Missives and Misunderstandings

by ElizabethHades

Summary

If the missive had met its mark: What would have been if the stone had struck John Thornton instead of Margaret Hale on that fateful day at Marlborough Mills? A tense, angst-ridden HEA Retelling of North and South from the day of the riot, both book and TV miniseries based. UPDATED WEEKLY
(Working title: In which John Thornton does a great deal of kissing)
Riot

“Go home! He is one man and you are many!”

The crowd stilled for an instant. The sudden appearance of a woman, and one so well liked as Miss Margaret, had momentarily deflated the restless, rowdy mob of striking workers that filled Marlborough Mill’s yard.

“Please!” she pleaded, “The soldiers are coming. Go home before things get out of hand!”

“Will ye’ send t’ Irish home?”

“Never!” he roared, stepping out in front of her. Mr Thornton was no coward. He would not hide behind anyone, not even a person of such admirable and impressive courage as Miss Margaret Hale.

A wave of violent restlessness rippled through the crowd. They bellowed their discontent like some great, injured animal. Margaret sensed rather than saw the arm, long and half starved from two weeks of striking, swing up high over the sea of flat caps and greasy heads.

She did not see the object hurtling in their direction. She did not hear the smack of brick against skin as it reached its mark, or the grunt of its victim as his body registered its impact. But she did observe the sway of inertia as he tried to steady himself, his arms unfurling from the tight knot that had held them over his chest. She saw him stagger forward, unsteady on his long legs, then watched, paralysed as the whole solid trunk of his body collapsed backwards, like some great elm felled in the forest.

Mr Thornton had been struck.

She stared in disbelief at the great and proud Milton Mill Master lying crumpled at her feet. So still, so pale… was he dead? Why had he fallen? She didn’t know. There were too many thoughts in her head. Too many feelings. Compassion, of course, and christian concern. Fear, panic and something else… something gripping, alarming, unknown.

She knelt beside him, checking his cotton and wool clad chest for any sign of movement. The chain of his pocket watch glinted up at her. She remembered the wistful warmth in his voice when he had shown her his father’s initials engraved on the back. ‘G.T.’, so he always carried a part of him, wherever he went. It had been the first time she had seen his face melt into some semblance of a smile. The first time she had enjoyed his company as they sat in her father’s study, discussing poetry, parliament, and Plato. Her heart sank as she imagined the possibility that it might have been the last.

“’Tis alright lass, the’s fight left in ‘im yet,” said a familiar voice at her elbow. She turned to see Higgins, red-faced and out of breath.

“I came as soon as I ‘eard. Fools, th’ lot o’ ‘em” he explained, gently turning the master’s head to locate the wound. “Throwin’ stones like that. We’ll never get th’ masters t’ see reason wi’ us behavin’ like wild animals. I warned ‘em, miss, I said… ah! there ‘tis” he pointed to a penny-sized gash that was oozing blood on Thornton’s left temple.

“We need to get him inside,” said Margaret, “Nicholas, can you hook his arms about your shoulders? I will help you…”
“Aye, Miss Margaret, give us a moment."

Margaret rose and turned to face the crowd. They had fallen silent. The sight of the author of their grievances struck down by one of their own missives had knocked the wind out of them, and their anger. The union leaders had warned them against such a display. They had said it would only undermine their cause. What would they do now?

“Go home.” She commanded, as gently and firmly as she could, “Your master has been struck down by....” She could not bring herself to say the words. She could see the fear written on their faces; the desperation hanging from their gaunt bodies. Poor, pitiful creatures, driven mad with hunger. “Please... Boucher, Peterson, Denby... You there, Ashe, take your brothers and leave. The soldiers are coming. Please, this is not the way.”

“You ‘eard t’ lady! Clear out!” Higgins cried, appearing at her side. His voice strained under the weight of the Master he had finally managed to hoist over one of his shoulders. “Be gone, th’ lot o’ ye’! Before th’ soldiers or th’ union get ‘old of ye’!”

“Nicholas!” Margaret exclaimed, rushing around him to shoulder some of the Master’s weight herself. She draped his right arm across her back and gripped his long, calloused fingers to keep him in place. He was warm, and he was heavy. His eyes were half shut and his mouth hung open, his expression one of acute pain. He mumbled incoherently as they heaved him up the few steps to the front door.

Behind them the mill yard was emptying in a quick and surprisingly orderly manner. By the time the soldiers arrived, there were no more than a few stragglers halfheartedly kicking about bits of debris, an attempt to express their discontent at the unexpected turn of events.

The door creaked loudly on its hinges before slamming into the wall. Margaret paused to catch her breath, before looking aghast at the daunting flight of stairs stretching upwards before them. Even with his great weight shared between the two of them, she was not certain they would reach the top.

“Wu’ll manage, Miss Margaret,” grunted Higgins, as if reading her mind. His gruff voice seemed to rouse the man they were supporting between their shoulders. He startled awake.

“Miss Hale? Miss Margaret Hale, she is here? Where is she?” he said, looking around wildly. Sensing Higgins at his side he leant towards him, pursing his lips and shaking his head “She does not like it here, no. She does not like Milton, or the mill, or even me for that ma...”

“Mr Thornton, I…” she began to protest weakly.

“Miss Hale!” he exclaimed gleefully, twisting his head, blinking slowly, and flashing her an incongruously bright smile. “There you are! Oh Miss Hale... do not be frightened. The soldiers will be here soon.” He bent his head towards her, “You smell like a flower Miss Hale.” His voice lowered, as if confiding some great secret, “but there are no flowers in Milton.”

Margaret fixed Higgins with a pleading, panicked look. What on earth was happening? The man seemed faintly amused. He had seen head trauma before, and did not find the Master’s newfound loquaciousness shocking. At least he was still talking, albeit a little indecorously. His silence would have been far more alarming.

“Come, let’s get ye’ upstairs,“

His ramblings continued as they made their way upstairs, although he was not as merry as he had
been upon discovering Margaret’s presence at his side. He protested his ascension, saying he was needed at the mill, that some of the orders would be delayed, that Fanny’s spending had gotten out of hand, that last night’s lamb hadn’t been cooked to his liking...

Higgins had humoured him with short, placating responses, offering a reassuring smile as Margaret’s brow had creased and furrowed in worry at the state of their invalid. By the time they had reached the parlour, removed his coat and laid (or rather dropped) his long, hard body onto the largest chaise longue, she found herself chuckling affectionately at his endearing vulnerability. Her heart wrenched when a quiet, almost inaudible “Father, where have you…” escaped his lips as he sank into soft velvet.

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Mrs Thornton was just coming up from the kitchens when she came upon Higgins hurrying out the front door. Why, of all the bloody nerve...

“What, had yer fill of the mill, have ye’?,” she spat at his back, “Come to loot and plunder our home as well?”

Higgins paused before turning to face the formidable woman.

“Th’ Master’s taken ill.” he said calmly, “‘im took a blow to th’ head, I was going for th’ doctor.” He glanced thoughtfully upstairs, “‘though th’ soldiers need seein’ to, n’ someone ‘as t’ start cleanin’ up th’ mess.”

Mrs Thornton’s impassive face drained of the little colour it had.

“John… My boy John! I must go to him!” she began to gird her opulent skirts lest they dare to impede her haste.

“‘im’s not alone, Mrs Thornton. Miss Margaret’s attending to ‘im.” Higgins interrupted, “She dun’t know where t’ find th’ Doctor, and ‘er company seems t’ be comfortin’ ‘im well enough.”

Mrs Thornton glared at him, her mouth hardening into a grim line.

“Very well. I will go for the Doctor, and see to the soldiers.” she said after a seething pause “you can stay here and sort out the mess your rabble left behind!”

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After despatching one maid to locate Mrs Thornton, and the other to prepare a fortifying pot of tea, Margaret had asked for some hot water and a clean rag. The sight of blood did not affect her, as she had often accompanied her father on his visits to the ill and infirm of Helstone. Mr Thornton had returned to his state of semi-audible muttering, his eyes half closed. His brows were contracted, and she could see his pupils darting about under the thin skin of his eyelids. His mind was active, perhaps he was dreaming? Higgins had told her this was a good sign, that it was a deeper slumber that presented the real danger.

But she sensed that he was uncomfortable. Beyond the pain of his injury, his body was tense. His breathing was laboured and he seemed to squirm ever so slightly with every inhalation. She scanned his person quickly, hoping to find how she might provide him with some relief. Her eyes came to rest on the thick, black cravat that tightly adorned his neck. She hesitated. Could she be so bold?

Lifting trembling fingers to the dark knot, she took purchase on its silky ends. “Forgive me, Mr
Thornton,” she whispered, “I assure you it is only for your comfort.” She tugged lightly at the fabric, and it came undone more easily than she had imagined. She exhaled a sigh in relief; the thing was done and his breathing seemed more relaxed.

Encouraged by her small success, she took up the rag and dipped it in the hot water. She took his jaw in her hand and gently tilted his face downwards, exposing the wound to allow herself better access. She was surprised at the roughness of his cheek, and absent mindedly brushed her fingertips along the pleasant prickliness of his jaw. She had never felt a man’s face before.

His face contorted as she pressed the warm, wet rag to his injured temple. She wasn’t sure of the wound’s exact location; there was so much blood and bruising. As she padded the area clean she was relieved to find that it wasn’t as large as she had feared, and was no longer bleeding profusely. But she still heard a small uncomfortable moan rumble in his throat each time she made contact with the cut.

Higgins had told her to talk to him, to try and keep his senses engaged, but she could think of nothing to say. Inquiring about his comfort seemed moot, petitioning him not to die far too maudlin. So she decided to sing to him. She began quietly, prefacing her performance with an apology for inflicting her talents (or lack thereof) on him when he had no means of escape. Soon she was lost in her song, her caring caresses and this intoxicating closeness to him. The repetition of her ministrations, and the cadence of the familiar melody soothed her into a trance. Had anyone been there to witness it, there could be no doubt that she found pleasure in the quiet intimacy between herself and her patient.

So lost was she that she did not notice his eyes snap open, pupils dilated, to fix her own. She did not register as he studied her face, taking in the full force of its breathtaking beauty at such close range. She did not notice his breath quicken, and his mouth stretch upwards into a warm, amorous smile. She startled when he reached out his hand and grabbed her own, stopping its journey to his face in mid air. She dropped the rag in shock when his finger slipped under her fine, silver bracelet, holding it in place at her wrist, before releasing it, letting it tumble back down to catch on the fuller flesh of her arm.

“There it goes again!” he whispered, his face a picture of delight.

He had heard her voice, calling to him, across a meadow greener than any he had ever seen. She was clothed in the sun, clothed in light, her hair tumbling well past her shoulders and a welcoming smile spread wide across her exquisite face. She wore a veil, and the meadow was now a churchyard. He was wearing his finest suit, and she was his gift on this special day. His birthday, was it? No, that was in December. It was clearly summer; she was barefoot, and the sun was giving him a headache.

She smelled like flowers, and was reaching out for him. Now he was undressed, wearing only his shirtsleeves and trousers. Mother was there, and father, smiling proudly. Fanny was there, chirpy, chubby thing; all curls and pink cheeks; bouncing away on mother’s hip. Then there was just her. They were walking hand in hand, beside a river. They were alone. They were together. She was caressing his face. She was singing. She was his.

Now she wore that bracelet. Now her hair was pinned back. Now she smelled like flowers and soap; and she was just inches from his face. She was dressed in everyday clothes. He could not see her feet. Her cheeks were flushed with colour. He held her by the hand. They were back in Milton. Which room in heaven was this?

He took her by her dainty fingers and brought her hand to his mouth. He closed his eyes and placed a lingering kiss on her palm, opening them again to watch her expression. His actions held her
spellbound and he smiled as he nuzzled the fragrant skin of her wrist.

He placed her hand on his shoulder and reached up to cup her face. She was barely a breath away from him and he treasured the slight tremble of her lips as her eyes glanced down to his own. His thumb traced a lazy curve over the satin of her cheek as he took her in, breathed her in. She was here. She was his.

He pulled her face towards his own, and pressed his lips to hers. His fingertips toyed with the curls that had come undone at her nape, and his nose brushed against her cheek. He moved his mouth against hers. Oh, but this was all of heaven! It was every single room! But why did his head ache so?

He tugged her closer to him, finding relief in reclining further back into the chaise. She had lost her balance and was now leaning over him, both her hands pressed against his broad chest. He held her face fast against his own, daring to trace his tongue across the seam of her lips. Instinctively they parted, and he pulled her deeper into himself as he gently plundered her mouth.

Something outside of them made her pull away. Gaining leverage on his chest, she pushed herself up to look him in the eye. The colour drained from her face as she came to the realisation of what had just passed between them. She had been kissed, and she had kissed. They had kissed. Her and Mr Thornton! Why had she let him? Why hadn’t she retreated? She leaned back away from him and began to scramble to her feet. He sat up, never taking his eyes from her; a soft, adoring look on his face. He made to rise to assist her to her feet, but the motion proved too much for him, and his eyes wavered shut as he collapsed back into the plush velvet once again.

“Oh, what have I done?!” she gasped to herself. Confused and horrified in equal measure, she stood staring at his motionless body, her pale hands clutching her face. Was kissing handsome, delirious, mill masters in broad daylight not thrilling enough for her? Had she now killed him as well?!

She let out a sigh of relief as she saw his lips move and the steady rise and fall of his chest. He was alive! Just faint from the effort he had made in an attempt to assist her. He still looked uncomfortable.

“Oh Mr Thornton, what can I do?!”

She moved towards him, but stopped short, her hands outstretched as if to ward off the temptation to touch him again. Her mind was so completely addled, she had not heard the door swing open. She had not heard the footsteps approaching. She had not heard the sharp intake of breath, and the knuckles cracking under the clenching fists.

“I believe you have done quite enough here, Miss Hale” a voice growled behind her.
Hello my lovely readers!

Welcome to chapter 2 of M&M, and thank you so much for taking the time to read my story. It's really thrilling for me to read all your comments and see all your follows come in!

This story was born of an idea for a premise I hadn't yet encountered on any of the Fanfiction websites, as well as a lot of encouragement from the dearest, loveliest darkpartofmydestiny; and I am so very glad you are enjoying it. I've also peppered it liberally with book and series-based easter eggs, so let me know when you spot them!

And last thing, I'm really keen to improve my romance writing with this project, so please don't hold back on the reviews, comments, thoughts, suggestions and critiques. Seriously, I'm very thick-skinned and eager to learn.

Anyway, enough from me... enjoy this longer chapter. For all the Thorntonites (is that a thing?) out there, I know this chapter is a little light on our beloved John, but the next won't be, I promise!

“Mrs Thornton!” Margaret gasped, stumbling away from the chaise. “I did not hear you come in!”

“I thought as much,” she replied curtly. “Come Doctor, he seems to have fainted again.” She bustled past Margaret to kneel on the floor by her son’s head. Though her expression betrayed very little, there was something in the shine of her eyes that indicated a storm of feeling straining against the check in which she was holding her entire person. Maternal affection and concern, Margaret thought.

“He… Mr Thornton was… awoke just now,” she stammered, not sure how much of what had just occurred would be medically relevant. “He spoke very little, and was behaving a little strangely…”

“He was behaving strangely?” shot Mrs Thornton incredulously. She glared at Margaret as though she were some foul thing she had been unfortunate enough to step in.

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“What of the injury?” asked the doctor, “was there much blood loss?”

“Somewhat,” replied Margaret, grateful for the respite from Mrs Thornton’s murderous glower, “the rag was stained, but not completely soaked through. There it is…” she turned away squeamishly to face the window, swallowing thickly, “upon his… his…”

“His lap, Miss Hale, where I assume you dropped it during your… *ministrations*” Mrs Thornton flashed her a withering look before resuming the gentle stroking of her son’s now untidy, black mane.

After inspecting the cloth in question, the doctor lifted one of Thornton’s eyelids, and then the other. He tilted his head this was and that. He felt his neck, checked his pulse, and kneaded the back of his head. “You mentioned strange behaviour,” he said, turning for the first time to
Margaret, “what was it exactly?”

“Well, he seemed, confused…” she began, conscious of how her words might be misconstrued, “he spoke of many things, and all of them at once, as if his thoughts were all tangled together. He seemed cheerful, and then sad, and then…” She paused, considering how much more she should disclose to the doctor. It was not just her own reputation that was at risk from their impropriety; she knew enough of this proud Milton family to surmise that he would be bound to her in honour, should their shocking encounter ever come to light. “...confused again.”

“Ah… well that is to be expected.” replied the scotsman, gripping the edge of the chaise longue and rising gracelessly to his feet. “Head injuries are unpredictable things. Mrs Thornton,” he said, reaching into his leather case and pulling out a small, leatherbound book, “Do you have any laudanum in the house? I’m afraid Mr Thornton is most likely to be in a great deal of pain when he awakes...”

“So he will awaken? You are certain?” ejaculated Margaret, rushing towards him, “He is in no danger?”

Dr Donaldson, taken aback but this sudden display, took a moment to respond before he was interrupted by a decisive rustling of skirts.

“You must forgive us, Miss Hale, for it appears we have trespassed on your time for far too long.” The look in her eye was one that would brook no opposition. “My son needs my attention, and no doubt your mother will be wondering where you have gotten to.”

Margaret attempted to meet her gaze with as much dignity as she could muster, but found herself completely disarmed by the sheer force of emotion trying to break through the tight mask held over Mrs Thornton’s wide, white face. Was that anger? No, that was rage. Hatred, disgust, and something else; something wild and wicked welling up in her eyes.

Mrs Thornton succeeded in staring Margaret down. In truth, the young lady’s spirits were in such turmoil that she conceded defeat more readily that she was wont. She made no reply, and with one final, wistful glance at the man lying unconscious on the chaise, she nodded wordlessly to his mother and the doctor, and took her leave.

The yard was empty as she crossed from the house to the gate, oblivious to Higgins’ call to her from the shed. He had been helping Williams, one of the overseers, to discard the detritus left behind by the strikers. He was angry and ashamed of the workers’ vicious and desperate behaviour, but he was not about to give the masters the satisfaction of painting him and the other union leaders with the same tarnished brush. He was a thinking man; an honourable man, like many of the workers under his makeshift leadership, and he would strive to prove it to them.

Higgins was keenly aware that his was a precarious position; that of a standard for the workers, and a loyal servant to the union. And now he was compelled to offer some sort of expiation for their sins, for if they were ever to gain any semblance of sympathy or respect from the masters, it would not do to be found condoning or even silent in the face of such a violent and thoughtless display. Williams condescended to thank him for his trouble, acknowledging the honourable nature of his intention to make amends. He would be sure to pass on any news of the Master, if Higgins was inclined to stop by at the mill door in the next few days.

The creaky bustling and cheerful chatter she heard emanating from the parlour upstairs signalled that her mother was awake and most likely in good spirits. Margaret smiled. In truth mama had had very few good days since their arrival in Milton. It had appeared as though the smoke and dirt that hung about the city like some great, grey serpent had somehow seeped into Mrs Hale’s very
lifeblood, draining her strength and painting her face an ashen, bilious hue. But today her voice sounded bright and alert, and was a precious and encouraging song to Margaret’s ears. She called up to announce her return, and went to wash the blood and grime off her hands before going up to her mother.

“Well Margaret?” said Mrs Hale cheerfully. She treasured the warm kiss her daughter gifted her cheek, but was eager to hear of the outcome of her excursion to the home of the indomitable Mrs Thornton.

“Yes mama?” replied Margaret, distractedly. Since arriving at the comfort of her home she had felt an intense wave of fatigue sweep over her. It had been quite a morning! She barely heard the question on her mother’s lips, as she busied herself preparing a fresh cup of creamy tea for the both of them.

Mrs Hale gaped at her daughter’s distraction, then shot a look of disbelief at Dixon, her faithful servant, maid and housekeeper from a time well before she had even entertained the thought of becoming Mrs Hale. Did she not know that they had been waiting all morning for her to return with a positive report? Margaret would have to do better than that…

“Pray child, do not be shy, I want to hear all about it!” Mrs Hale said excitedly, “How did it feel? Did you like it? Was it very strange?”

Margaret’s mouth fell open. The delicate, fine bone china teacup trembled in her hand and its hot contents threatened to leap from its delicate edge and fill her mother’s lap. If it weren’t for Dixon rushing to relieve her of the dangerous, wobbling beverage, she would certainly have caused her mother’s fine silk dress, an irreparable injury.

“Heavens, miss Margaret! You’re shaking like a leaf! I hope you’re not sickening…”

“Forgive me Dixon, mama.” Margaret said, scarcely knowing where to look. Could it be that her mother had learned of her behaviour? Had Mrs Thornton seen her and her son in that strange embrace? Mama did not seem upset; and surely news could not travel any faster than she just had, quitting the Mill directly and heading straight back to Crampton. But how could she account for…

“The water mattress Margaret! Did Mrs Thornton agree to our request?”

Margaret breathed an audible sigh of relief. In her haste and emotion she had quite forgotten the original object of her visit. Upon hearing that Mrs Hale had taken ill, Fanny had kindly proposed the use of their water mattress. Margaret had been sent to see the contraption, considered the very latest thing among London’s most fashionable infirm and neurotic.

“Oh mama, I am afraid I quite forgot about the water mattress!” she paused, wincing in guilt at her mother’s pained expression, “You see, there was a riot at the mill. Mr Thornton was taken ill. I stayed to attend him, and then left as soon as the doctor arrived. There was no time to enquire after the mattress.”

Mrs Hale gasped, and if it were at all possible, turned an even paler shade of white. If Margaret had considered that plain speaking was the best way to apologise for her forgetfulness, then she had not reckoned on the effect the actual content of her speech would inspire.

“You… attended him? Margaret…” Mrs Hale scarcely knew how to assemble the words she needed. Her only daughter, raised in London and presented at court, had spent the morning attending to an eligible, (injured possibly, but mostly eligible) tradesman in his home! And Mr Thornton of all people! Why, one of the servants might have seen them! Would there be talk?
People can be so cruel, and a woman’s reputation is a terribly brittle thing. Surely Margaret would not have been so thoughtless.

“Forgive me mama, I am alarming you!” she said, rushing to kneel at her mother’s feet and taking her small, soft hands in her own. “Mr Thornton was struck in the head by a missive. One of the workers and I got him inside, and as he was unconscious I merely bathed the wound on his brow and waited for the doctor to come.” She looked down, her stomach knotting in the anticipation of the untruth about to leave her lips. There was no way around it. “Nothing improper happened mama. I sent the maid to prepare some tea, and Mrs Thornton arrived shortly after. The doctor believes he will make a full recovery.”

She hesitated before chancing a glance at her mother’s face. Her cheeks had coloured a little and her eyes were closed, her shoulders rising and falling sharply as she allowed the relief to sweep the weight of momentary panic away from her. Dixon was rubbing her mistress’ arm with a firm gentleness that seemed to soothe her. After a few moments, she opened her eyes and smiled wearily at her daughter.

“Well Margaret, I am sure you did what you felt was best. It is too late to do anything about it now, at any rate.”

“Yes mama.”

“Now I think I shall rest. My exertions this morning have left me quite tired.”

“Yes mama.”

“And Margaret…”

“Yes mama?”

“Do not worry about the water mattress. I am sure we will find some other method. You should rest as well. You are quite pale and have had a very trying morning.”

“Yes mama.”

“I will see you later. Dixon?”

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Margaret had been surprised at her father’s seeming indifference to the tale of her morning’s unusual events. In truth she was a little disappointed. She had hoped to receive some sort of commendation for her compassionate care of Mr Thornton, a man whose life and livelihood she had had no qualms about abusing out loud to her father on many occasions. She expected to find some sort of relief in her father’s predictable praise of her good, christian character and presence of mind under such formidable circumstances. But she had been met with neither. In fact, she worried he had not heard her. He sat in silence for several long moments, before jolting out of his reverie to enquire after the state of his friend John.

Margaret had repeated all that she had told her mother, and had welcomed her father’s lack of interrogation on the score of her potentially scandalous behaviour. She had not had to deceive him outright, but had found herself once again obliged to provide a more palatable version of events, devoid of any inappropriate embraces.

They had spoken no more on the matter, and she had quite put the conversation from her mind until her father came down to the kitchens the next day. She was starching the linens, bent double over
the low, wooden beam set out for that purpose, and so she barely heard the man enter, so soft was his footfall. She had taken to doing some of the laundry and ironing herself, and had learned some basic cooking, in order to relieve Dixon of some of her more menial duties so that she could better attend to the ailing Mrs Hale.

“Er… Margaret…”

“Father!”

“Forgive me my dear! I did not mean to startle you. It’s just…” His brow furrowed as he attempted to scrape together an appropriate preface for what he had come down to say. “About what you told me yesterday. About the riot, and the stone, and Joh… Mr Thornton.”

“Yes?” She could not imagine what more there was to say on the subject, not in the least to her father.

“Well, I have been thinking… that is… you know… when he was telling me about…”

“Who, father?”

“Oh, Mr Piggott, my latest pupil. You met him last week, and he sent a note to bring up his reading with me today. One of Thornton’s referrals, as it happens.”

“I see…” said Margaret, although she did not.

“I mean to say… Margaret my dear, your behaviour… Were things done, that is…” Mr Hale wrung his hands nervously, as if he might squeeze a full, coherent sentence out of them. “Are you quite sure you were not seen when you were er… alone with Mr Thornton? By some servant, or one of the workers perhaps?”

Margaret felt the small flame of terror catch light in her belly. A dark crimson flush raced up from her core and coloured her face. Had someone seen? Had his new pupil; this acquaintance of Mr Thornton’s, somehow learned, in the space of less than a day, what had transpired between herself and his friend?

Fearing above all the loss of her father’s good opinion over her concealment rather than the fact itself, she carefully picked her way through the words she would need to relate the situation as sensitively as possible. She was about to launch herself into her explanations when he threw his hands up in a gesture of begrudging surrender.

“Oh, perhaps it is just the way of people, when they are so huddled together in such a tight space, with nothing but work to occupy their minds! There is little else with which to employ their undoubtedly fertile imaginations…”

Margaret was confused. Of what, in heaven’s, was he now talking?

“Father, please, I do not understand!”

He stepped around the table to take her small, round hands in his own. Greying and wrinkled as they were, their warmth was a welcome comfort to her. She held them, and waited.

“Forgive me Margaret, for I have no doubt that nothing improper occurred between yourself and Mr Thornton. I know how much you dislike him!”

“I am not sure I dislike him so very much, father…” she contested weakly. Her father was not
“It’s just that Ti… Mr Piggott was telling me a little about himself. How he worked his whole life in trade under one of Milton’s oldest and meanest cotton lords, but he inherited the means to live a more comfortable life, with enough to buy the mill in question. They are full of fascinating contradictions, these Milton men! Why, I’m sure apart from Thornton I’ve yet to meet a more eager or intelligent pupil than Piggott! Although I was surprised to discover he tends more towards Sophocles than Socrates- he is enamored of the theatre! But has had little chance to pursue his interest given…”

Margaret stared at her father, blinking and bewildered. She was used to his propensity to amble, rather than dash to the point, but just now she could not bear to be kept in suspense. Mr Piggott and his unfulfilled, thespian ambitions would have to wait.

“Father, please!”

The old man sighed, and looked his beloved daughter in the eye. She was, and always had been, a good girl; a credit to both her parents in every sense. She had blossomed into a particularly exceptional specimen of woman, he had surmised, since their removal to Milton. Perhaps not so much of a fine ‘lady’ as the term would be employed in the grand houses of London, where she had spent most of her formative years; but in his own eyes, and, he was convinced, in God’s. She was honest and compassionate, and had borne up more than admirably under the weight of reduced circumstances in which the family now found themselves. No, there was no doubt that the old Parson was incredibly proud of his passionate daughter. But had she had the clarity of mind to factor propriety into the equation?

“I have heard tell of a story, or rather, Mr Piggott confided it to me himself.”

He glanced at Margaret’s face. She was listening.

“His young cousin, raised in his house and under his care, and as dear as a sister to him, had been seen after dark some evening, walking arm in arm with a young man. One of the agents employed at one of the smaller cotton mills. It seems there had been some small attraction between them, but as it stood, no understanding as they were, you see, from very different backgrounds. She, the close family of a successful merchant and he, well, only a mill employee. Not one of the ‘hands’ as they call them but not quite her equal either.”

“Yes father…”

“According to Piggott, the lad was only accompanying her home from the station, as her chaperone had taken ill and he feared for her safety. But by the time the story had reached his own ears, it had been so embellished that it was tantamount to the worst sort of scandal. He confronted his cousin about the report, and she vehemently denied any impropriety. Naturally, he believed her…”

“And so he should,” observed Margaret, struggling to see a point anywhere on the immediate horizon.

“Yes, but this is the thing, Margaret,” He tightened his grasp on her hands, “Even if there was no impropriety, the story had become so inflated and exaggerated that the family could not escape the inevitable scandal. Miss… Miss Piggott, (as I imagine that is also her name), had no choice but to agree to a hasty engagement with the boy. They are to be married in September.”

Aha! There it was!
“Margaret, reputations are such fragile things! Women’s in particular. Perhaps I have been too lax, and have allowed you too much freedom.” He let go of her hands and looked away dejectedly. “It was always my aim that you and your brother be equipped to weigh the merits of what is good, against the importance of what is right. But it would seem that both my children share a talent for forgetting what is good and proper when there is justice or charity at stake.” He heaved a weary sigh, and glanced at Margaret from the corner of his eye.

“Father, I can assure you, nobody saw anything because there was nothing to see.” The lie came more quickly to her now, as if she were beginning to believe it herself. “And the Thorntons are well respected; he, a magistrate and she, well, a force of nature. It would not bode well for any of Milton’s society to make up stories about them.”

“Oh my dear,” said Mr Hale, reaching out to affectionately stroke her cheek, “I would not have you forced into some arrangement for the sake of your reputation, however much I may esteem John.” He pulled her into a warm embrace and, addressing the top of her head, whispered, “and I do not believe your mother’s heart could withstand anymore suffering on that score. She has already been brought so very low by Frederick’s mutiny and our own removal to this god-forsaken, gossip-ridden place.”

Margaret swallowed back the tears that her brother’s name had summoned. She pulled away just enough to look deep into her father’s eyes.

“Do not worry yourself, father. I know what is expected of me. You have taught me what is right and proper, and I will bring no scandal to our door, especially where Mr Thornton is concerned. Besides,” she took a moment to gather her thoughts, “I am not even sure I want to be married. Milton and my life here are enough to keep me happily, if not gainfully employed. And then there is you and mother. I will always have my little family to take care of.”

Mr Hale clasped her head back to his chest, afraid she would see the water gathering in his eyes. How could he correct her on this subject? She was of age to be interested in men, but again her education in that area was probably sorely lacking. With an invalid mother, a prudish Parson of a father and a sailor brother all but lost at sea, what did she know of the world of love, of marriage and of men? Not very much, he concluded, but perhaps it was better this way. Maybe he could send her to London? That other Lennox boy seemed agreeable enough, and if young Edith’s teasing was anything to go by, he probably showed an interest.

“Now, if that is all, I must be getting back to these drapes. I’m not convinced they will survive another washing this week, but they do seem to get sooty so very quickly here!” She stretched the pink and yellow fabric between her outstretched arms. “We never had such problems in Helstone!” she joked.

Mr Hale gazed at her wistfully. “No my dear, we didn’t.” He gifted her a small, contrite smile and left her to her work.

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It was late by the time Margaret retired for the night. She had finished the linens, dined with her father and spent the best part of an hour reading to her mother. She had always enjoyed good health and a lively disposition, but she found that her life here in Milton had a way of wearing down even her energetic constitution. Come the day’s end, her head scarcely hit the pillow before she was fast asleep upon it.

But tonight she could not sleep. It was not that she wasn’t tired, no indeed, she felt keenly that particular fatigue that comes from keeping an electric storm of emotion in check for a prolonged
period of time. The ache in her back from bending over the ironing was nothing compared to the knot in her stomach at all the untruths, or rather the single omission she had had to repeat several times over the past day and a half. With all the care she had taken to spare her beloved parents, she had neglected to offer herself adequate time to acknowledge her own opinion on the events.

The dying summer sunlight waning at the window, and the uncharacteristically cool, summer draught wafting up through the house and under her door were quiet, calming invitations for her to assess her feelings. About what exactly, she wasn’t sure. She tried to retrace her steps throughout that afternoon, but found that several junctions elicited such strange sensations within her that she couldn’t continue. Oh dear! Perhaps she should try a different approach.

She sat up in bed and rested her weary back against the smooth wooden headboard. What were the facts? Thornton, *Mr Thornton* had been injured. She had cared for him, as she would have any other human being. Higgins had helped her, and the doctor had been sent for. That much was clear and indisputable.

Then she had been alone with him, although she had not considered the implications of their isolation at the time. And she had nursed him to the best of her ability. Her mind recalled the warmth radiating from his body, his slight twitches at her touch, his lips slightly parted and the scent of him; sweat and soap, strong and masculine…

Suddenly she was transported. His lips on hers, that warm embrace. That look of complete adoration. The small, intimate moment suspended in space and time that belonged only to the two of them as he had freely helped himself to her. And she had not pulled away.

A sharp pain from her lower lip jolted her back to reality. Her own teeth had drawn blood! What was this heat in her belly? This rapid beating of her heart? Although in the deepest, darkest, most delicious part of her she knew instinctively what this was; she had neither the experience, nor the vocabulary to put into words what she was feeling, let alone make any rational sense of it. This was Mr Thornton, after all. The unmistakable, implacable Mill Master of Milton, who had first impressed her with his kindness in assisting the procurement of their home, and then, so soon after, shocked her with his cruelty in beating a starving man who was not his equal.

Granted, she had not had all the facts in her possession when she had formed her second opinion of his callousness and brutality. Her sense of fair play had driven her to make amends in person, once she had learned more of the circumstances in which he had acted. She would never agree with his methods, but conceded that she was in no position to judge him for his execution of the consequences he thought necessary for such a grievous misstep as smoking in a cotton mill. Something in her mind had shifted then. Her opinion of Mr Thornton and the great city he called home had changed as she became painfully aware of her own naiveté and prejudice regarding the industrial north. She had then resolutely determined to discover as much of the city, its people and its ways as possible, in order to form an original opinion of it on its merits alone. In doing so, she had found herself unconsciously taking the same approach to him, as if Milton and the man were one inseparable entity.

Their exchanges had been polite, but earnest. She liked that about him, and the people here in general. There was no pretense, no meaning implied that was not explicitly expressed. When he conversed, as she had heard him do in the many evenings he had spent under her father’s tutelage, his words were measured and precise. She suspected that the usual serious demeanour that cast him as so distant and severe, was likely the product of concentration and circumspection rather than cruelty and calculation. His tragic history, as he had awkwardly related to them on one of those evenings, attested to her suspicions that he was undoubtedly a man of great moral character and valor, inasmuch as she understood the terms.
She toyed nervously with the braid resting on her shoulder. It was no secret that their acquaintance had not been an easy one. Although there was much to be admired in the moral fibre of his character, the world he occupied and consequently, his manner, were harsh. With his disdain for the south, and his apparent indifference to the inequality and injustice that surrounded him, he displayed a talent for provoking Margaret to a righteous anger that she had often found herself struggling to quell.

Margaret winced. She had been worrying the plait so roughly she had managed to undo the end of it and snarl the hair together into a tight knot. She sighed as she removed the scrap of ribbon that no longer served any purpose and set about pulling the tangle apart hair by hair.

She flushed with shame as she remembered her conduct at the Thorntons’ dinner party. She had been reluctant to go, but her mother had insisted, and so she had determined to honour her father and his friend, Mr Bell, by being as agreeable company as she could manage. The evening had been pleasant enough, aside from a couple of lascivious glances in her direction from the same offender- a Mr Slickson, she was told; one of the other Mill Masters. By contrast, Mr Thornton, easily the youngest and most handsome man there, had come off quite the refined gentleman. She had been eager to shake his hand, and would have liked to continue one of their previous conversations pertaining to his moral duty as an employer, but they had been separated when dinner had been announced.

The knot was unravelled and her hair lay in thick, lazy waves across her shoulder and down her chest, covering her right breast. She cringed as she remembered the hot swell of indignant rage that had climed from her core to her face, making her nose itch. How dare Mrs Thornton and her daughter talk down to her in such a way! When all she was doing was her christian duty to help a poor, starving mother feed her child. Her public rebuke of him had been impetent, and she had hardly noticed the whole party silently watching their exchange until her father spoke up to divert the conversation, addressing Mrs Thornton on the subject of her place settings. She had felt the aching throb of shame and embarrassment settle in the pit of her stomach, and had willed the floor to open up beneath her and swallow her whole. She had been unspeakably rude, and knowing the brutishness he was capable of, she silently prepared herself for his inevitable (and justified) retribution.

But it had not come. His gaze had sought her out on several occasions during the evening and when their eyes met, it was their warmth, not their wrath, that had moved her. Upon her and her father’s departure he had even apologised for his mother and sister’s tactless behaviour. He had left her in no doubt of his capacity for kindness and gentility; and feeling no little shame for her own outspoken and unruly tongue.

They had seen little of each other until the day of the riot. And the events of that day, she did not dare conjure up again in her mind, lest that irrepressible heat come upon her again. But what had happened? Why had he kissed her? And what would happen now? She slumped back down into the pillows. What was she to do?

There was no understanding between them. Nay, there weren’t even any feelings to speak of, as far as she knew. So what then? Her mind suddenly flashed with a memory of Henry, what had he said? “Encouragement… a London girl would have known… not to encourage.” She shook her head, as if to shake his unpleasant memory from her mind. Encourage- that was the key. Somehow, she must have encouraged Mr Thornton- how else could she explain this good, albeit a little rough, man taking the liberty of her lips so very easily? But it had surely been her mistake, and she would have to remedy it. She would have to ensure she gave him no more encouragement, lest he truly begin to misconstrue her character.
“But… but what if he already does?!” she gasped out loud to herself, horrified, the question summoning a brand new wave of heated panic to crash over her. She had not thought of that! She did not dare speculate on what a man would think of a woman giving herself so easily to such an improper embrace. And who knows what conclusions a coarse milton man such as himself might draw? It was too much!

There were no two ways about it. The kiss had happened, and that, she could not change. His opinion of her had undoubtedly been affected by their encounter, but in that too, she was powerless. She summoned as much courage as she could muster, and through a stifled yawn and drooping eyelids, swore a determined oath to herself. Come the morrow she would endeavour to give the man no more ‘encouragement’, lest he mistake her for a woman of loose morals. And she would no longer think on the matter, lest she find herself drowning in the uncharted and raging sea of feelings that, she suspected, had already begun to take root in her heart.
Repercussions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We have already discussed this, Mother.” Thornton exhaled, “It would likely be very complicated, not to mention cruel to attempt to locate, let alone further punish the offenders.”

“But surely an example must be made, John,” insisted his mother, “a message must be sent! What, would you have the hands believe they may go about lobbing bricks at their masters with impunity? That blow to your head must’ve caused more damage than Donaldson imagined!”

John smiled, a small, tired smile. Her dry, laughless humour signalled the beginning of her surrender. He did not like to argue with his mother, and it felt as though they had done little else of late. Although that was not entirely her fault.

After Margaret’s departure from the millhouse, he had fallen into broken, fitful sleep for much of the first day, his dreams filled with appealing, bucolic scenery centred around its appealing, bucolic protagonist. Then the pain had overwhelmed him, and his dreams had turned into a nightmarish mess of his father, mill fires and the snarling hunger that had haunted his adolescence. He had jolted himself awake, dazed and confused at finding himself in his nightshirt, in his bedchamber, in what appeared to be the middle of the next day. He had roared for his mother; cursed the boom of his own voice; leapt out of bed and swiftly collapsed onto the floor. Then the doctor had been sent for and had stayed long enough for John to rouse and hear the prognostic from the man himself.

The doctor had insisted on a full week’s bedrest, or at least until the dizziness subsided, along with a whole host of bitter concoctions and crystallized solutions to be swallowed and inhaled and rubbed on his brow. John had fought and protested every step of the way, rising determinedly on the second and third mornings in an attempt to demonstrate his wellness, but soon the blackness had overwhelmed him and he had finally conceded to staying in bed. But he had been foul-tempered and demanding, his anxiety over the repercussions of the strike aggravated by the pain. He had insisted on being allowed to half-dress in his breeches and undershirt; and had his mother or Williams bring the day’s paperwork to his bedside so that he could still manage the mill’s progress, now that the the strike had come naught and the hands were clamouring to get back to work.

He recalled very little of the events of that fateful day, except that his dreams had been more vivid and pleasant than he had ever known. He vaguely remembered happening upon Miss Hale in the foyer… she had come to ask to borrow something. A hot water bottle? No, that wasn’t it. A kettle? Surely they had one of their own… Argh, he couldn’t remember. No matter, she was there and she wanted something and there couldn’t have been a worse time.

He was loath to send her away, or to leave her unattended. Their exchanges had recently taken a more amiable turn, and he had allowed himself the luxury of collecting pleasant thoughts of her; the honesty in her regard as she had apologized for refusing his first handshake; her blush as his fingers had brushed against hers when she served him tea; the sympathy in her eyes as she had enquired about his pocket watch; the cut of that dress as it clung to the prettiest parts of her on the night of the dinner party…

But the mill was in danger. The innocent irishmen, his innocent irishmen she had called them, were disoriented, and terrified out of their wits. He had sent Fanny away, and mother to the cellars, in the eventuality that things take a turn for the worst. Then he had waited. And she had appeared.
She had exhibited such extraordinary fearlessness in commanding him to go out and speak to the crowd. In truth his pride had been not a little piqued, but he had also believed her to be right. It was not honourable to skulk in the relative safety and comfort of the millhouse while the rioters bayed like dogs for his blood just outside his door. And yet she had told him that they were not his enemy, nor he, theirs. He had begun to see what she saw, that although their viciousness and violence was inexcusable, they were, as she put it, driven mad with hunger.

Yet right there, in between his stepping out in front of Miss Hale to face the rioters, and his rude awakening in his bed almost two days later, hung a hazy, shady nothingness that he just could not make out. The feeling was most unsettling. He vaguely remembered Miss Hale’s gentle voice, rising to a higher pitch than he had previously heard. She sounded alarmed. And there was another… a scotsman. No, that must have been Donaldson. There was certainly a Darkshireman, and a coarse one at that. But here, in his house? Who could it have been?

He had waited until his mother left the room before asking the doctor if he could explain his alarming lapses in memory. He did not wish to worry her, sensible of the fact that she, and everything they had worked so hard for, were dependent on his vigorous health and stalwart constitution. Dr Donaldson had reassured him that his symptoms were in keeping with the injury he had sustained. They would wear off, and although he might never clearly recall the events of those two days, the blow had struck a nerve very near to his brain, and he was lucky to have been spared the worst. John had been satisfied, and had tried to be more amenable ever since.

“Are you hungry?” the question jolted him back to the present. “You’ve barely eaten a thing today, and the doctor says you must get your strength up.”

John stopped to consider her question. The laudenum succeeded in relieving most of the pain, yet his thoughts were still muddled, as though his mind were filled with cotton fluff. Such a basic question did not warrant such long minutes of deep reflection. He said the first thing that came to mind.

“Yes mother, I believe I am. I will not be pressing charges. Is there any veal left?”

Mrs Thornton looked at her son quizzically. It was unlike him to speak in such a disorderly fashion; jumping from one subject to another. Her John was meticulous in everything he did, from his grooming to his accounting to the very words he chose. She knew this, because she herself had drilled the quality into him. After his father’s suicide she knew his life would be one of hardship and struggle, but she saw great promise in him, the same promise that had drawn her to her George Thornton- that driven, generous man. She could not risk losing her only son to the same sort of tragic error of judgement, and so had raised him to conduct himself with a great deal of circumspection in every area of life.

It was armed with this certainty of her son’s faultless character that she resolutely determined to lay the blame for the impropriety she had observed, squarely at Miss Hale’s door. In spite of much unwavering determination and feminine wiles, no girl of their acquaintance had ever succeeded in turning John’s head before the arrival of this saucy, southern slip of a thing. Within a matter of weeks she had had her poor John changing his clothes twice in one day (for tea no less!) fawning over philosophers and poetry, and entertaining her every query and criticism with regards to the mill. She had privately attacked him and his colleagues, accusing them of ungentlemanly cruelty in matters that she knew nothing about. She had subjected him to the public undermining of his methods and defamation of his character- and all this under his own roof, at his own dinner table at that!

The lack of reprisal on his part on the night of that infamous dinner party had not gone unnoticed.
by his mother, nor by any of the other guests, she was sure. It would not do for John to be found so
easily subjugated by the charms of some pretty, haughty novelty, no matter how high she may
fancy herself above the rest of Milton. Not so high, it would seem, that she would pass over a
chance at the clear advantage that the wealth and position of this mere merchant-manufacturer
could offer her and her impoverished family. Financially reduced and friendless in an alien city,
Miss Hale had evidently set her sights on the biggest catch she could find, and was determined to
secure him for herself, before anyone else got their claws in him. She was hardly the first girl to
attempt such a feat.

No, Hannah Thornton knew her son, and she knew women. She knew the wistful, unrequited looks
he received when they were out in society or town. She heard the attempts to tease and flirt; and the
shril peals of laughter that rang out a little too quickly in response to one so sorely ill-versed in the
art of polite drollery. She saw the batting of eyelashes, the fluttering of fans and the tending of
corseted figures towards the one, irresistible centre of attraction that held them all entranced. Her
John was not just the most handsome and eligible man in Milton; he was also one of the wealthiest,
and most powerful; not merely in his position, but in the very fibre of his person. His tall, broad
stature was both massive and intimidating, and his movements were graceful and measured;
revealing the confidence expected of a man far more advanced in years and experience than he
actually was. The deep, thunderous melody of his voice, seldom raised above an eloquent rumble,
had the singular power of holding his listeners spellbound to whatever carefully considered thought
he had judged worth putting to words.

When combined with the economy of his speech, the exactness of his ideas and forthright
execution of his decisions had set him apart amongst the other Mill Masters of Milton. Although
he was by far the youngest, his fellow mill owners were long in the habit of seeking his counsel in
most subjects that affected the running of their respective mills. More often than not, they would
derer to his judgement on this matter of trade or that. Upon hearing that he had been hit during the
riot, an nauseating unease had crept over them and cast a shadow over their meetings at the local
gentleman's club that had been held daily in the aftermath of the strike. The masters were worried.
They did not know if this assault would prove to quell or excite the mob's bloodlust; if the hands
would feel embarrassed or emboldened by their success in striking down one who was so
representative of their grievances and subjugation.

One certainty remained: in receiving such a blow, Thornton had somehow managed to dissolve the
strike, at least for the present. Most of the hands had slunk back to the mills, restless and frustrated,
to claim their jobs. The masters had little recourse except to accept them, as orders had to be filled
and time and expense lost had to be accounted for. But they were still unsure of how to proceed.
They had seen how quickly they could be brought to their knees; one whisper of strike and the
whole city might find itself at a standstill once more, and worse off than it had been in the first
instance. Milton's cotton hung in the balance between the iron will of its masters and the foolish
grit of its workers- for that is what they considered it to be: foolishness. Fools to think the masters
could be bent to their will; fools to bite the very hand that so meagrely fed them; fools to resort to
such abject violence against one so superior in both station and power to themselves.

But come the week's end, when Thornton sat with his eyes trained on his half-drunk tumbler of
brandy and listened to the masters' nervous exultation at the workers' humiliation, it was not
foolishness that came to mind when he remembered their haggard faces. He recalled their ghastly
appearances, their desperate cries, the blinding madness of hunger in their eyes. No, if they were as
fools it was because the strike, the masters, the mills had somehow made it so. His head throbbed,
as it had been wont to do of late. Hamper's grating pitch regaled the company with yet another
account of his clever trickery in regards to his workers; how he had promised to consider a pay
rise, then refused at the very last minute, taking a distinctly perverse pleasure in dashing their
hopes and stoking their grievances. Such abject cruelty. Miss Hale was right. There were no
gentlemen here.

“What’ll ye’ do with yer Irish, Thornton?” said Matthews, cutting into his silent remonstrations.

Thornton looked up, his eyes taking in each of the six pot-bellied, powerful Milton masters. He knew the attack had given them cause for concern— not for him personally; they would have happily seen him knocked down dead if it meant they could somehow acquire his mill and assets, and the position that came with it. But he wondered if his injury had served to enlighten them, as it had himself, as to how dependent the two opposing sides were on one another, each with its own distinct ability to completely cripple the other; each with its own exact method of robbing the other of their livelihood. In the long hours he had spent confined to his bed he had pondered the matter from all angles, and had come to one, of several, irrefutable conclusions.

If the strike had been prolonged, his business and livelihood would have undoubtedly suffered. Yet he knew he could count on a sturdy roof over his head, some money put aside in the bank and the means to go on living in the same easy manner for quite some time. His mother, sister and himself would have eaten their fill, rested and entertained themselves in much the same fashion as they had done up until that moment, and would have had the luxury of time to settle their affairs, empty the millhouse and move into smaller, and only slightly less comfortable accommodations. Thornton himself would have been certain to procure a suitable, if slightly reduced, position of employment in one of the other businesses in town. They would have had to endure the disgrace and humiliation of his failure, but without the oppressive weight of poverty that suffocated his workers in its clawed grasp.

He would not have to suffer the sight of his mother begging for work in the street, nor his sister’s ample frame wasting away for lack of food. He would not have to sacrifice his midday or even evening meal so that the women in his care could eat. They would be safe, dry and attended by a reduced, but probably still sufficient number of household staff. They would enjoy their health and the simple satisfaction that only having one’s family nearby and thriving could procure. They would not be kept from their rest or occupations by the disease and infirmity that plagued so many of those who had worked in the mills from their earliest age.

No, the interdependent nature of the relationship between master and millworker began to present itself clearly to him during his confinement. But the fallout of an event such as the strike was clearly far more dreadful for one side than for the other. The hands would lose everything, where he and the other masters would only lose in part. And Thornton had not forgotten, for it was not so long ago, that he himself had been at the mercy of an employer, scraping and saving to keep his mother sheltered and his baby sister fed. He was coming to see that Miss Hale, and her dear father, might not have been so ignorant in their assessment that he and his workers were not so very different after all.

He had yet to answer the man’s question. He found himself tiring more easily, and becoming more easily distracted since the blow, but even he was conscious of the fact that he had delayed a little too long in responding. Silence had fallen across the mahogany table, as the men waited with bated breath for their unofficial leader to shed some light on his intentions. It was, after all, his Irishmen, his riot, and his injury that had broken the strike and brought about this state of uneasy recovery in the mills...

“I will keep them on,” he began, addressing all the men at once, “those that remain, that is. After the riot and some hostility from the locals, a few of them asked to be returned to Ireland. But I brought them here with the promise of work so work they shall have, no matter what the hands have to say about it...”
“Serves them right!” interjected Hamper, to a chorus of enthusiastic agreement from the others, “the brutes! Let Paddy come and have their places. I’ll reckon they’ll think twice about quitting work the next time they…”

“I said I would give them work,” interrupted Thornton, his low rumble silencing their jeering approbation “I did not say they would replace my Milton workers.”

The masters stared at Thornton, confusion written on some faces, disbelief playing across others. With the global cotton market being what it was, now was not the time for any of the mills to take on new workers, and very likely unskilled and untrained ones at that. What was he playing at? Reading their expressions, but conscious that he owed them no particular explanation, he elaborated in his usual, matter-of-fact way.

“If the hands are willing to put aside their resentment and work for me, I will welcome them back into the mill and we will go on as we did before, in most respects. I have a duty to the irish in bringing them here, so far from their homes, with the promise of work. I am not a man to shirk my duty, whatever cost I might incur for myself. I can only hope that we can catch up with the orders that have been delayed and receive payment in a timely manner.”

It was several, long minutes before any of the masters spoke. When they did, three or four of them spoke at once, their protestations colliding noisily into one another. Thornton winced as the cacophony of darkshire accents tugged painfully at the area between his ears and temples.

“What?! No consequences for the strikers?”

“Have ye’ gone quite mad?! What about sanctions?”

“Your hands would sooner slit their throats than train up paddy in his own trade!”

“How’ll ye’ stop them saving up against another strike?”

Thornton looked down at his lap and shook his head, partly to relieve the tension, partly in disappointment. He could hardly have expected otherwise, really. If anything, his observation of their vindictive fury confirmed his hypothesis: the same sense of injustice that had animated the angry mob on that day now possessed the spirits of each one of the men sat before him here. But he would not indulge their outrage. The humiliation, and near starvation had been punishment enough for the strikers, and it did not suit his recent enlightenment regarding the balance of their relationship to further antagonise the workers, or their precious union.

“There will be no sanctions on strikers, although I daresay I won’t take Neale back on, (should he come asking), what with him being one of the union leaders. How the hands choose to spend their pay is still none of my business. I wouldn’t take kindly to someone telling me where to spend my money, and so I won’t start telling them where to spend theirs.”

He rose to leave, the throbbing in his temples, and the stuffy air of the “gentlemen’s” lounge having become quite unbearable. He would not attempt to convince them of the merit of his own, personal revelations on the matter- the subject was still shifting and settling inside his own mind. But he would invite them, as was his duty as a member of the Milton Masters’ Guild, to entertain a notion that, he believed, would prove to be to the benefit of all, masters and workers alike.

“I have made my decision on the matter, and will speak no more of it. But I would caution you, my fellow cotton lords, against further aggravating the situation with fines or restrictions on union participation, or the like. I believe it would be beneficial for all of us masters if we could attempt to bleed them of their bitterness, rather than fuel it.”
With the briefest nod of his head he was gone, and the masters were left steeping in their own brandy-laced bewilderment. Thornton had always been a man apart from them in his temperament, as well as honesty, integrity and power, but there now lay between them a deep, cavernous trench filled with something they could not put their finger on. Madness, Hamper thought to himself. Some deceit or trickery, suspected Slickson. Not one of them recognised it for what it was, foetal as it was in its development: moral conviction.

As he made his way back from the club to the mill, Thornton also found himself engrossed in the assessment of the sudden distance he too felt between himself and the rest of the Masters’ Guild. It did not make him uneasy, so sure was he in the moral righteousness and, incidentally, sound business merit in the shift of his attitudes towards his mill and all those who depended on it, not just himself and his family.

He turned the sharp corner onto Marlborough Street. The brisk walk, made shorter by the length of his stride, had done wonders to dissolve the pain that stretched between his temples. He had been pleased to find that exercise and activity actually seemed to make the headaches better, and fully embraced the fact by throwing himself into his work with more vigour and determination than ever. The mill’s survival hung in a precarious balance between delayed orders, deferred payments, dwindling resources and restless workmen, but he was not a man to shy away from a challenge, no matter the magnitude. Some deep, primal part of him even relished it, particularly in view of his recent, internal revelations of how things could be improved in the future, for both himself and his workers. The hope was to him like the breaking dawn creeping its way promisingly across the floor before flooding the whole room with light, and ushering in a brand new day.

As he passed through the familiar wooden gates, now repaired from the damage sustained during the riot, his thoughts turned to the one he had come to consider as his muse; the inspiration behind this new well of determination and fresh ideas. He knew enough of his own character to admit that it was not any great generosity of his own spirit that had sparked this marked change in stance. Nor was it entirely the fruit of his interviews with Mr Hale, fascinating and informative as they had been, filled with discussions of philosophy, morality and religion as they pertained to the business and bustle of Milton. No, it was none of these. It was Miss Hale. It was, utterly and entirely, Miss Hale.

Even in the clutches of his undeniable attraction for her, inflamed and intensified by his many recent and gratifying dreams, (some so real he could almost swear they were more memory than dream!); he had not yet landed on an adequate designation within which to encase these new and tender feelings. Attraction, admiration, desire… he had been a grown man long enough to recognise the symptoms of those feelings. But there was something else that had taken root deep in his heart, in the part he guarded most jealously, and to which no other had ever been granted admittance. It was a keen fascination, bordering on obsession, with the inner workings of her mind and the development of her opinions that had been, in the past, so diametrically opposed to his own.

He had developed the habit, since their earliest acquaintance, of subconsciously asking himself what Miss Hale would be thinking in such and such an instance, in this circumstance or that. When he was at leisure, he wondered what she would make of the latest story he had read in the paper. When he inspected the Mill’s output, he pondered whether she held any informed preference for cotton or linen. When he sat down for his evening meal, his mind would seek refuge from Fanny’s inane conversation in ruminations over Margaret’s stance on beef or lamb; or her view on taking a glass of wine at dinner. And his deliberations of more significant issues tended in the same direction: what had she seen when she looked out on that sea of desperation and defiance? What would her reaction have been to the act of violence and the events that had lead up to it? And, most importantly, what would she do; or what would she have had him do next? Revenge, retribution
against the perpetrators? Surely not. Hers was a kinder, more compassionate way.

And so he had incorporated these approximations of his muse’s opinion on the matter, combining them with his own methodological evaluation of his current situation, and the potential repercussions of any course of action. This strategy made him feel closer to Miss Hale, even though she was undoubtedly unaware of being almost constantly at the foreground of his thoughts, or the background of his conclusions. In the past she had alluded to the fact that she did not consider him a gentleman, and it had stung. But he began to feel, as his dreams and determination built her up in his mind, that there might just be the smallest hope of her looking on him and his current actions in an approving light. And where there was approval, was there not room for bolder, brighter, and more delightful feelings to grow?

He crossed the threshold of the millhouse, wincing as the sour sound of Fanny’s tone-deaf rendition of Bennett’s Sonata rang out over the silence of the empty mill. It was well past six, and dinner would be served soon. He could hardly wait! The day had been full, challenging, and distinctly devoid of refreshment of any kind. But most of all he treasured the anticipation of the time when he could retire to his private rooms and be alone with his thoughts. There he would eagerly await the arrival of his muse, arms outstretched and quite informally attired, as she beckoned him into the most pleasurable depths of sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you once again for all the reads, follows and feedback! Please, keep the comments coming, I welcome all of them so don't hold back!

I discovered I had taken the mistaken liberty of dubbing John's father "James" when the book clearly states his name was "George". Apologies! It's been edited now.

And lastly many thanks to AvidNorthAndSouthFan for her suggestion that I add a little more worker-master angst into the mix, which does make for a meatier, more well-rounded story. Let me know what you think...
Repentance

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay in posting this chapter. My aim is to post every week, either on a Sunday or Wednesday. I have also edited the previous three chapters ever so slightly. Please let me know what you think!

It was with a heavy tread that Nicholas Higgins made his way up the winding Princeton alleys. Although his face gave nothing away, as was his Darkshire wont, his mind was bubbling over with the recollection of the events that had passed in the month since the riot. The strike had broken, but his personal troubles had only begun. None of the masters would take him on, but that much was only to be expected. He had some small amount of coin put by in anticipation of such times, but when his brother-in-law, John Boucher’s corpse had washed up on the shores of the canal, he knew that what little he had would have to feed the six little mouths that that lily-livered recreant had left behind.

In truth it was not just a sense of familial duty that propelled him to take his young nephews and nieces under his wing. He also carried a heavy shroud of guilt. Unbeknownst to few but himself and his late sister-in-law (who had had the pusillanimity to pass away herself within days of her husband’s suicide), John Boucher had lead the cry to arms against Marlborough Mills and the Irish concealed within. It had been Boucher who, upon the emergence of his Master from behind the gentle Miss Margaret, had gathered a few choice stones from the ground and pressed them into the palms of the younger, more impressionable lads crushed all around him. It had been Boucher’s challenge to Thornton regarding the irish that had risen over the crowd. And it had been upon Boucher’s urging, and insistent prodding in the ribs, that the young Price boy, not yet fifteen years of age, had hurled his missive at the master’s indomitable form.

Upon leaving Marlborough Mills, Higgins had lost no time in tracking down his treacherous brother-in-law, who had been one of the first to flee. He found him late that evening, cowering under a bridge, bottle in hand and incoherent wails of regret tearing from his chapped lips. If he hadn’t had upwards of ten years experience of the man’s theatrics, Higgins might have felt sorry for the louse. But as it was, he felt nothing but disgust.

Boucher had always been a vicious man, prone to drink and violence, and always envious of Higgins’ position in the union and the respect that came with it. With the arrival of the irish he had seen his chance to become a leader of men, but not in the passive, diplomatic manner in which his brother-in-law and his comrades sought to go about it. He wanted retribution- for himself and for the others who would undoubtedly turn to him in reverence and gratitude once the masters had been made to pay for their crimes. His thoughtless ambition and bloodlust overpowered him, and it was only when the enormity of his actions and their consequences dawned on him that he had escaped by the only means he knew.
Higgins had rebuked and reviled him, shoving him against the damp brick wall and spelling out the consequences of his actions for the strike, the workers and the union. He had ordered him to give himself up, certain that Thornton would be eager to press charges against his attackers. He had cursed him, and lamented his poor wife and children for having such a reckless lunatic for a father. As he spat his revulsion he did not suspect the chord his words would strike in the drunkard’s addled mind. He threatened to give him up to the union, then released him, feeling equally satisfied and frustrated by their altercation. He stalked off back home, hurling a few more insults over his shoulder for good measure.

Their was the last conversation John Boucher would have on this earth. When his body was discovered and brought back to Princeton, Higgins felt keenly that it must have been his own harsh words that drove this wild, weak man to such a miserable end. As his late wife, (god rest her soul), had often reminded him, not all men had been forged of the same steel that he was. Her wretched sister’s husband was a prime example. Still, Higgins knew he had to take responsibility; for his actions as much as for his late wife’s memory. But his hopes, his money, and the children’s gaunt bodies were already wearing thin. He was desperate. He went to the only place he could think of.

The housekeeper, a large, red-faced lady, let him in begrudgingly and lead him to the kitchen. There she forbade him to move or breathe or, (heaven forbid!) touch anything. She appraised him one last time, a look of acute displeasure crimping her porcine face, before leaving to inform her young mistress of his arrival. He heard voices raised above, followed by the pattering of footsteps, some laborious, some light, rushing down the creaky staircase until materialising with their owners in the doorway.

Miss Margaret rushed forward to greet her friend warmly, and her father followed close behind, hands outstretched in a gesture of welcome and condolence for the poor man’s loss. Tea was offered and prepared and, after some coaxing, Higgins laid out his current predicament for his friend’s advice. He was prepared to do anything to see the children taken care of, even if it meant leaving his beloved Darkshire to find work, even at a lower wage.

“Oh no, Nicholas! There would be nothing for you in the south!” cried Margaret, distressed by her friend’s desperation. “You would find it so dull, with nothing to fight for and nobody to fight with. Besides, who would look after the children while you were away?”

“Margaret is right,” added Mr Hale, “it would not be prudent to attempt such a journey without the certainty of finding work before winter sets in. No, I cannot say that I would advise it, however much I wish I could be of assistance.”

Higgins sighed. The Hales and their southern promise had been his final option. He would have no choice but to put the children in the workhouse, and Lord knew what would become of them there.
“I wonder…” said Margaret, interrupting his thoughts and pressing two fingers to her lips pensively, “I mean, perhaps... Nicholas, have you thought of applying to Marlborough Mills?”

Higgins scoffed, choking a little on his tea.

“Aye, I bin’ t’ Thornton’s Mill…”

“And?”

“And nowt, miss Margaret. Oh t’ overseer, that Williams feller, was kind enough t’ hear me out, but ‘im as good as told me I was wastin’ me time, that Thornton’d sooner set fire t’ ‘is own mill than see th’ likes of me workin’ in it. I dint’ get no further than t’ gates.”

“Oh.”

Margaret turned her gaze to the window, turning things over in her mind. The matter felt unresolved to her. Had Nicholas been given the opportunity of an interview with Mr Thornton himself, she suspected that the master would have surely been inclined to hear, if not act, in the poor man’s favour. There was a pragmatic sort of kindness hidden carefully beneath that cold, marble exterior. Kindness, compassion, humanity…

_Tenderness, passion, softness…_

“But you did not speak with Mr Thornton himself,” she pressed, snatching herself back from that heated precipice. “You did not meet with him face to face, and lay the facts of the situation before him as you have, so clearly, to us here today.”

“No miss, I weren’t given t’opportunity. Though I don’t think t’ outcome’d have bin much different.”

“Nicholas, I think you should go back to Marlborough Mills,” said Margaret resolutely. “Speak with Mr Thornton himself. Tell him you had no part in the riot; remind him of how you were on hand for him when he was injured. He is a thinking man, a decent man, not unlike yourself. I am sure he will listen to you.” She paused, waiting for his response, “He is not like the other masters.”
Nicholas looked down at his bare feet, the condition imposed by the housekeeper on his admittance upstairs. Miss Margaret was a good sort, but very young, very naive. She did not know the masters and their ruthless ways. Hers had been a sheltered life, full of love and affirmation. He knew her heart was firmly on the side of the workers, but he had noticed a warmth in her attentions to the master when he had been hurt. He would not disabuse her of her optimism now. Besides, it was hardly as if he had anything to lose.

“Alright, Miss Margaret, I’ll try Thornton’s once again. But I don’t expec’ anything’ll come of it. Whatever assistance I bin’ t’ th’ master that day’ll be nothing t’ ‘im in light o’ me position in th’ union.”

“No, Nicholas, I am sure you are mistaken. How could Mr Thornton be anything but grateful towards someone who helped him when he was most in need of it? He cannot be as ungenerous as you think.”

Higgins scoffed again, and slurped down the rest of his tea.

“Per’aps you are right, miss. We shall see.” He offered her a lopsided smirk, the closest thing to a smile he could manage. He thanked his friends gruffly for their time, and ambled down to the kitchen to retrieve his boots, before taking his leave.

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In another parlour across town Mr Thornton’s behaviour was under the scrutiny of a very different woman entirely. Since the riot, Hannah Thornton had watched her son like a hawk. Her concern was partly for his health, but stemmed chiefly from her need to detect any sign that his partiality to that Hale girl had grown. She had flung herself at him so very wantonly, and John was, afterall, a grown man with a grown man’s needs. She wasn’t actually certain how much of his wits he had had about him at the time. His attachment to her could not be denied, but he had yet to make her an offer, and had given no indication that he planned on doing so anytime soon. Mrs Thornton clung to the hope that she still had time to intervene, but in the back of her mind lay the unnerving certainty that once John’s heart had truly been stolen away, the wildest of horses could never bring it back to her.

It was with this intent that she attempted to coax his thoughts away from Miss Hale and onto other matters. The mill, the fallout of the strike, finding Fanny a suitable husband… but she found that nothing held his attention with the same immutable gravity as it did before. He still listened to her concerns and counsel, but would disappear in his own thoughts, an uncharacteristic ghost of a smile often tugging at his lips. At times his replies alarmed her- no sanctions for union members;
talk of some worker productivity scheme; even suggesting Fanny should only marry for love! No, she would have to find a way; some other girl perhaps? Anyone but this penniless, southern sprite who had bewitched her son, body and soul.

“I heard Mr Latimer’s daughter is soon to return from Switzerland.”

John looked up from his letter. It was unlike mother to take an interest in other people’s affairs.

“Mrs Foster says she’s quite the fine young lady, what with her having completed her finishing school.”

John smirked. “I daresay that was the object, mother. Otherwise they’d ‘ve asked for their money back.”

Mrs Thornton clicked her tongue, training her eyes on the stitch in front of her. John teased and joked far more than she was comfortable with these days. Although you could hardly tell if you did not know him. To the outside world his brow was as stern and his gait as impassive as ever.

“It would be a good match for us, John. I seem to recall her catching your eye when last she was over. When we dined there, with the Fosters…” She paused to glance up at him. “And such a close connection to Mr Latimer couldn’t be owt but advantageous to the mill.”

John stared at his mother for a moment before turning back to the half-finished letter lying on the desk. He hardly knew what to think, except that he wanted to laugh. He knew how excruciating such a topic must be for his mother, but he could not believe how mistaken she was. Miss Latimer, Anne Latimer caught his eye? Yes, it was possible, she was a pleasant enough girl with a fine figure, and his height did afford him an agreeable vantage point on the latest, revealing, European fashions she was usually decked in. Perhaps she had caught his eye, but that was all. She had no claim to any other part of him, least of all his heart.

He rose with his gaze still fixed on his desk. “I’d best get back to the mill. I can finish my letters there.” He stopped to place an affectionate hand on her shoulder, “I should be back tonight, Mother, though I might be late.”

Once concealed in the darkness of the hall he let out a quiet chuckle. Miss Latimer indeed! Didn’t Mother, who knew him better than anyone else in the world, know where his heart lay? How it had been stolen from under their very noses and spirited away to the other side of town where it was
being held hostage by a most agreeable captor? His thoughts turned once more to Miss Hale: what was she doing? What was she thinking? What was she wearing?

He could hardly stand this intensity of feeling, and yet simultaneously could not get enough of it. This feral rush of passion, this raging tangle of emotion that coloured his bleary days in the mill and fueled his wild imaginings at night. He had seen women, he had noticed women, but he was certain he had never felt this way before.

Before Miss Hale, there had only been Caroline, the draper’s niece, who had painted his cheeks with their first, faint blush and loosed a small flight of winged insects into the pit of his stomach as he worked alongside her at her uncle’s shop. A bonny, effervescent girl who was always pleased to share her smiles and her noonday meal with ‘her little John’. She had even kissed him once, a chaste but curious peck on his eager lips that had taken him by surprise and made him feel quite giddy. At fifteen he already towered over her, even though she was almost four years his senior, and often made him feel like a small child unable to express himself. Then a certain, eligible Mr Ross had stopped in Milton on business, and had been so impressed by her dimpled smiles and cheery disposition that he had almost immediately swept her away to Scotland to make her his wife and the queen of his growing mechanical empire. Coincidentally, much of the new machinery that currently held the mill hostage, had been produced by the McCloud & Ross Manufacturing Company of Dunfermline.

But he had been just a boy, and now he was a man. A man with means, and a man with needs. Ill-versed as he was in matters of the heart, he felt certain that the day was imminent when he could confess his true feelings to Miss Hale, and begin the rest of his life with her by his side. True, she had had her reservations and prejudices when she had first arrived, but he had detected a distinct softening on her part, and he was sure that his deference to (his interpretation of) her thoughts and sensibilities would only help build him up in her esteem. Surely she could see that he was nothing like the other masters, with all their cruelty and roughness.

His short walk to the office was interrupted by Williams materialising by his side.

“Excuse me, master, but that man Higgins is back again. ‘e’s askin’ to speak with yer”

“Higgins?!” John shot a withering glower in the direction of the mill gate. “What can ‘e want?”

“Work, master. ‘e came by a few days ago, but I sent ‘im off then. ‘e says ‘e must speak with ye’ in person.”

John looked at Williams, who seemed perplexed, although he couldn’t think why.
“I can’t stop now. I have some letters to write then I must go to the bank. Talk to ‘im yourself or send ‘im home.”

“Yes master.”

When John emerged from his office almost two hours later, he spotted Higgins’ hunched figure in the archway. Where was Williams? No matter, he’d remonstrate with him later.

“I need t’ talk with ye’ measter!”

“Can’t stop now. I have a meeting.”

“I’ll wait.”

“Oh you will, will yer?” Thornton stopped abruptly in his tracks, turning to fix Higgins with one of his iciest stares. He startled inwardly when he saw its match in the determined depths of the worker’s ringed eyes. He found himself at a loss...

“Very well,” he ventured finally, “If ye’ still ‘ere by the time I come back, I will hear whatever it is ye’ ‘ave to say.”

“Thank you, measter. I’ll be ‘ere.”

True to his word Higgins was still keeping his hunched vigil under the archway when Thornton returned several hours later. His meetings at the bank had not gone the way he had hoped, although Mr Latimer had been congenial enough, given the circumstances. But his discussion with the masters at the club had been fruitless and frustrating, the subject of the strike and its aftermath being far from exhausted. He was in a black mood as he crossed the threshold of Marlborough Mills, and seeing the embodiment of his grievances in the form of a notorious union lackey only exacerbated his foul humour.

“What, you still ‘ere?” he tossed over his shoulder as he brushed past. “You’d better come in then.”

Thornton took his time rearranging the papers on his desk. He meticulously jotted down a
reminder of the tasks he needed to complete, and some points that would require deliberation with his overseer later that evening. He sorted a handful of letters into two distinct piles, then looked up at the man he hoped his contemptuous procrastination had shrivelled down to as small a size as he deserved.

Damn him, he thought, damn him, his strike and his union. If it weren’t for him we wouldn’t be in this mess.

“So,” he began, his voice as smooth as butter, “What do you want with me, sir?”

Higgins took in a deep breath. He had rehearsed what he had to say several times over, and was thankful for the steel in his backbone that allowed him to stand undaunted before the formidable Master of Marlborough Mills. As clearly as he could, he laid out his reasons for needing work, as well as his attributes as a worker, and a promise not to disappoint, or cause mischief. Thornton heard none of it.

“If I were to believe you… can’t say that I’m inclined to, how would I know you would not cause trouble? We have enough to be worrying about here at Marlborough Mills without setting a live firebrand like you in amongst the cotton.”

“I promise ye’, I’m an honourable man- I’d give ye’ fair warning, should the’ ever be any need. I’d even take a paycut, if t’were t’ only way for ye’ to be sure of my…”

“What, ye’d take wages less than others?! And you set yer rioters on our Irish for doing the same? Strange sorta’ honour you got there! And them tryin’ to feed their families n’ all. You’re wasting your time,” he sneered “I’ll not give ye’ work”

Higgins’ felt the knot in his stomach tighten. His concern was not for himself, he had known the masters long enough to expect no less than the treatment he had received. He worried for the children, whose survival depended on the kindness Miss Margaret seemed to think existed in this man. Hmm… perhaps that was the key…

“Forgive me then, measter, for takin’ up so much o’ yer precious time,” he said, fixing Thornton with a detached stare. “I wouldn’ta bothered yer, if t’weren’t for a woman what spoke well of ye’. Said she thought the’ was a kindness about ye’...”

“Tell ‘er to mind ‘er own business, and to leave me to mind mine.”
“Very good measter. I’ll be sure t’ tell ‘er. I thank yer for yer courtesy,” he added, not a little facetiously, “I bid ye’ good day.”

As the day darkened into evening Thornton could not shake the feeling that something was amiss. The foulness of his earlier mood had dissipated and he was overcome with a sinking feeling that he had treated that man Higgins with more discourtesy than he deserved. Why had he felt the need to humiliate one already so far below him in station and circumstance? It was cruel and ungentlemanly. He was evidently out of work, most likely out of favour with the union and very probably on the brink of starvation, even if the part about adopting some relative’s children had been a fabrication. The knowledge that this man called Margaret his friend also nagged at the back of his mind. He had just been congratulating himself on the improvement of his character when this Higgins had turned up to reveal the merciless brute that still lurked beneath. What would she make of his treatment of her friend?

And that was not all. There had been something in Higgins’ address, something in his voice and manner, that had left Thornton with the distinct impression he had known the man before. But though he racked his brains he could not fathom when, where or why such a circumstance would have come about. The sensation was most unsettling.

He was still distracted by the time he joined his mother in their large, formal dining room late that evening.

“What did that man Higgins want with ye’?” Mother asked, spearing a boiled carrot determinedly.

“Work.” John replied. Their conversation was clipped and to-the-point, as always.

“Work?! And him a union man! He’s got some nerve!”

John did not respond. Something about Higgins had impressed him today, but he wasn’t sure it was his ‘nerve’.

They continued their meal in silence.

“Although,” Mother began, selecting her words carefully as was her habit, “I do own that he was of some assistance to you when you took that stone to the head. And he did stay behind to help Williams put the yard to rights after the rabble took off.”
John’s head snapped up. He watched his mother plough through her roast beef with the same systematic determination he had witnessed in every aspect of her life. No wonder Higgins’ voice had seemed so familiar!

“Higgins was here, after the riot?”

“Yes John. It was he that helped get you upstairs until the doctor could be sent for. Well…” she added begrudgingly, “he and Miss Hale.”

John’s eyes widened in disbelief. He knew Miss Hale had been present, but he had assumed she had gone, or hopefully been escorted, home, after he had been taken inside. He had never imagined she would have stayed to… to…

“Either way he did show an interest in your welfare. I believe he even offered to go for the doctor.” she sputtered, alarmed by the sudden elation threatening to break across his face. Her tactic worked. John’s brow furrowed once more.

“Then I have behaved unforgivably. I will have to make amends.”

“But you’ll not give him work, surely?!”

“What would you have me do, Mother?” he challenged calmly, “A man who considers me his enemy comes to my aid in my hour of need, and I do nothing but turn him away in his?”

“No,” she ventured quietly, “you could hardly do that. I suppose you are honour-bound to the lout…”

“Then we are in agreement.” John said. He polished off his last bit of gravy, and with a peck on the cheek, bid his mother goodnight.
It was well past noon by the time Margaret managed to corral all six Boucher children into sitting down at the table for their dinner. Mary had gone to try to haggle some off-cuts from the butcher, and Margaret and Nicholas had quickly found themselves quite outnumbered. It was only with the promise of one of miss Margaret’s beloved stories that the rowdy bunch had acquiesced. One by one they fell silent, their mouths occupied with gulping down the watery stew and their ears delighting in her tales of pirates, princesses and far away places.

When they had finished she set the youngest two on the small cot to rest and sent the others outside to play until Mary came home. As quiet descended on the Higgins’ sparse but cosy hovel, she set the kettle to boil and gestured to the master of the house to take his ease at the table.

“Have you thought anymore on our discussion, Nicholas? On applying to Marlborough Mills?”

“Yes Miss Margaret, I’ve even gone one better,” he said with a grimace. She did not notice, busy as she was brewing the tea.

“You have?”

“I’ve spoken wi’ Thornton meself, jus’ as ye’ suggested.”

Margaret looked up at her friend, a brightness stealing over her face. She was proud of him, for it must have taken a great deal for him to put aside his pride and apply a second time. There was also some strange thing at the base of her breastbone that set itself fluttering at the mention of Mr Thornton’s name...

“Nicholas! Oh, I am pleased!” She set a steaming cup before him before walking around the table with one of her own. “And he listened, did he not?”

“Aye, he listened.”

“Wonderful! So when do you start?”

Nicholas looked up at her beaming smile and felt a curious sort of guilt, which was odd, as he knew he would not be the culprit in its imminent disappearance. But the northman in him forbade him from embroidering the previous day’s events into a more agreeable tableau, even for her.
“Not anytime soon. Thornton wouldn’t ‘ave me. ‘Im barely let a man talk, let alone ‘ear what ‘e come t’ say”

Margaret sunk down onto the chair rather gracelessly. So it had come to naught, this great idea of hers. She could hardly understand it. Higgins had shown such kindness towards Mr Thornton, only to be met with such disappointment.

“But you told him of your predicament?”

“Aye.”

“And you told him of the children?”

“Aye.”

“And he knows you were not involved, and stayed to help him on that day?”

“The’s nothin’ doin’, miss! Forgive me, but ye’ don’ quite understan’ th’ way o ‘these measters. Thornton may ‘ave a wheel an’ a few more pence for ‘is workers, but ‘e’s no different from the rest o’ them.”

Margaret rose to her feet, her cheeks colouring with fury. She walked back to the stove, turning her back to the room in an attempt to conceal the extent of her displeasure. She was not sure what angered her more: the humiliation her friend had endured; or the notion that she had been wrong to alter her opinion of Mr Thornton. Any timid feeling she had allowed herself to entertain now seemed to mock her for her poor judgement of his character. He was a man without honour, that much was clear. She had been sorely mistaken, and her dear friend had suffered for it.

“I am sorry Nicholas. I had begun to believe…” her voice trailed off. She circumvented the table once more to look her friend in the eye, “I am disappointed in Mr Thornton. He is clearly just as you said: a man as deficient in kindness as he is in honour. Forgive me, I did not think anybody could be so cruel.”

Higgins eyes softened at her pained expression, before hardening once again into a look of angry
disbelief as they flicked to something over her shoulder.

“Measter.” He growled, as Margaret’s eyes widened before his own, “Now what brings ye’ ‘ere, I wonder?”
Margaret froze. An icy tingle of shocked embarrassment made its way up from the base of her spine to the tips of her ears, flushing them a bright crimson. Slowly she turned, her face cast down to the floor.

“Mr Thornton.”

He stood in the doorway, half of his tall frame hidden by the door that was only just ajar. Upon approaching the house he had seen Higgins sitting at the table, facing the graceful outline of a corseted waist and an ample, linen skirt. He did not need to see its owner’s face to know who it was.

“Miss Hale.”

Well, this was a surprise! And confirmation that she was indeed the woman who thought him kind enough to counsel her friend to apply to his goodness. The knowledge of her good opinion sent a warmth to loosen the knot in his stomach that had accompanied him on his humbling errand. He was capable of kindness. She had been right!

And then you were cruel, and proved her wrong.

‘But now I am here, to make amends, and do the right thing,’ he thought.

She does not know that. She still thinks you a brute…

‘Then she is wrong! My coming here proves her right!’

What is it then? Is she wrong or is she right?

‘She is wrong if she thinks she was not right! I am capable of kindness. I am no brute.’

Well right now she must think you are mad, standing there arguing with yourself…

Thornton tore his eyes up from the floor that he had been studying with considerable intensity. Higgins and Miss Hale were staring at him, bemusement on both their faces. They shot each other a quizzical look. How long had he been looming in the doorway, bickering silently with himself? At least he hoped it had been silent; it would hardly do to add lunacy to Miss Hale’s laundry list of his personal defects.

For God’s sake John! Say something!

“Nicholas, I have stayed too long! I really must be going.” said Miss Hale, cutting into Thornton’s half-formed thought. Securing her shawl about her shoulders, she gifted her friend a sympathetic smile before tossing a curt nod in Mr Thornton’s direction. Their eyes met just long enough for
him to read the clear disapprobation that was written there. With a determined rustling of skirts she departed, leaving behind the faintest breath of soap and florals hanging in the damp, dense air.

A Darkshireman’s conversation is known for its economy, and the exchange between master and worker was no exception. Thornton shoved Miss Hale and her disdain from his mind. He had come to make amends, and so amends he made, even going so far as to offer his hand to the incredulous union leader, a symbol of agreement between honourable men. Higgins accepted his proposal, even deigning to thank the master for the olive branch he had extended. They stood for a moment in satisfied silence, each man taking the measure of the other. Higgins was the first to speak.

“Was the’ summat else ye’ was wantin’ measter?”

Thornton hesitated. With the matter concluded the embarrassment of Miss Hale’s words and departure flooded his thoughts once again. He opened his mouth to speak, but seemed unsure of exactly what it was he wished to say.

“No Higgins. That’ll do. I’ll see ye’ monday, and mind ye’ keep sharp t’ yer time.”

Higgins crossed the small room to hold the door open for the master. He took his time replacing his hat and checking his pocket watch, his fingers fiddling with the chain a for a little too long.

“Measter?”

“Was Miss Hale the woman you mentioned? The one who thought she saw kindness in me?”

Higgins suppressed a grin, his eyes twinkling mischievously. He raised his eyebrows in the affirmative.

“You might’ve said.”

“And ye’d ‘ave bin a bit more civil?”

With a begrudging smirk, Thornton tipped his hat to his newest employee, and left the small, dark house.

As he walked the latent itch of embarrassment gave way to a raging throb of frustration. He felt angry at himself for yesterday’s foul temper; angry at Miss Hale for her inconvenient presence at the Higgins’ home; angry at how the circumstances invariably lent themselves to the misrepresentation of his character. It was maddening!

What a fool he was to believe her opinion of him could change! Why could she not see the renovations he was making on his person? The years of unbending, uncompromising strength of character and opinion giving way to the influence of her gentler and more compassionate world view. How could one so warm and welcoming in the foremost workings of his mind, be so self-righteous and unforgiving in the flesh. It was as if there were two Margarets, one the wise and accommodating sprite, the other an obtuse, untameable amazon. He had to admit he much preferred the former, but the latter seemed bent on turning up whenever he was shown to his meanest advantage. Infuriating girl!

He had worked himself up into quite a temper by the time he crossed the Mill yard. He tried to convince himself he did not truly care for her, that his feelings were those of a mere infatuation, and that she wasn’t worth his distraction. His head throbbed and his stomach churned at the very thought, as if his body were rebelling at its untruth. He did care for Margaret, in every way a man could, and her constant readiness to misjudge him stung.
John was sullen and short-tempered over the next few days, as he tenderly nursed the wound inflicted by Miss Hale’s disapprobation. The gentle feelings that had taken up the habit of asserting themselves throughout his day became tainted with memories of her censure and the injury it caused. Even his dreams had become a source of frustration, with the apparition of his muse as beguiling and sensual as ever, yet proving immune and unyielding to even his most passionate advances.

It was in one of these foul moods that he retired one day to the mill-house a good deal earlier than was his habit. His mother had sent a note informing him that Miss Latimer, the banker’s daughter, would be calling on herself and Fanny, and that he would do well to pay his respects, given the precarious situation of the mills’ finances.

“There you are John.” said his Mother, by way of a greeting.

“Yes Mother.”

Without acknowledging any other of the room’s occupants, he turned directly to the console by the door, and poured himself a large brandy. There he stood, his back to the room, swirling the amber spirit round and round in the glass for several moments.

“Miss Latimer was just asking after the Mill.” said Fanny, attempting to draw his attention to their guest. Ugh, John was so farouche sometimes!

John inhaled slowly, rolling his eyes at the wall. He took a fortifying swig of his drink, before turning to greet Switzerland’s most exciting export, at least to the mind of his mother and sister.

“Good afternoon, Mr Thornton. What a pleasure it is to see you again.”

John’s confident stride faltered, imperceptible to all but his Mrs Thornton.

Great God in heaven!

This young woman was not the pretty-ish girl (by Milton standards at least) that he remembered. No indeed, John Thornton found himself struck dumb by the uncommon beauty of the tender goddess that stood before him. Framed by a perfect halo of resplendent golden ringlets, her delicate porcelain skin and perfectly symmetrical features gave her appearance an ethereal quality. The daintiness of her lithe figure was matched by the grace and poise with which she occupied the space in which she moved, somehow made softer by her presence.

John struggled to regain his composure.

“Miss Latimer,” he rumbled, after a significant delay “the pleasure is mutual.”

He took the delicate hand she extended in his direction. His heart sped up at the contact as heated blood coursed its way away from his brain and to the less evolved parts of his person. He postured instinctively, drawing himself to his full height and portraying himself to his greatest male advantage. Her rosebud lips stretched into a honeyed smile at the primal gesture, and set something in the pit of his stomach to fluttering.

“Come John, Cook has baked those ginger biscuits you like so much.” said mother, patting the chair beside her, directly opposite their magnificent guest.

Fanny giggled as he sat down, his eyes still fixed on Miss Latimer. “You’d better hurry up and take one too, Anne! John scoffed the lot last time, didn’t leave any for his poor sister!”
Miss Latimer smiled affectionately at Fanny, before turning her attention to his Mother, who was asking John about his day. The subject of the day’s business kept the party engaged for a few moments.

“And how’s that Higgins getting on?”

John chewed thoughtfully on his ginger snap.

“Well, I would say. He’s certainly one of the most skilled workers I’ve had in recent years. He keeps to his hours,” his eyes flicked to Miss Latimer for the tenth time, “and we have agreed that he is to leave his brains at home when he is at the Mill.”

“Who is Higgins?” asked Anne, after a dainty sip of her tea.

“One of my newest hands, Miss Latimer. He lost his position at one of the other mills following the strike. He is one of the first men in the union.”

“Ah!” Miss Latimer nodded.

“He’s a rabble-rouser and a trouble maker! I hope you’ve instructed Williams to keep a close eye on him.” Mrs Thornton spat, “He’s just the sort that would fancy himself ascending to the position of master, when he’s not busy stoking the mob to arms. I wouldn’t put anything past ‘im.”

Mr Thornton gave a wry smile at his mother’s contrariety. “I do not think he is planning any mischief, Mother. I reckon Higgins is a man of his word, and he clearly knows his way about a loom.”

“All the same, I can’t think why you had to take him on. Surely there are hands enough at Marlborough Mills without the likes of him kicking about!” Fanny simpered, not wanting to be left out of the conversation.

“Your brother is showing benevolence, Fanny,” said Miss Latimer softly.

Yes! Thank you! At least someone understands me...

Her perspicacity stunned and pleased him in equal measure.

“...although I can’t say I am surprised.”

Huh?

All three thorntons looked at her quizzically. She dipped her head with a coy chuckle.

“Forgive me, perhaps I am presuming to know more of your brother’s character than I do. But from what I have gleaned from father and the other cotton masters, Mr Thornton has always sought the best interests of his hands, inasmuch as his role as employer will allow.”

She fixed him with her crystal blue gaze. He swallowed thickly.

“Although the interests of all, masters and workers alike, are best served by keeping the mill prosperous. The strike, encouraged by the union, interrupted productivity and jeopardised those interests. Mr Thornton’s priority must be to ensure the Mill’s survival, and the survival of those that depend on it. You are not running a charitable institution after all…”

Further bemusement furrowed John’s brow for several moments. Who was this heavenly creature?
“Therefore my only conclusion in hearing that you have hired a destitute union leader, a man that undoubtedly played some key part in the recent strike, is that you have done so out of the kindness of your heart for his particular situation. Am I mistaken?”

Her positive appraisal of his actions, and the clarity of her argument left John flummoxed for longer than he was comfortable. How was it that his girl, this exquisite but so far insignificant friend of his sister, had such a clear understanding of the challenges he faced? Fanny’s open-mouthed gaze bounced between her brother and her friend, unsure of what to make of the intensity of their exchange. Mrs Thornton, barely looking up from her tea, allowed herself a small smirk, neatly concealed behind the fine china teacup.

John scrutinized the lovely, disconcerting young woman sitting directly opposite him. He was unsure how to respond. He had entered the parlour with the sole intention of being civil for the sake of his relationship with her father, and incidentally his sister. He was not prepared to find himself so affronted by her beauty, nor so flattered by her appreciation of his position. And she was not entirely mistaken…

“Perhaps not so much kindness, Miss Latimer, as some sense of moral duty. I was in a position to help Higgins and so I did. I believe he is a good man, albeit a bit rough around the edges.”

Mrs Thornton snorted.

“But I also found myself in his debt, as he was of some assistance to me when I was in need of it. During the strike, as it happens. It seemed only fair that I return the favour.”

She nodded knowingly, her eyes not leaving his.

“Then I must say that the combination of honour and kindness does you credit, Mr Thornton.”

Miss Latimer stopped there, conscious that any more explicit praise would offend the man’s northern sensibilities. But she was pleased with herself at having remembered, almost word for word, the speech that she had heard from his own lips at the last Thornton dinner party. He had hardly noticed her then. The words had been his calm rebuttal in response to that new, southern girl’s objection to the masters’ handling of the workers during the strike. Miss Hale’s audacity and flagrant disdain for Milton’s wealthiest and most eligible bachelor had shocked Anne. But the wounded look in Mr Thornton’s eyes had not gone unnoticed either. She had watched as those stormy blue seas had sought out the author of their pain throughout the evening. The southern lady’s terse words had obviously hurt some proud, male part of the handsome master. Anne had determined then and there that she would be the one to nurse it back to health.

She turned her attention back to Fanny, tilting her head and smiling politely as the youngest Thornton tittered and shrilled as she recounted whatever inane piece of gossip she had moved onto. But she was all too aware of Mr Thornton’s eyes on her. He watched her as she sipped her tea and nodded at all the right intervals. He did not know what to think. His mind had been so taken up with dark thoughts of another, the sudden appearance of such beauty and empathy had thrown him completely. Although in the depths of his person his heart was still unmoved, Miss Latimer’s words and ready approval brought a small warmth in his chest and a cool sense of relief to his frustrated mind. He felt, for the very first time, the balm of what it was to be understood. And by a beautiful woman at that.

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As pleasant an impression as the lovely Miss Latimer had made on John, he found the effects of it were really quite fleeting. He felt no regret in quitting her presence, and had no thoughts of her in
her absence. There was no tangle of nerves at the prospect of seeing her again, no piqued curiosity at the sound of her name. She was a regular visitor to the Thornton household, and their paths crossed a couple of times when John called on Mr Latimer at his house. The sight of her pleased a very base part of him, and her flagrant interest flattered his injured pride. But neither her beauty, nor her devotion had any real consequence on his existence. She was like a patch of gauze temporarily pressed onto the wound of his bleeding heart, but he still longed for the one that was both the culprit and the cure in its affliction.

John had seen very little of Miss Hale since their awkward meeting at Higgins’ home. He had resumed his lessons with Mr Hale the following week, always making sure to arrive a few minutes before time and lingering more than was necessary in the hopes of catching a glimpse of her. It was ridiculous really, for the few times that he did find himself in her company, he shrouded himself in an air of such complete indifference that the young lady began to believe that the mill master felt nothing but contempt for her. This suited Margaret, who combined his cruel treatment of her friend Higgins with his current detachment in an attempt to concoct some sort of antidote for the irresistible pull she felt toward him.

His sudden arrival at the Higgins’ residence had unsettled her in more ways than one. Although she had spoken truthfully, the words were said in anger, and she deeply regretted the offense they must have caused. Despite her disappointment, she had no wish to injure Mr Thornton, particularly since, upon reflection, he had most likely come to make amends, and possibly even offer Higgins something in the way of a solution. But would his pride ever allow him humility enough to admit his mistakes? Either way, she could not be certain. And therein lay the problem: she was not sure of anything when it came to Mr Thornton. The mere mention of his name was enough to melt her innards into a puddle, and her vociferous reproof of his behaviour had somehow succeeded in conjuring him up on Higgins’ doorstep. She repeated to herself that she did not like him, but for some reason she did not want to be disliked by him. It was an odd state of affairs.

So she had made herself as scarce as possible upon his bi-weekly visits to Crampton. But with Dixon so often occupied with mama’s constant care, she had little choice but to attend to his needs as her father’s friend and guest. It was on one such evening that her father bid her stay and join them for tea after their lesson had concluded.

Margaret rallied her spirits as she prepared the tray, reaching for the two china dishes piled high with biscuits. Tuesday was baking day, and Dixon had been at it all morning. Her hand hovered over the delicious treats, hesitating between the dense, shortbread circles and the rectangular ginger snaps. *His favourite*, she thought to herself, with a small huff of frustration. Surely there were more useful occupations for her mind than the retention of Mr Thornton’s biscuit preference? To temper her annoyance she arranged an assortment of both flavours on the dish, and left to join her father and his guest in the parlour.

She trudged begrudgingly up the stairs, before collecting herself just in time to push the door open with her hip and enter the dimly lit room. Her father was seated with his back to her, and a momentary glance in her direction was the only acknowledgement she received from his pupil. Her heart skipped a beat, regardless.

Returning her father’s warm smile of welcome, she set the tray on a low table and slowly began preparing the cups and saucers. She knew exactly how both men took their tea, but did not want to interrupt, as they seemed engaged in their discussion about Milton’s banking institutions. Margaret could not tell exactly to what their conversation pertained. In truth she was not really paying attention.

She found herself quite overcome by Mr Thornton’s handsomeness this evening. He wore his usual
dark waistcoat and jacket, but at his neck his cravat was the colour of burgundy wine, which set the ruddiness of his cheeks and the precision of his features to an almost breathtaking advantage. The strong, implacable jaw was dusted with the beginnings of a beard, summoning to her mind the heated memory of how it had once tickled beneath the soft pad of her own fingers. The strength and size of his frame, that had at times intimidated her, now held an irrepressible attraction, as she imagined what it would feel like to be hidden beneath it, protected and cherished by some unnamed, unattainable feeling on his part. His eyes were as disconcerting as ever, as they carefully avoided her own, all the while making a meticulous study of her every movement, completely unbeknownst to her.

“I must say I was most impressed by his daughter’s proficiency in latin. Why, she rattled off at least three passages from *Metamorphoses* when I took tea there, from memory, and with impeccable inflection at that!”

“Ah yes,” said Mr Thornton, reaching for his first biscuit, “I’m given to understand that Miss Latimer is very accomplished.”

Margaret’s ears perked up. She had heard that Milton’s foremost banker had a daughter. The subject had not piqued her interest any further.

“How old is Miss Latimer?” she asked. *Hopefully somewhere over thirty-five*...

“She’s about your age, Margaret, perhaps a year or two younger. She’s just returned from Switzerland, where she attended finishing school.”

*Drat!*

“I am unfamiliar with the curriculum at such an establishment,” continued John, placing his saucer back on the tray, “But I confess that upon our recent reacquaintance I found myself quite surprised by Miss Latimer’s intellect. She has a keen understanding of subjects beyond her sphere, subjects,” he glanced unconsciously in Margaret’s direction, “regarding the mill, and the cotton trade in general.”

Margaret’s stomach clenched. She busied herself reaching for the teapot to fill the gentlemen’s teacups; first Mr Thornton’s, then her father. *Surely that was the end of Miss Latimer and her attributes?*

“And she really is uncommonly handsome,” her father mused, “I expect Mr Latimer will have no shortage of eligible suitors applying for her hand now that she is back.”

*Apparently not.*

“Aye,” agreed Mr Thornton, rather too quickly for Margaret’s liking. He smiled as men do when they recall a beautiful woman, “She is certainly a most attractive young lady.”

Margaret’s head snapped up to glare at Mr Thornton full in the face. She had never heard him speak of anyone in that way before.

She did not like it. Not one bit.

Her sudden motion interrupted his brief reverie. He stared back at her, unsure of what to make of her expression. His eyes widened as they diverted to the forgotten task in her hands. A painful yelp severed the charged silence between them, as tea cascaded over the sides of Mr Hale’s saucer, splashing over his shoes and onto the floor.
“Oh Father! Forgive me! Are you hurt? Oh what a mess I’ve made!”

The clumsy incident brought an electric charge to the atmosphere. Margaret fawned over her father, oblivious to Mr Thornton as he observed her with less restraint, confused by her uncharacteristic skittishness. He had never seen her like this. Once the damage had been repaired, she settled herself in her chair, but neglected to pick up her needlework or a book as was her usual habit. She took little part in the conversation, and yet her eyes hardly left his person and when they met his own, he was disarmed by the passionate challenge he found there.

Her peculiar behaviour was far from over. As the gentlemen moved on to discussing some form of machinery or other, Mr Thornton, by now a frequent fixture in the household, took the liberty of reaching for another ginger biscuit from the dish which was nearest to him. As he extended his hand, so did she, and upon lifting the treat to his mouth he discovered it was not a ginger rectangle, but a shortbread circle. His face contorted as he glanced down momentarily to the table. How had that happened? Instinctively he looked up at Miss Hale, who sat upright listening intently to her father, a half eaten ginger snap held firmly between her thumb and index finger.

He tried once more, this time looked deliberately at the dish to locate the biscuit of his preference, and then at Miss Hale who met his gaze quite brazenly. Again he reached, but she was faster than he, and discretely snatched the small rectangle out from under his outstretched fingers, before consuming her spoils triumphantly. This happened again, and again, and to Thornton’s bewilderment the insolence in her eyes seemed to increase with each usurpation. Fortunately, her father was much too engrossed in his own discourse to notice the strange theatrics that were playing out right under his nose.

Soon there was a single, orange rectangle left in the dish, resting atop a small mound of its circular, shortbread companions. Mr Thornton offered his host some half-hearted reply to whatever question he had been asked, but his mind was elsewhere: occupied with the unusual battle of wills (and biscuits!) he was engaged in. He looked down at the dish, and then up at Miss Hale, who glowered back at him, her countenance challenging him defiantly. He frowned. Miss Hale did not usually partake of confections that he knew, and yet in the past half hour she must have consumed at least eight biscuits!

He glanced back at the plate, noting the slight quirk of her eyebrow in anticipation of his next move. He carefully placed his teacup and saucer down on the table, and with a last glance at his challenger, made to grasp the small dainty.

“Oh Father! You must taste the ginger biscuits Dixon baked this morning! Quite the most delicious batch! Here you go…” she honeyed, gracefully swiping the plate out from under Mr Thornton’s hand with a saucy look, “please, there is one left.”

Mr Thornton stared incredulously at Miss Hale’s triumphant expression. She did not look at him, but her expression betrayed a haughty satisfaction that left his mind reeling. What was she playing at? Her actions reminded him of those of a child, indeed in any other circumstance, or perhaps with some other person this might have felt like some sort of game. But her cold demeanour impressed him with the keen sense of rebuke. She was punishing him. But for what?

When his visit was at an end, he thanked his hosts, and quitted the parlour, not daring another look in her direction. He was grateful Mr Hale had not insisted that his daughter see him out. He was not sure he would be able to keep his offense in check after such a confusing display. He grimaced as the uncomfortable warmth of the evening stoked the nauseating unease he felt in his belly. He glanced back at the house. Did she share in his discomfort at all? Or had she simply retired for the night, to take her rest in all serenity and ease that became her person? The latter was more likely.
Thornton stormed off towards the mill, ignorant of Margaret’s plight above stairs as she lay on her front, a pillow tucked under her belly, rocking her body in an attempt to relieve the great, self-inflicted stomach ache she felt from eating far too many of her least favourite biscuits.

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“I see... And how often does the pain come upon you?”

Dr Donaldson had finished his cursory examination of John’s skull, and had stepped back far enough to take in his patient at his full height. He had been called upon this evening to attend Miss Thornton, who had had another one of her (imaginary) dizzy spells. He had thought it prudent to check up on Mr Thornton’s progress while he was in the vicinity.

“Seldom. Only when I am tired or over worked. I find walking to be very beneficial.”

The doctor nodded. He closed his case, and exited through the door held open for him. John followed him through, down the hall and into the foyer.

“You are fortunate the blow did not lead to any more serious complications. Head trauma is a frightfully unpredictable thing, especially if left unchecked for too long.”

He pulled on the coat John handed to him. The wool heaved as it stretched to accommodate its portly proprietor.

“Spot of luck, too, Miss Hale being here to manage things until my arrival. Remarkable girl, that one.”

Thornton froze, the doctor’s hat still in hand.

“But she… No... Miss Hale left, not long after I had been struck.”

The doctor frowned, his thick eyebrows crashing together like two angry, grey caterpillars challenging each other to a duel across his forehead.

“No, Thorton, I assure you: Miss Hale was here when I arrived. She was quite the attentive nursemaid: bathing your wound and keeping you conscious, the clever lass! I have found most ladies of her station to be the most squeamish things, fainting at the first sight of blood and all that. But I was most impressed by her calm manner, she hardly seemed affected by your injury. Just overcome,” here the scotsman paused to scrutinise Thornton’s face- a picture of growing disbelief “when she learned you were quite out of danger.”

John’s mouth fell open for a fraction of a second. He quickly took hold of himself. It would not do for anyone, not even the family doctor, to see how this knowledge affected him. His mother had mentioned Miss Hale’s presence, but she had made it sound as if she had been completely removed from the action. He had pictured her sitting downstairs, impatiently waiting for the streets to clear long enough for her to walk back to Crampton and be rid of his home and his mill. He had never imagined she would have sat with him, tended to his injury, nursed him to the best of her ability.

Why, that would mean she had touched him! Her delicate hands had come in contact with his skin! Her face held a mere breath away from his own! In an instant John was drowning in a raging torrent of emotion. It engulfed his entire person and turned his face quite pink.

“Thornton, are you quite well?” the doctor asked, alarmed by his sudden flush.

“Yes Donaldson, I am quite well. Miss Hale is a vicar’s daughter. She has most likely seen more illness than most young ladies of her position.” he said, hoping his reply would satisfy the
scotsman. His eyes had left the doctor’s face, and he stared back into the hallway, lost in realisations.

His mother’s call from the dining room jolted John back to the present. He did not know how long he had stood in the foyer, ordering and reordering his own thoughts and fractured memories. Miss Hale had stayed with him, had nursed him, had been overcome at the idea of losing him. She had thought him kind enough to send her friend to him. Then she had judged him, taken some unknown offence to him, and stolen all of his favourite biscuits. It appeared the puzzle that was Margaret Hale was no closer to being solved, despite these newly discovered (and most gratifying!) missing pieces.

Without a word he took his place at the head of the table, his eyes trained on his empty plate. He did not feel inclined to eat, but eat he must lest his mother worry he was sickening. As it was he knew she was observing him closely, glancing past her daughter as she recounted her visit to the Watsons’ that afternoon. The bonds of maternal affection alerted her to the engagement of her son’s mind elsewhere, and her protective instincts lead her to suspect where, or towards whom, his thoughts tended. John barely acknowledged Thomas the butler, as he piled his plate with venison and potatoes. It was unlike him. His manners were usually so agreeable, even towards the servants.

It was Fanny, surprisingly, who managed to pull her gloomy brother from his cogitations. She startled when his deep voice interrupted her shrill laughter, asking that she repeat for him the last thing she had said. Fanny rolled her eyes as if the request were some great imposition on his part.

“*I said it served him right for going on so much about her skill! I mean, I know she is only his sister, but I do not think it very gallant of Mr Watson to sing her praises so, especially when I am present. Why, we are certainly matched in our talent for playing, and I’m sure I’ve never heard owt but a flat note from her when she sings...*”

She paused to take a breath and a small sip of water.

“And so I turned my attention away from him and did not say another word to the man all afternoon! Ha! I believe Mr Watson will think twice next time he intends on paying another lady a compliment at my expense. I’m sure I will never see him again if he doesn’t.”

John closed his eyes for a moment, sorting through the barrage of new information in his mind. Had Fanny formed some sort of attachment to Watson? He would have to look into that later. Watson had offended Fanny by praising his sister’s skill. *At the piano,* he conjectured, knowing his sister’s lofty opinion of her own talent with the unfortunate instrument. But Fanny seemed to exult in the knowledge that she had set Watson right. That she had meted out some sort of punishment for his offence. But why?

“Because, *John,*” she said impatiently, “it is most unbecoming of a man to praise another woman in the presence of one in whom he claims to show an interest. I should be most displeased, jealous even, to find that any suitor of mine had even *contemplated* another lady’s attributes or accomplishments, let alone suggested that they were the equal of my own!”

John unfolded from his hunched position, and sat bolt upright in his chair. He stared at, or rather through, his sister, a fanciful smile playing on his face as the sweet wave of realisation cascaded over him. The women were confused- the great, grey thundercloud that had joined them for dinner had evaporated and in its place was an unrecognisable breaking dawn. Both ladies found the transformation most unnerving.

“John! What are ye’ staring at?”
“I told you ‘e’s not been right since the blow, mother!” Fanny hissed.

“Hush child! John? John! What, have ye’ lost yer mind as well as yer appetite?”

“Sorry mother,” he proffered, returning to the present. The smile was gone but something whimsical and wondrous still shone from his face. He looked at his family. Mother’s eyes were wide and horrified and Fanny’s nose was scrunched up as if some horrible smell were wafting over her. He wanted to laugh. His changeable temper was obviously discomfiting them.

_Best pack it in, John, you’ll have all night to think things over. You don’t want an earful from either one just yet._

So John endeavoured to appear as stoic as ever, and the rest of the repast concluded without further event. He spent a few hours in the library, reviewing the day’s ledgers and penning some short correspondence, before retiring to his room at his usual hour.

He rid himself of his day clothes, folding or hanging each item neatly in the wardrobe as was his habit. He crossed the room to the washstand, and poured the cool water into the bowl. He splashed some water on his face and neck, before meticulously washing his hands. He began by scrubbing his right palm against the back of his left hand, then twisting to rub both hands together. Weaving the fingers of both hands together, he rubbed them up and down to rid those small spaces the day’s grime. With his thumb he massaged circles onto his palm, starting at the joint of his wrist and working his way up towards the knuckles. He repeated the process on his right hand, before retrieving a clean cloth to dry himself off with. It was an unconscious private ritual, but one that allowed his mind to relax in the knowledge that rest was soon to be within his grasp.

But tonight his mind was racing, his thoughts hurling themselves in many directions as he thrilled at his newfound realisations. He had washed both hands several times before he realised his distraction. Miss Hale had nursed him. Miss Hale had been scared to lose him. Miss Hale had seen kindness in him. And that unusual behaviour the other day... Miss Hale had been _jealous_ over him!

John caught sight of himself in the mirror. He looked positively wild! His hair was a mess, and his whiskers were showing. His dress shirt was open at the collar and one could just make out the distinct contour of lean muscle where he had splashed water on the garment. But his face still sported a delirious grin at the prospect that maybe, just maybe, Miss Margaret Hale might have begun to care for him.

But he had to know for certain. As much as he was left in no doubt of the regard of many young women of his acquaintance (Miss Latimer sprung unbidden to his mind), Miss Hale was cut from a different cloth entirely. He suspected she would find his northern candour more worrying, than welcoming, particularly when it came to matters of the heart. He would have to proceed with caution, with discretion, with carefully calculated gallantry in order to secure her affections through slow and deliberate courtship.

He stripped off the last of his garments and threw himself on the bed. It was unseasonably warm, still well into the evening, and the torrent of emotion raging within his chest did nothing to cool him down. He snuffed out his candle, and stretched his long limbs across the broad mattress. He had to know; had to find a way to procure the certainty he needed that she would be receptive to his attentions.

_“Just one word,”_ he whispered to the dark night that had fallen all around him, _“just one sign from her, is all I need.”_

The darkness made no reply. John fell fast asleep.
Rejection

Chapter Notes

AN: Hi all, thanks again for taking the time to read my story, and for all your comments and feedback. It really is such a boon to my writing! Please keep them coming, and be as specific and critical as you like as I really do hope to improve my writing with this exercise. I'm also on twitter @ElizabethHades if anyone wants to get in touch about this story, North and South or writing in general.

I'd also like to reassure you that John and Margaret do get their HEA in the end, but not without a few more bumps along the way. I love these two characters far too much to give them any less!

The days that followed proved fruitless and frustrating for John. No matter how hard he tried, he was no closer to making himself known to Miss Hale. It was not that she was not receptive to his feelings. It was that she was never there long enough to hear of them. It was that she was never there long enough to hear of them.

Margaret had elevated her avoidance of Mr Thornton to an art form. Upon his visits to Crampton she made sure the tea tray was ready and waiting in the parlour for his arrival, forcing tea to be served during his lesson, when her presence could be overlooked (or so she imagined) for the sake of lively debate. This ruse also offset the requirement for refreshment at the end of the interview, effectively cutting his visits as short as was politely possible. She would scuttle in, serve the gentlemen, and scuttle out again without so much as a word or nod to either. On the days when she was particularly inspired she would contrive some excuse for an excursion; to visit one of her friends in the Princeton district, or to fetch some suddenly indispensable article for her mother from one of the shops in town. Her errands always managed to coincide exactly with the time that Mr Hale’s favourite pupil was expected to be at Crampton.

John remained undaunted. Patience, although not his strong suit, was a virtue he felt he would need to cultivate in his courtship of, and indeed marriage to, the gentle, sophisticated Miss Hale, with all her southern graces and sensibilities. So he gritted his teeth and savoured every fleeting minute he could get of her: the brightness she brought into the room each time she entered; the scent that hung in the air she had just occupied; the graceless dash she made across the parlour to clear away the tea things.

He also relished the challenge. To his subconscious mind this merciless climb towards the summit of his prize, whose wonts and ways represented a delicious mystery, was the most enthralling pursuit to which he had ever applied himself. In the blinding light that was Miss Hale, every other young lady of his acquaintance was found wanting, even those whose designs on his person remained the most undisguised. He even began to consider their attentions rather irksome, and found himself actively avoiding their company, inasmuch as honour and etiquette would allow.
The current state of tension between Mr Thornton and herself did not sit so peaceably with Margaret. She who prided herself on her soundness of character and mind began to suspect that the softening of her prejudice against Milton and its Masters had somehow brought about some nature of softening of the brain. How else could she explain the incredible lapses on her part of late? She cursed the day she had met Mr Thornton, for in the few months since their acquaintance she, Miss Margaret Hale; minister’s daughter and defender of all things chaste, christian and charitable, had succumbed to more temptation than in the entirety of her previous life.

She began to worry her sin knew no bounds. She was guilty of prideful prejudice, of wanton lust, of bearing false witness, and of whatever it was that would cause a person to spitefully steal another person’s ginger snaps. She knew not how to atone for these sins, and so she determined to hide them, and herself, away from their most irresistible and persistent tempter.

But alas for poor Miss Hale, she could only abscond from so close a connection as her father’s friend and pupil for so long. After a few days of successfully evading Mr Thornton’s presence at every turn, it was on Milton’s most public high street that her inconvenient lack of self-restraint would next resurface, much to her own dismay.

Mr Hale and his daughter walked arm-in-arm down the cobbled road. They were going to call on the Higgins family, as Margaret had not had the time to visit of late, and the old parson felt it was his duty to accompany his daughter and provide some form of pastoral encouragement to her friend, whose precarious situation had no doubt little improved since he had appealed to their southern knowledge and connections several weeks ago.

Mr Thornton was just exiting the post office, where he had been sending several letters to potential investors, some as far afield as France and Holland, as well as some of his mother and Fanny’s personal correspondence. Although the former had not the inclination, and the latter not the occasion to leave Milton, they still managed between the two of them to produce an impressive stack of letters for his weekly charge. John could not for the life of him fathom who would rank high enough in his mother’s esteem, and who would have shown carelessness enough to entrust Fanny with their personal address. But he still faithfully fulfilled his task each week, without question. One of the many ways in which he expressed his respectful affection for the ladies in his care.

John still had one or two other errands to run while he was in town, but stopped short of pursuing his remaining business when he spotted the familiar shape of Miss Hale’s wide-brimmed, brown hat making its way across the street opposite him.

His body flushed hot with excitement from the inside out, quickening his pulse and splitting his face into an uncommonly wide smile. Who knew such an unremarkable accessory as that
depressing brown hat could have such an effect on a man?

Several passers-by were halted in their stride by the sight of the usually stony master looking so animated. But the streets were crowded, and although he felt he did not care, he was certain that the object of his jubilation was not so obvious to any onlookers as to be improper. Besides, she was with her father, who was known, after all, to have become his tutor and close personal friend.

“Miss Hale!”

Oh dear! He sounded positively giddy! Even the old post-master was peering at him curiously from inside the blurry window. Thornton schooled his features into their habitual severity. Perhaps it wouldn’t do for all of Milton to see this side to him after all...

He crossed the street with the confidence of a man who fears neither carriage nor criticism enough to check whether either are forthcoming from either side. Soon he was upon them, his features an odd tableau as his eyes sparkled with elation, yet his brow furrowed in an attempt at gravity.

Margaret’s eyes widened in disbelief. She made to keep on walking, in some half-hearted effort to pretend she had not recognised the sound of her own name as it resonated across the busy market square. She stopped, feeling the inertia of her father’s arm holding her back. He turned to greet his young friend with a beaming smile.

“John! What a pleasant surprise! What brings you to town at this hour? I would have imagined you would have been quite busy at Marlborough Mills.”

“Mr Hale, Miss Hale. Yes, an excursion at this hour is quite unusual for me. I was at the post office. I had some letters to…”

His voice trailed off as Margaret mustered her courage and raised her head to meet his searching gaze with her own. Heaven above, she was magnificent!

“To post?” suggested Mr Hale.

“Aye,” said John, his eyes still fixed on her’s, “to post.”
They stood entranced, staring at one another for far longer than was proper. Margaret racked her brain for something to say. Damn this power that he held over her!

“At… at the post office?” She managed finally, gesturing pathetically to the building behind him.

“Yes Miss Hale,” he said gently, warmed by her words directed at him, “at the post office.” With an air of conspiracy he bent his head towards her. “For that is where one usually posts one’s letters.”

She looked at him bemused. Something warm was tugging at the corner of his mouth. He did not appear impatient, or offended, or angry at her in any way, despite her behaviour of late. And was that a twinkle of mirth in his eyes? His countenance was illegible, and in her great confusion she abruptly looked away.

His heart sank a little at the momentary deprivation. No matter, he would still enjoy whatever fleeting minutes of her presence he had so very unexpectedly been blessed with today.

“We were just on our way to Princeton, John.” said Mr Hale, oblivious to the tension once again. “I thought I’d accompany Margaret to call on Nicholas Higgins and his family. I fear they have fallen on very hard times since the strike.”

At this Margaret’s eyes shot back to Mr Thornton’s face, a mixture of apology and supplication written across it. At first he did not understand her reaction, but in an instant, the realisation was upon him.

*She does not know!*

He cleared his throat and squared his shoulders unconsciously. Her words of disapproval still rung in his ears, and he pushed the bitter memory of them aside. He knew that admitting his mistake would be of significant import to her. He would show her he was worthy of her good opinion.

“Then you will be pleased to learn Mr Higgins’ luck has turned around. He has recently found work.”

Margaret’s brow contracted.
“Work? What work? Where? And with whom?” she paused breathlessly, deciding against adding ‘and how is it that you know about it and I do not?’

Thornton repressed a smile. Her earnest concern was endearing.

“With me, Miss Hale. I have taken him on. I was mistaken,” he added ruefully, “and treated him most discourteously. But it has all been put to rights. And I believe Marlborough Mills to be better off for it.”

He watched the transformation of his words into understanding in the minds of both Hales stood before him. Old Hale’s face broke into a wide, approving smile; his tutor evidently pleased with his pupil’s actions and Higgins’ good fortune. But it was Miss Hale, the thus far elusive, contrary, Miss Hale whose response quite overwhelmed him. Him, and everybody else in the street.

“Oh, well done Mr Thornton!” she exclaimed loudly, a bright, new dawn cresting on her face as she propelled herself across the appropriate distance of pavement between them. “I knew you would! I knew you were not like the other masters!” He was temporarily blinded by the sunshine in her face as she smiled up at him genially, clasping both his arms with unabashed affection. “You won’t regret such kindness I am sure.”

Mr Thornton was not sure where to look, and much less what to do with himself now that Margaret held him in so tender (and public!) a grasp. The full blast of her beauty at such close range rendered him momentarily speechless, but his northern reserve squirmed under the directness of her compliment. His elation waged war with his embarrassment, evidenced by the bashful smile that tugged at his lips as his eyes sought to rest upon anything by her own. Thankfully Mr Hale soon came to his rescue, indicating that he too had been taken by surprise by Margaret’s spontaneous display.

“Oh, I am sorry father! Mr Thornton, forgive my… my…” she dropped his arms, a warm blush colouring her cheeks as she glanced all around her. Oh no, not again! She stepped back until there was equidistance between herself and both men. What now? What could she possibly say now?

The two men stood in expectant silence. Mr Hale looked about, tipping his hat and smiling awkwardly at several incredulous onlookers. Mr Thornton ignored his audience, his eyes fixed on Margaret’s downturned face. Devil take them all! What did she mean by throwing herself at him like that?
“I must ask you to forgive my enthusiasm, Mr Thornton. I am just overjoyed to hear that Nicholas has found work at last.”

Mr Thornton let out a breath he didn’t know he had been holding. So that was it then. She was happy for Higgins, but unmoved by his behavio…

“And with the fairest and finest mill master in all of Milton, at that!”

Oh no! The words escaped her lips before the thought was even fully gestated in her brain. Margaret Hale, have you gone quite mad?! She struggled for breath, her palms sweating, her corset seeming suddenly bent on her demise. She flushed hot and cold, and felt certain that her entire person must have turned bright crimson from the top of her hat to the tips of her toes.

She could not tear her eyes away from Mr Thornton, who stared back at her in reverent awe. He bent his head towards her, his eyes dark and his pupils dilated under the firm line of his unyielding brow. The corner of his mouth tugged up rakishly, and the heavy milton breeze unsettled his thick hair, giving him quite a wolfish appearance all of a sudden. Indeed, as he looked at her Margaret felt as if she had been transformed into a delicious treat that he would readily devour in one ravenous gulp.

“Er... yes, very good John!” said Mr Hale, suddenly struck by the manner in which his pupil and daughter were gazing at each other. He looked back to the milling crowd feigning disinterest in their small spectacle. “Yes, well, perhaps we should be getting on. Until tomorrow then. Five o’clock, as always.” He tipped his hat and took up Margaret’s arm once more

“Until tomorrow.” rumbled John, his eyes never leaving them as Mr Hale lead his dazed and confused daughter away.

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“Oh Margaret Hale! What have you done?!”

Her whisper echoed in the empty room, barely audible over the rustling of her skirts and petticoats as she struggled to extricate herself from their suffocating grasp.

“Fool!” She hissed. “Foolish fool of a foolish girl! Where others would stand and demurely commend a man for his kindness, you, Miss Hale, you do not!”
She shoved the layers of cotton and lace down to her ankles, and stumbled over the top, clutching at the edge of the bed with a small squeak to steady herself. She dropped down heavily onto the low stool before her dressing table, and stopped to take in her reflection in the glass. Her eyes were wild and her brow was knit together into a dark cloud. She was flushed. She was frustrated. She was furious!

Oh no! She continued silently, that is far too dull and reserved a course of action for a wild wench such as yourself! Best leave the man in absolutely NO doubt of your wantonness! Throwing yourself at him... at HIM! Of all people! Stupid, impulsive girl! Whatever must he think of you now?!

She snatched up her hairbrush and began tearing through her dark curls, as if she might sweep away her troubles if she just brushed vigorously enough.

And father! She thought ruefully, What of him? You embarrassed him with your display. You embarrassed your father, and encouraged Mr Thornton... in front of the whole of Milton! Of what, in God’s green earth, were you thinking?!

At this she paused, and began to laugh, maniacally. The absurd events of the last few months struck her suddenly and she doubled up over the dressing table, laughing until tears streamed down her face.

“Oh, how fine!” She gasped as her mirth subsided. “What a fine kettle of fish this is! Mr Thornton will think you wanton, and will either abhor you, or abuse of you for his own end. And it will be your own fault, you silly girl! Your commuppence for embracing him, leaping at him, and stealing his biscuits with impunity!”

She watched as the merry reflection in the glass faded, replaced by the familiar wan face that looked every bit as taut as it did tired. Heavily she sighed.

“And this,” whispered some small, steady thing inside of her, patiently waiting its turn “what will become of this?”

“Nothing.” she breathed in reply. “Nothing will become of this at all.”

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Oh Margaret Hale! What have you done?!
Mr Thornton smiled ruefully to himself as he leaned his weight against his broad, oak desk, rubbing the bruises he could just feel forming along the length of his muscular thigh. He cringed as he tallied up this morning’s injuries: he had walked into a large bolt of velvet, bumped into at least two carding tables, and collided with three of his younger hands as he crossed the mill floor. Although his body was feeling the effects of this uncharacteristic clumsiness, his mind was far too agreeably engaged to care.

*What have you done to me, Margaret Hale? That I have no mind for my work and no patience for my mill? What glimmer of hope is this that you have bestowed upon me, my love? Might you look on me with favour, and perhaps even welcome my suit?*

He glanced at the clock. Seventeen minutes past one. It felt like days had passed since he had last looked upon that cursed object bent on vexing him. It had read a quarter past one then. Time had slowed to make a mockery of his distraction, cruelly stretching out the hours between his work day and the moment he was anticipating most jealously.

*This is it! This is the day!*

He was expected at Crampton for his usual lesson at five o’clock, and so had planned on quitting the mill early enough to freshen up before leaving the house at exactly thirty-five minutes past four. He had timed the short walk to perfection, and was confident in the knowledge that he needed no more than twenty-three minutes at his usual brisk pace to arrive at his destination on time.

He had instructed his man Busby to set out his dark green waistcoat and matching cravat, as the ensemble had recently proved quite popular with a room full of Fanny’s friends. The ubiquitous Miss Latimer had not refrained from complimenting ‘what a handsome shade of blue’ his eyes looked in contrast, and even his mother had commented on how well he looked. Although not a man without much inclination or time for vanity, he desperately hoped Miss Hale would share in their appraisal.

He would not have time to bathe so late in the day, so hasty ablutions with some of mother’s lavender water and a spot of cologne would have to do. He decided against repairing the broken roller beam that his foreman had pointed out to him just before noon, convinced that the sweaty state of dishevelment that would inevitably ensue would not be conducive to showing himself to his best advantage that evening. He would have to get Brearley, his mechanic, in to look at it in the morning.

He straightened up and paced the room, his eyes invariably drawn to the pile of papers strewn across his desk, screaming silently for his attention. But he could not give it, not just yet. His mind was whirring with much the same intensity and speed as the monstrous machines on the other side of his office wall. He could not just ask her to be his wife, as he might have done with any other girl born and raised in the same sphere as his own. Perhaps he could call her by her christian name?
as a sort of prelude to his declaration. No, she might just dismiss that as some northern expression of friendship—much like the handshake she had at first misconstrued but now partook of readily.

That was it! Her hand! Up until that point they had always shaken hands, as was the northern custom. Margaret had come to appreciate the gesture as one of mutual respect between any two parties, no matter the circumstance. Perhaps if he were to lavish that delicate appendage with more, er, tender attention, he might just succeed in conveying just how much he wished to do the same with the rest of her.

Yes! That’ll do nicely! He thought, pausing in his step, a wide, congratulatory smile spread across his face. For a moment he considered sending his hands home, shutting down the mill, and racing across town to put his plan into immediate action. But that would hardly be possible, and he might risk terrifying Margaret, her father and his workers with his lack of restraint. No, he would wait, revelling in his distraction, neglecting all but the most pressing of the day’s work. Besides, it couldn’t be long now, surely!

Hopefully, he glanced up again at the clock. Blasted thing! It was twenty past one.

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“Margaret, there you are!” Mr Hale beamed at his daughter. “John, if you don’t mind, I’ll let Margaret see you out. I shall go up to Mrs Hale”

Without waiting for a response, he shook Thornton’s hand and bid him goodnight, stopping to cup Margaret’s cheek before leaving the study.

They stood for a few moments, the silence heavy but for two very disparate reasons.

Margaret had been relieved, when Dixon had emerged from her mother’s room that afternoon. The Mistress had fallen asleep earlier than usual, and so Dixon was available to serve tea to the gentlemen when their lesson was at an end. Margaret had thrown her arms around the stout servant, thanking her warmly, and had retired to her mother’s sitting room to occupy her anxious mind with a good book until dinner.

So engrossed had she been in her novel that she did not think twice before answering her father’s call. Carelessly she did not stop to consider whether she had heard the heavy footfall she had come to recognise (and relish, albeit unconsciously); whether she had heard the door to the parlour creak open and the door to the street swing shut. Careless. She had been so very careless.

And now she was trapped, struck immobile before him, as his height, his eyes and the inescapable heat that radiated from his person held her completely spellbound. Oh, and all that had passed between them! She still did not know what to make of it; what he made of it. What he made of her! Drowning in her own discomfort, she did not discern his delight at this fortuitous opportunity of time alone with her. He had worried at her absence since his arrival at Crampton. Then suddenly she had appeared, as if summoned, not by her father, but by the fates themselves, as they smiled down upon him and his great and tender pursuit of love. This, this was his chance to reveal his feelings, his intentions. With the exception of the previous afternoon, the weeks of stolen glimpses and polite niceties had left him starved of her, and he was eager to seize this opportunity to finally,
finally press his suit.

It was she that broke the silence, making for the door with a quiet but clear “This way, Mr Thornton.”

He followed her down the narrow staircase and into the hall. She paused, her back still to him, as if unsure what to do next. The sharp rise and fall of her slender shoulders betrayed the turmoil within, and she startled when his low, northern burr cut through the silence that had hung suspended between them for longer than she had imagined.

“Miss Hale?”

She turned to look at him, and had to avert her eyes from the warmth she found in his own. She glanced towards the wall, lifting his cloak off the hook and handing it to him. He swung the dark, woolen shadow around his neck, ducking his head to try and meet her eyes as he draped it over his shoulders.

A blush crept up from her neck and coloured her cheeks. His mouth twitched with the hint of a smile. She extended her hand, daring a hesitant glance in the general direction of his face. She was determined to be civil. Taking it in his own, he mistook its slight tremble as the coy invitation he was waiting for. Bending his head, he gently rotated her wrist and lifted it to his mouth, closing his eyes reverently. A measured but determined press of his lips. The brush of his thumb across her delicate fingers. The thrill of her scent and her pulse...

“Mr Thornton!” her voice startled him out of his miniature ecstasy. Her face was contorted into a horrified expression as she stared at her hand still held tenderly in his own. What on earth was he doing?!

The heat of his lips on her skin. The sensual closing of his eyes, as if lost in a memory of something far more tantalizing than this- his second time claiming her hand so brazenly with his mouth. It was too much. She would not stand for it this time.

“Miss Hale, have I hurt you?” he enquired, confused. He brought his other hand up and lay it over hers in what he estimated was a soothing gesture. Her expression changed from one of horror to effrontery. Where was he going wrong?

“You mock me sir!” She cried, snatching her hand away as if his own were an open flame. “How dare you take such liberties!”

He stared at her, his eyes flicking between her injured expression and the hands she was now vigorously rubbing as if to remove the stain of him. He was stunned. His behaviour had been presumptuous at best, but mocking? He did not follow...

She closed her eyes to gather her thoughts. She had heard of men who toyed with women's affections, and took liberties in their attentions. Although not a gentleman in the strictest sense, she had begun to consider Mr Thornton a good, moral man, in spite of their earlier encounters having suggested otherwise. But good, moral man or not, what was excusable in the heat of the moment and in light of a recent head injury, was not acceptable when both parties were clearly in command of their senses and keenly aware of their surroundings. Why, father was just upstairs!

She had struggled in vain to put the events of that fateful afternoon in the Thornton's parlour from her mind. She felt shame at what had happened, at the heated intimacy that had taken place between them, but had convinced herself that it was, for the most part, of her own doing. Thornton would not have been so bold, cautious and reserved as he was, had she not given him some sort of
unconscious indication that she would be receptive to such advances. And she had not resisted his touch. She had melted into it, giving into her own curiosity and the flaming heat that had possessed her person in that moment. No, she was far from blameless. But this... familiarity, this presumptuousness... this brazen disrespect for her father to accost his own daughter under his own roof... It was not to be borne!

Her words were rashly spoken and intended to wound. She needed the higher ground, scrambling to disentangle herself from the burning mess of feelings this man's touch had conceived within her.

“I apologize if I have ever given you any inclination that I would be receptive of such... er... attentions. Your touch was, and still is, unwanted...”

His eyes widened in confusion, the sting of rejection flashing across his face.

“I have no doubt that a man such as yourself may be used to getting your way, in business as well as in social situations. It would appear your wealth and status may have afforded you that right, here in Milton...”

She named his home as if it sickened her. His jaw clenched.

“...but you forget yourself, sir; you forget that I am a gentleman's daughter. And where I am from, your behaviour is not the way of a gentleman.”

She glanced briefly at his face to see that her words had hit their mark. There was hurt and confusion in his eyes. A wave of regret washed over her. She made to speak again...

“Miss Hale I...” he turned his head to the side, searching the floor to his right for the words that refused his summons. “I do not understand... I thought perhaps... friends? We could be... your dislike of me was not so...”

His distress was palpable. His creasing brow and searching eyes endeared him to her, as they had on the day of the riots. This tall, powerful beast of a man so vulnerable, so earnest, so in need of her gentle care...

'I do not dislike you!' she longed to shout, 'I dislike what I have begun to feel for you! I dislike the confusion, and the anticipation. The memory of that wonderful, wanton embrace. The fire upon my skin when you touch me, the warmth in my belly when you speak to me... the fear that it might consume me.”

“Mr Thornton,” She held up a hand to silence his incoherent mumblings. “Forgive me, for it appears that I am once again the author of your confusion.” She had to look away from the bewilderment intensifying across his face. Once again?

“Let me be clear: I neither want nor welcome these attentions, particularly when we are in private. Please do not attempt to renew them. You are my family's friend and my father's pupil...”

She met his eye.

“... and considering the... improper behavior on both our parts, I fear there can never be anything more between us.”

She did not reckon on the weight that would settle in her chest at her own words. She did not reckon on the knot that would twist in her belly as anguish and dismay flashed across his open-mouthed expression. His hand twitched slightly in its place at his side, his wrist flexing upwards in the beginnings of an attempt to reach out for her. But he thought the better of it, let it drop, and
schooled his features into the cold implacability she had almost begun to forget.

“Forgive me, miss Hale,” He began after a moment, his baritone low and unforgiving, “for the ‘liberties’ it appears I have taken. I did not imagine that my behavior would be offensive, even to a lady such as yourself, considering everything that has passed between us. I had hoped...” he trailed off, his words failing him once again.

An eternity seemed to pass. Margaret did not breathe. Thornton searched his disappointments.

In one swift movement he swooped his hat onto his head.

“I was mistaken. I bid you goodnight.”

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