Elizabeth Gaskell

ELIZABETH GASKELL

North and South

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Jenny Uglow

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NORTH AND SOUTH

Elizabeth Gaskell was born on 29 September 1810 in London. She was brought up in Knutsford, Cheshire by her aunt after her mother died when she was two years old. In 1832 she married William Gaskell, a Unitarian minister, and they lived in Manchester with their children. Elizabeth Gaskell published her first novel, *Mary Barton*, in 1848 to great success. She went on to write for Charles Dickens's magazine, *Household Words* where the *Cranford* stories appeared from 1851–3. As well as short stories and her famous *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), she published five novels including *North and South* (1855). Her final novel, *Wives and Daughters* (1866), is unfinished as Elizabeth Gaskell died suddenly of heart failure on 12 November 1865.

OTHER WORKS BY ELIZABETH GASKELL

Novels

Mary Barton

Ruth

Cranford

Sylvia’s Lovers

Wives and Daughters

Collected Short Stories

The Moorland Cottage

Lizzie Leigh and Other Tales

Round the Sofa

Right at Last and Other Tales

A Dark Night’s Work

Cousin Phillis and Other Tales

The Grey Woman and Other Tales

Non-Fiction

The Life of Charlotte Brontë

Introduction

In the 1850s, Manchester dignitaries were bursting with pride: their town had fine streets and shops and their leading manufacturers lived far from the smoke, in grand villas with ballrooms and conservatories crammed with exotic plants. Manchester could claim to be the manufacturing capital of Britain, and, beyond that, a centre of culture. Dickens and Thackeray spoke at the opening of the Free Library in 1852, and five years later the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition drew visitors from around the world. A few years before, in his novel *Coningsby*, Disraeli had described the town as ‘as great a human exploit as Athens’. But when guests from the South came to stay here with the Gaskells, they were more curious about the ‘other Manchester’ – the world of mills and looms, crashing steam hammers, slums and cellar dwellings clustering in its heart like the circles of hell. Outsiders sensed a dangerous energy, repressed and seething, a potential for conflict between masters and men, a threatening rustle rising like a storm from sites of despair, poverty and exploitation. They admired, but they were also afraid.

In *North and South*, published in 1854, Elizabeth Gaskell explored this fear and fascination in a dramatic, confrontational love story, an industrial re-writing of *Pride and Prejudice*. A series of conflicting ideals are explored through the fraught romance between Margaret Hale, who has moved, reluctantly, from her rose-covered southern rectory to the bleak streets of Milton, and John Thornton, a powerful young manufacturer, as downright – and prickly –

as his name suggests. Like Margaret, Gaskell herself had come to Manchester as a young woman, when she married William Gaskell, the junior minister of Cross Street Unitarian chapel. She understood the dizzying impact of the town, the bustling, physical presence of the crowds, especially the independent mill girls who thronged the pavements, just as she describes them in *North and South*, ‘rushing along, with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughs and jests’. Her husband’s congregation included professional men, bankers and mill-owners, but the Unitarian spirit was radical and reforming and through William’s work Gaskell also saw the suffering in the slums, and met the hardworking factory workers and artisans who won her admiration and affection.

She felt for these people when depressions in the cotton trade forced factories to close or work half time, denying families a living and putting children at risk of starvation. In her first novel, *Mary Barton* – written partly as therapy after the death of her ten-month-old son, and published anonymously in 1848 – the heroine’s father is driven to despair after watching children die. Pushed still further by the failure of the Chartist petitions, John Barton draws the fatal lot to murder a young mill-owner. The novel was born, Gaskell said, from her deep sympathy with the people who elbowed her daily in the streets. She wanted merely ‘to give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people’. She gave the poor a voice. Her picture of their plight was a revelation, more effective than any parliamentary reports, but many manufacturers were outraged, feeling sorely misrepresented and complaining of her bias towards the poor.

Gaskell was a daring, pioneering writer, determined to speak out against injustice. In 1851 she upset the public in a different way with *Ruth*, the first novel to feature a young woman with an illegitimate child as a heroine. Members of

William's congregation were horrified and two concerned fathers of families actually burnt it. 'I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it,' she lamented to a friend, 'I do so manage to shock people.' After braving the storms of criticism she took refuge in a return to the rural calm of her childhood with her *Cranford* stories. These were written for Dickens's *Household Magazine*, and Dickens, who recognised her power as a great story-teller – calling her 'my dear Scheherazade' – then persuaded her to try her hand at a novel, which he would serialise.

North and South was the result. It was not written directly to make amends for *Mary Barton* – Gaskell stuck to the 'truth' of that vision – but it was in some senses a conciliatory book, designed to show that manufacturers were not all despots. Several manufacturers whom she knew had experimented with benevolent schemes, with varying success, like Samuel Greg of the Styal cotton-spinning factory, and Salis Schwabe, a calico printer who had built an industrial village. In London in 1853 she visited Spottiswoode's printing works, where masters and workers ate together, shared prayers and went on outings. This sounds paternalistic, and indeed it was, but it was better, in Gaskell's eyes, than the harsh, rigid attitudes she found in most workplaces. Her hero John Thornton must learn to be 'tender and yet a master'.

We can see from the start that Thornton's progress will be hard, chiefly because he feels that each man must be strong, and stand alone, but also because of his background. His widowed mother is stiff and fierce, living in her room above the mill, with its shrouded chairs, glittering mirrors and unread books, a room that feels 'as if no one had been in it since the day when the furniture had been bagged up with as much care as if the house was to be overwhelmed with lava, and discovered a thousand years hence'. Damaged by the past, she wants to guard her

son against eruptions of the workers – but also against the smouldering passions of love.

The novel’s power comes from its intensely physical evocation of attitudes and relationships. Gaskell makes a plea for tolerance, and for the introduction of a softer, ‘Southern’ ethic, by showing us men and women as distinct individuals, rather than as types or members of a class. She brings out the emotions – like parental love – that she feels all people share, regardless of their status or wealth. At the level of feeling we are all equal, even in the workplace: one of her favourite quotations, which shimmers in the background of this book, is from Wordsworth’s poem ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’ – ‘we have all of us one human heart.’ She takes this insistence on our fundamental equality further, down to our basic physical needs. As Margaret’s godfather Mr Bell puts it, ‘the philosopher and idiot, publican and pharisee, all eat after the same fashion – given an equally good digestion. There’s theory for theory for you!’ This vivid, sensual apprehension of the body undercuts artificial divisions of class or faith, and also challenges those institutions which treat men as ciphers, pieces of machinery, tools to do a job, whether it be the navy – as Margaret’s brother Frederick finds out – or Thornton’s mill. We see into the mental as well as physical world of the mill, for example, when Bessy Higgins, whom Margaret has befriended, tells her why the factory owners take so little care to get rid of the fluff that has now invaded her lungs, and how the workers sometimes stubbornly collude with them:

> ‘Some folk have a great wheel at one end o’ their carding-rooms to make a draught, and carry off the dust; but that wheel costs a deal o’ money – five or six hundred pound, maybe, and brings in no profit: so it’s but a few of th’ masters as will put ’em up:

> and I've heard tell o' men who didn't like working in places where there was a wheel, because they said as how it made 'em hungry, as 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.'

Thinking only of their profits, the mill-owners find it easier to ignore human need – the pangs of hunger, the need to breathe freely – if they see their workers merely as 'hands'. One tiny detail shows how Gaskell makes potent physical images flow through the book, underpinning her argument. In the romantic plot, Thornton is transfixed by the delicacy of Margaret's hands and the beauty of her arms as she pours him tea, and the way that her hand is held by her father, who playfully uses her thumb and finger as sugar-tongs. She is her father's daughter, the child of a principled man, who has put his beliefs before his family security. By contrast, she often refuses to take Thornton's proffered hand. In the industrial plot, Margaret objects strongly to Thornton calling his men 'hands': we have to wait a long time before Thornton takes the hand of Bessy's father Higgins, the leader of the workers, in a 'good grip'.

The sexual and industrial tensions come to life through such moments of sudden contact, especially in the drama of the strike, when the atmosphere feels almost ready to ignite:

> Margaret felt intuitively, that, in an instant, all would be uproar – that first touch would cause an explosion . . . in another instant, the stormy passions would have passed their bounds, and swept away all barriers of reason, or apprehension of consequence.

All the way through, people put their bodies on the line, as Margaret does in the strike, in sudden, irrational movement. The clash of interests between masters and men, and the clash of ideas between Margaret and Thornton are true battles, and to underline this, the Civil Wars of the seventeenth century are often evoked. Margaret's mother is descended from a Cavalier family, while Thornton is an instinctive Roundhead. 'Cromwell would have made a capital mill-owner,' he declares during one of their sparring matches, 'I wish we had him to put down this strike for us.' Cromwell, she replies tartly, 'is no hero of mine'. Despite their tough, contemporary surroundings, Gaskell's hero and heroine are linked, too, to the old conflicts of chivalry. Thornton, the merchant prince, is associated with Homeric heroes and Norse legends, while Margaret's daring and desire for conquest are those of the old heroines of romance: at different points she is compared to an Eastern queen, to a princess from the *Arabian Nights*, to Vashti, Zenobia, Cleopatra. But there is danger here too: both become entangled in images and stereotypes, and have to search within, plumbing the depths of their being, to find their true selves and to choose how to live in the modern world. And in Margaret's story Gaskell subtly equates the position of Victorian women to that of the suppressed workers: the women too have to speak out, to take charge.

The story is a struggle of powerful personalities and Gaskell had her own jousts of strength while writing the novel. At the start, Dickens had reassured her that her theme of industrial conflict was 'certainly NOT too serious, if sensibly treated' for *Household Words*. But in early 1854, just before the serialisation started, he suddenly appeared as a rival rather than supporter. In January he visited Preston, which had been gripped for the past four months by a weavers' strike, intensified by the factory-owners

imposing lock-outs, and on his return he began writing *Hard Times*. Gaskell was furious, feeling that he had stolen her material. In fact – although both attacked the dehumanisation of working relations, her intimate fiction was very different from Dickens's brilliantly schematic drama of heartless Gradgrinds, scheming agitators and victims. But the overlap rankled and they had already had problems over length: Dickens tore his hair out with frustration as her novel continually over-ran the allotted columns in his magazine. To make it worse, as he told Wilkie Collins, she ignored all his painstaking corrections to her proofs, when he had nobly laboured to take out 'all the stiflings – hard plungings, lungeings and other convulsions'. In the end, lack of space forced her to a hurried conclusion, expanding the final chapters when the book was published in volume form. 'I will never write for H.W. again' she told her friend Maria James fiercely. But she soon relented, and wrote for *Household Words* until it ceased publication.

Gaskell knew what it was to fight her corner, and she gave this stubborn passion to her heroine in *North and South*. But she also gave her the ability to learn from experience, to accept that she needs, sometimes, to adopt a little humility. She finds out, from bitter experience, that people – including herself – may do the wrong things for the right motives. Can she put aside her prejudices? Can Thornton overcome his pride? Can she come to understand her northern home, and to see, by contrast, that a labourer's life in the rural south is far from roses and honeysuckle? Such questions hold us in suspense as we trace Margaret's path through misunderstandings and conflict. When she asked them, Gaskell wanted to wake up her middle-class readers, dozing in their cushioned lives, like Margaret's cousin Edith at the start of this wonderful novel, curled up on the sofa in a 'soft ball of muslin and

ribbon and silken curls', unaware of the urgent problems and new ideas of the industrial north. Melodrama is a problematic mode, since it falls too easily into crisis and resolution. But Gaskell never thought that the gulfs between classes, or between employers and workers could be bridged in a moment, or surmounted like the obstacles of a love story. What she did feel, passionately, was that if the people's eyes were opened, and if 'feminine' values of sympathy and connection were introduced into the hard, male world of the manufacturers, there might be some hope – some way forward. *North and South* is sexy, vivid and full of suspense: its power still resonates and its conflicts still linger today.

Jenny Uglow, 2008

On its first appearance in *Household Words*, this tale was obliged to conform to the conditions imposed by the requirements of a weekly publication, and likewise to confine itself within certain advertised limits, in order that faith might be kept with the public. Although these conditions were made as light as they well could be, the author found it impossible to develop the story in the manner originally intended, and, more especially, was compelled to hurry on events with an improbable rapidity towards the close. In some degree to remedy this obvious defect, various short passages have been inserted, and several new chapters added. With this brief explanation, the tale is commended to the kindness of the reader;

> 'Beseking hym lowly, of mercy and pité,
> Of its rude makyng to have compassion.'

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 every one, 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 spoiled 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 gipsy 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 kinds 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 lap-dog 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 bed-clothes 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 new-comer; 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 some one 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 96 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 to-night, 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 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 – pic-nics – 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.’