

bad I didn't like to leave the place,' began Mrs. Hale.

'I know you are always busy,' answered Margaret absently. 'I, who have nothing to do, ought to have come to you, to tell you about Clara, and to thank you for all the good things you sent for the breakfast. I have not been well.' She looked ill, old, plain; much altered since Mrs. Hale last saw her.

Mrs. Hale expressed her sincere sorrow, consoled with her visitor on her loneliness, heard all she had to tell of her sister, and then went off into a long chat about her own affairs. 'The sick gentleman' was often alluded to; but it was no unusual thing for invalids to lodge at the farm, and Margaret was too listless to have any curiosity about this particular sufferer.

By and by, Mrs. Hale begged to be excused for a moment; the kitchen clock warned her that it was time 'he' had his medicine. She came back with a mournful look on her pleasant face.

'Is the gentleman worse?' asked Margaret, who had looked from the open window at one particular monthly rose during the whole time of Mrs. Hale's absence, and yet could not have told that Mrs. Hale's roses were already in blossom.

'He's not long for this world; I'm afraid he's only come here to die,' returned Mrs. Hale, brushing her hand across her eyes. 'He's too good to live, Miss Woodford, so patient and so grateful for the least kindness; and who could help being kind to him, I wonder? Let me see, it was just after Miss Clara's wedding he came; he was taken dangerously ill next day. Miss Woodford, ma'am, she went on, after a brief pause, 'I have it in my mind to ask a favor of you: may I make so bold?'

'I shall be very glad if I can do anything for you, Mrs. Hale.'

'Do you think now'—and the farmer's wife spoke coaxingly—'that you could come up now and again, of an afternoon—that's his best time—and read to the sick gentleman a bit? He's always a wearying his poor head trying to read to himself.'

Margaret looked blank, and visibly shrank from compliance.

'It's troubling you too much, and taking up your time!' Mrs. Hale said regretfully.

'It is not that,' said Margaret; 'my time is of no value; but for an entire stranger! I shouldn't like to do it, Mrs. Hale.'

'I am sure you would not mind him; he is quite a gentleman.'

'The gentleman might not like it—might not wish it,' said Margaret, secretly hoping such might be the case.

'May I mention that a lady I know could come and read to him now and then, and ask if he would like it? I won't mention who you are.'

Margaret said 'Yes,' because she was ashamed to say 'No.'

Mrs. Hale went up stairs at once. She returned with an answer, delicately and courteously worded, expressing the invalid's gratitude for the charitable offer and his eagerness to avail himself of it.

Mrs. Hale asked Margaret to come on the next day; she had no notion of delay. As, soon after, she stood at the gate watching her guest out, of sight, the farmer's wife smiled to herself in a complacent manner.

Margaret's interest had not been awakened; her homeward step was weary and listless. She wondered, just a little, if Mrs. Hale's request were not a strange one; then she thought: 'I am middle-aged now; I look older than I am. I may use the privileges of mature years. I ought to be glad to be of use to any one, but it will be very disagreeable.'

She woke next morning with a sense of something impending; but a letter

came from Clara and drove the matter out of her head.

Probably she would altogether have forgotten her engagement, had not a message from Mrs. Hale in the course of the afternoon reminded her that she was expected. It was already rather late.—She put on her shawl, bonnet, and gloves hastily, and walked fast to the farm.

Mrs. Hale was on the watch.

'I am very glad you are come, ma'am,' she said. 'Sick folks are like children; it's very hard for them to give up anything that's been promised them. He'd have been terribly disappointed if you hadn't come.'

Leading the way up stairs, Mrs. Hale continued: 'He has the two big south rooms. He's dressed, and on the sofa in the sitting-room to-day. He fainted right off when all was done, but he's had a good sleep since.'

Mrs. Hale paused to take breath before she knocked at the door. Margaret felt very shy; she was glad to find the room dim. It was large and low; the small lattice-windows, shaded by creepers and set deep in the massive wall, did not admit much light, and the afternoon was cloudy.

A wood-fire burned on the hearth; but the head of the couch on which the invalid lay was drawn back into a recess, out of the light and heat. Margaret supposed that the stranger made a movement as if to rise, for Mrs. Hale said as she hurried to his side; 'The lady will go away, and not come again, sir, unless you lie quite. We won't have no politeness, if you please—will we, ma'am?'

'I should be very sorry to cause any disturbance—that any exertion should be made on my account,' said Margaret.

When Margaret spoke, the invalid, who had closed his eyes for a moment, opened them, and fixed them on his visitor. She had turned towards the window. Mrs. Hale followed her there to set a low chair and a footstool for her. The light fell on her, but she had not removed her bonnet and veil.

After a few moments—after a few courteous sentences of the invalid's had been reported to Margaret by Mrs. Hale, who was close to him, and answered by Margaret with less embarrassment than she expected to feel—Margaret began to read the book which the patient had been trying to read to himself. Mrs. Hale sat by him, knitting; Margaret, in the window, was at a considerable distance.

'Isn't it too hard a book, sir? You listen so eager, you'll make your head bad,' Mrs. Hale said by and by, taking advantage of a pause.

'O no! But ask the lady if she is not tired or cold. Beg her to come near the fire—to say if she does not like the book.'

'I like the book, and I am quite warm enough,' said Margaret, and went on reading.

She had a clear and sweet voice, rather deep-toned for a woman's—a soothing voice, and yet the stranger did not seem to find it soothing. He moved his head from side to side restlessly, and Mrs. Hale noticed that his cheeks were flushed, and that his eyes glistened.

At the next pause she rose. 'You want your tea, sir? I'll get it directly.'

'There is no hurry. Do not trouble to go down on purpose; you take so many, many journeys for me,' the invalid said faintly; then, conscious that Margaret was rising also, he added: 'Ask the lady not to go yet. Beg her to sit nearer the fire, and to take some tea with me.'

Margaret seated herself closer to the hearth. She would have continued reading but the stranger, sure that she must be tired, began to talk. Suddenly, the weak voice failed in the middle of a sentence.

Margaret rose, and went softly towards his couch. His eyes were closed, his

head thrown back, and a deathly pallor was over his face. One moment she stood irresolute: just as she was turning to call Mrs. Hale, the closed eyes opened. A glass of water stood on the table; she brought it to him; he drank, and smiled thankfully. 'Do not tell Mrs. Hale. I am weak to-day; but it is nothing,' he said.

The dark, soft eyes—the only beauty of a plain, wasted face—looked up into hers with an irresistible expression of appeal and confidingness. 'Pray, come again, whatever Mrs. Hale says,' he added; 'promise to do so please.'

She supposed that he was feverish by the eagerness of his manner. As she answered, drawing back to her former position: 'I will come again if you wish it, if it does you no harm; I am glad to be of use to any one,' Margaret felt a warm glow come into her face, and was glad of the increased dimness of the room.

There was a pause. It was broken by his saying: 'Give you much trouble; but would you kindly open a window? I want to hear the thrushes in the pear-tree.'

Margaret complied, and stood beside the casement listening to a song which appeared to her unusually sweet.

'How delicious,' he said, softly, 'the fragrance of the garden comes across to me! But how I long to go out! Please close the lattice now. Mrs. Hale is coming, and we do not agree about fresh air.'

The room was so dusk, and they stood so far off, that they could hardly be said to exchange a smile; but yet each felt that the other smiled, and that they were no longer as strangers.

Mrs. Hale entered with the tea, and Margaret tried to slip quietly away; but the invalid saw her movement.

'The gentleman thinks, ma'am, that it is too late for you to walk across the meadow alone. Mark will be proud to go with you,' Mrs. Hale said.

Margaret shook her head decidedly, and departed. She enjoyed the homeward walk, the dusky fragrance, and the perfect quiet, as she had not enjoyed anything for a long time.

She thought over all that had passed at the farm; lingered out-of-doors, and forgot, till she entered the house, how dreary she was. She read that evening a book which the invalid had spoken of; it had been given her by Clara's husband a long time ago, and had remained unent till now. She became interested, sat up late, and slept well when she went to rest.

CHAPTER III.

'I doubt if I ought to let you go up to-day,' said Mrs. Hale, meeting Margaret; 'but the gentleman begs so earnest, that I won't hinder you. He had a bad, tossing night, and was fevered this morning. Have you ever heard of any one of his name, ma'am—Whityear? He knows a deal about Sunny-slope, and all these parts; and one night, when he was very bad, he spoke of having come home too late, only in time to die.'

'I do not know the name. It is not a name belonging to this part of the country,' answered Margaret.

'Perhaps you could read a bit easier-like sort of a book,' suggested Mrs. Hale, as she led the way up-stairs. Margaret was earlier to-day, and the day was brighter. As they entered, she could see with what a radiant look Mr. Whityear stretched out his hand.

'I cannot think of one who is so kind as a stranger,' he said, as she gave him hers. 'I was sorely afraid Mrs. Hale would keep you away.'

He asked Mrs. Hale presently to request Margaret to take off her bonnet. As she did so, she was conscious that she was intently watched. Turning to lay it down, the sun smote her brown hair, and irradiated her face.

According to Mrs. Hale's suggestion, the somewhat dry book of yesterday was not resumed. The sick man had many books, the works of many poets especially; some of the latter of these quite unknown to Margaret. 'In Memoriam' was opened by her for the first time that day. Her listener appeared to know it by heart. He asked her to read from it one favourite poem after another; they seemed to her strongly and wonderfully beautiful—key-notes to an unknown depth within her own heart and soul.—Presently he asked for one which she could not at first find. He repeated it, and several succeeding ones. They seemed to her the best of all—infinately lovely and touching; tears rose to her eyes, and colour to her cheeks, as she listened, with suspended breath, to the low, sweet voice.

Mrs. Hale had gone away, the truth being that she was afraid of falling asleep. Margaret opened the window unasked, when the musical voice was silent; they both listened to the song of the thrushes in perfect quiet. Margaret did not look towards the invalid; she knew that he was looking at her; she was ashamed of the tears that she could not repress—tears of a sweeter sadness than she had ever experienced.

When Mrs. Hale approached, Margaret having closed the window, met the look of the sick man with a twilight smile of her own, and rose to go away; she pressed her hand in leave-taking; he pressed it, and added a fervent 'God bless you and comfort you!' to his good night. He had seen her tears.

'Take "In Memoriam" with you—you will like to read it this evening,' he said. She thanked him, and as she walked home with the book held closely against her as something precious which she loved, she felt in a bewildering dream; it was impossible for her to believe that she had to-day seen Mr. Whityear for the second time in her life only; he had spoken to her and looked at her to-day as no one else had ever done, and every tone of his voice in its languid sweetness seemed familiar as remembered music to her innermost heart.

And Mr. Whityear?

'I cannot understand it; but it is she!' he said softly, as the door closed after Margaret. 'What was the Christian name of the Miss Woodford who was married the day I came here?' he asked of Mrs. Hale.

'Clara, sir.'

'How can that be? Clara Woodford died six years ago. When I was in Ceylon, I saw her death in an English paper.'

'Ah! that was little Clara, Miss Woodford's half-sister, sir.'

'I think I am too anxious to get strong!' Mr. Whityear observed to Mrs. Hale next morning. 'I have hardly slept to-night for thinking—of the future.'

It was a sultry, oppressive day; expectation seemed to harass her patient. Mrs. Hale was glad that Margaret came early in the afternoon. After her arrival he grew more composed, but was evidently languid and exhausted. It was a busy day with Mrs. Hale; she left them together. Mr. Whityear had requested Margaret to sit near him—he could not speak loud, he said. When, in a pause of her reading, she looked up and saw that he slept, she let her voice sink to silence gradually, then she sat still and mused. Her eyes were irresistibly drawn towards the worn face of the sleeper—such a happy child's smile dwelt upon the mouth, she wondered of what he was dreaming.

As she gazed, a strange thought entered her heart—if she were sister, mother, wife, anything to him—how dearly she should love him! She rejoiced in his peaceful sleep as tenderly as a mother in that of a suffering child: she would have liked to hush every bird in the garden. In time, a longing was born