On hearing this, Margaret laughed, but stopped when she saw Mrs Thornton's annoyed look.

'I'm sorry, madam. But I really am not interested in that way,' she said.

'Young ladies have been, before now,' said Mrs Thornton stiffly.

'I hope I will see Mr Thornton on Thursday,' said Mr Hale, trying to change the subject.

'I cannot say. There will almost certainly be a strike.'

'A strike! Why?' asked Margaret.

'The workers want higher wages, I suppose,' said Mr Hale.

'That is what they say, but the truth is, they want to be more powerful than the mill owners. They strike every five or six years. But I believe that if the men do strike, the mill owners have some ideas that will teach them not do it again in a hurry.'

♦

That evening Mr Thornton came to see Mr Hale. He was shown into the sitting-room, where Margaret was reading aloud to her father and mother.

'I have come partly to bring a note from my mother and partly to apologise for not coming for my lesson yesterday. The note contains the address you asked for.'

'Thank you,' said Margaret quickly, holding out her hand to take the note. She did not want her mother to know that her father, who was becoming worried about his wife's health, had asked Mr Thornton to give them the name of a good doctor. Mr Thornton seemed to understand immediately and gave her the note without another word of explanation.

Mr Hale began to talk about the strike. Mr Thornton, looking angry, said, 'Yes, the fools are going to strike. They think the cotton trade is as good as it was last year. They want better pay, but because we won't explain why we have refused

their demand, and tell them we may have to lower wages, they think we are trying to cheat them.'

'But why can't you explain your reasons?' asked Margaret.

'Do you give your servants reasons for the way in which you spend your money? We manufacturers have a right to choose what we do with it.'

'What about the rights of the workers?' said Margaret quietly.

'I'm sorry, I did not hear what you said.'

'I would rather not repeat it,' she said. 'I don't think you will understand.'

'Please try and explain,' said Mr Thornton, who really wanted to know what she had said.

'I meant that the workers have rights too. Surely they deserve to know why you cannot pay them more.'

Mr Thornton paused for a moment and then said, 'In my opinion, the workers are like children. I do not think we mill owners try to keep them like that – it is just the way they are. They need to be told what to do and, like children, they do not need to be given reasons why.'

Margaret replied, 'I very much disagree with you. There should be friendship and cooperation between the manufacturers and their workers. We all depend on each other.'

The conversation continued with neither side willing to change their position. Mr Thornton got up to go. Margaret smiled at him but did not put out her hand, and again, as he left, he told himself that she was unpleasantly proud.

That night, as the Thorntons sat in their sitting-room, Mrs Thornton asked her son what he had done that day. On hearing that he had visited the Hales, Fanny said, 'Are they really so different to most people one meets?'

Her words annoyed her brother, but he did not reply.

'They do not seem unusual to me,' said Mrs Thornton.