

**THE STUMBLING
BLOCK; A NOVEL**

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The stumbling block; a novel by Henry H. Harper

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HENRY H. HARPER

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HENRY H. HARPER

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CHAPTER I

THE WEDDING

Margaret Benson's early childhood was spent in a small town in the western part of New York State. Her expressive dark eyes and rare beauty were her sole heritage from her mother, who was the daughter of a distinguished Kentucky family. From her father, of whom less could be said, she inherited the traits that were ultimately to dominate her character and disposition.

Shortly after the death of her mother, when Margaret was fourteen years old, she was taken to New York City and placed in charge of a woman who conducted a lodging house on the East Side, where she attended public school. She saw but little of her father, who came to see her at uncertain intervals, and she knew nothing of his business or financial resources, except that her spending money was very meagre, and the amount allowed for her board and clothes only covered the barest necessities. Though only fourteen years of age her slender, prematurely developed stature and the matureness of her features gave her the appearance of seventeen.

There being no other children at her boarding place she found the atmosphere ill suited to her age and temperament. She felt keenly the loss of her mother's

CHAPTER ONE

tender care, at an age when a mother's influence and advice are such important needs in a girl's life, and many of her evenings were spent in tearful retrospection in her little room up three flights of uncarpeted stairs. After a few months of this lonely existence she returned home from school one afternoon to find a well dressed, distinguished looking woman waiting for her in the sitting room.

"You are Margaret Benson?" asked the woman, as she advanced smilingly with outstretched hand.

"Yes," she said timidly.

"And I am Mrs. Grayson-Howells. I was a girlhood friend of your mother, and my sister married her brother; so you see I am your aunt by marriage. Both my sister and her husband have been dead for many years. On returning from abroad a few days ago I found a letter from your father telling me about you."

"Oh, then you know my father?"

"No, I never met him, but I knew your mother's family."

"Yes, I've heard my mother speak of you; she said how rich you were, while she — poor mother!" she said, as the tears welled in her eyes, "she was so unhappy." And she burst into sobs.

"Yes, poor dear, it was an unkind Fate that cut her off from all her girlhood associates. I never saw her after she married. But what a dear, charming child