

Chapter I

Such wind as scatters young men through the world
To seek their fortunes farther than at home,
Where small experience grows.

—Shakespeare

That Edmund Percy must someday have a wife was a fact that he himself had assumed from boyhood on; but when he imagined the future Mrs. Percy, he had only the vaguest picture of what she might be like. It would be unnecessary to say that he thought she might be like his mother; for though most boys at least think they desire women who are the very opposites of their mothers, Edmund knew so few women closely that his mother could be said to have virtually defined for him what a woman was. He had no sisters—a circumstance which, by the way, greatly simplifies (or, if you prefer, impoverishes) a man's relationships with women throughout his life—and the only other women he knew at all well were his aunts, a few neighbors, and the serving women in his father's house. It is true that one of his aunts, his mother's sister, by her example came to exercise a great influence over his appreciation of the opposite sex as time went on; but still it can be said that what he wanted in a marriage partner, and why he wanted those particular qualities, were lessons he must learn through hard experience and no little sorrow. And having learned to want something extraordinary, it became his great challenge to secure such a partner. For a brief time, in despair of accomplishing an end that was to all appearances so improbable of success, even infinitely improbable of success, he actually gave over all such expectation and resolved to settle on whatever pleasing being should first come into his path. But that

transient complacency, and the reason he renounced it, will be told in its place.

When he looked back on how he had come to pursue such a difficult course, it seemed to him that it all began on that day in April 1870 when he arrived home at Brackensom upon summons from his father. Until the chain of events set in motion on that day, he had been too busy to do anything in regard to the matter but to want a wife in the most dim, inchoate, and ineffectual fashion. Till then, marriage was something prudently postponed, not actively pursued; and he had never for any considerable length of time fallen in with an intelligent young woman his age, or for that matter, a vivacious one, or a pretty one; any one of whom might perhaps have captured his heart by mere virtue of obtruding on his attention for long enough. And then he might have undergone a most ordinary fate: suffered a long engagement, begun married life on the first chance of a living, honored his wife, and perhaps have been as happy with her as he was capable of being, in that unenlightened state—for he would indeed have been unenlightened as to the possibilities of married life and married love, make no mistake about it. He would in that case have lived the life of the sleeper, as most men and women do, unaware of what it is to love and to be loved passionately, both heart and mind, within the shelter of a secure marriage.

So let the tale begin on that April day.



The horses took the bridge at the River Brake with a certain aplomb—their hooves ringing, their harness ajingle, communicating their high-stepping, oat-fed willfulness right through the poles and the frame to where Edmund Percy sat inside the carriage. At the high center of the arched stone span they seemed to pause for a second as if to boast of their contempt for the cool, dark waters flowing away quietly to the south; and then they plunged on, out of the shadow cast by a great fair-weather cloud, on, into the soft sunlight of the spring morning, onto the road that led to Brackensom.