid to Sir John’s wards, the pretty Miss Beresfords, the belles of Rutlandshire. Dixon had always considered Mr Hale as the blight which had fallen upon her young lady’s prospects in life. 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 with her, and was devoted to her interests; always considering herself as the good and protecting fairy, whose duty it was to baffle the malignant giant, Mr Hale. Master Frederick had been her favourite and pride; and it was with a little softening of her dignified look and manner that she went in weekly to arrange the chamber as carefully as if he might be coming home that very evening.

Margaret could not help believing that there had been some late intelligence of Frederick, unknown to her mother, which was making her father anxious and uneasy. Mrs Hale did not seem to perceive any alteration in her husband’s looks or ways. His spirits were always tender and gentle, readily affected by any small piece of intelligence concerning the welfare of others. He would be depressed for many days after witnessing a deathbed, or hearing of any crime. But now Margaret noticed an absence of mind, as if his thoughts were preoccupied by some subject, the oppression of which could not be relieved by any daily action, such

as comforting the survivors, or teaching at the school in hope of lessening the evils in the generation to come. Mr Hale did not go out among his parishioners as much as usual; he was more shut up in his study; was anxious for the village postman, whose summons to the household was a rap on the back-kitchen window shutter – a signal which at one time had often to be repeated before anyone was sufficiently alive to the hour of the day to understand what it was and attend to him. Now Mr Hale loitered about the garden if the morning was fine, and if not, stood dreamily by the study window until the postman had called, or gone down the lane, giving a half-respectful, half-confidential shake of the head to the parson, who watched him away beyond the sweet-briar hedge and past the great arbutus, before 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 apprehension not absolutely based on a knowledge of facts is easily banished for a time by a bright, sunny day, or some happy outward circumstance. And when the brilliant fourteen 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, into which Margaret had only peeped in July and August weather. She had learnt drawing with Edith; and she had sufficiently regretted, during the gloom of the bad weather, her idle revelling in the beauty of the woodlands while it had yet been fine, to make her determined to sketch what she could before winter fairly set in. Accordingly, she was busy preparing her board one morning, when Sarah, the housemaid, threw wide open the drawing-room door, and announced, "Mr Henry Lennox."

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