To Give My Love Good-Morrow

by Maidenjedi

Summary

Margaret Hale has the world at her feet, and all she wants is to go home again.

Notes

A few bits and pieces are more book-inspired than series, but this is very much a series story.

See the end of the work for more notes.

It would only be right to take her good fortune to Cadiz, for a long visit with Frederick and his cherished bride, so Margaret sat down to write the necessary letters the very evening she received official word of Mr. Bell’s legacy.

For it was his intent, was it not, that she should use the money to be happy, to escape the heartache that all of England must now hold for her, south or north? Mr. Bell himself had done that, sailing for Argentina and the brilliant air he remembered from his youth. She imagined him now, reclined on the deck of a ship blessed by fair winds and clear skies, on his way to his Paradise. She could have that, too.

It was impossible to think of Mr. Bell's generosity and not also think of Milton. Milton and her property there, and her tenants, one man in particular. It was impossible to think of Milton and not bring to mind John Thornton.
If she closed her eyes she fancied she could hear his voice. “So you are going, then?”

She had imagined before that his ill opinion was not forged in iron. She was ever conscious of his look when they were thrown together in those last months, and thought she could detect...something. Margaret's perception did her credit, though had she known the whole of what he yet felt for her she would deny the possibility. In her safe, warm, dull rooms in Harley Street, she knew nothing requited, and only recalled the soft dip of unspoken regret.

“So you are going, then?”

Aunt Shaw stood so close, and in truth had the room been empty Margaret could not have voiced all she wished to. Her heart cried out while she went through civilities with the merest possible composure. Yes, I am going, but one word from you.... Aloud, only Plato and her father’s wishes.

She would never see him again, so what would it matter, truly? She could have told him the truth about Frederick, given him some indication that she was not everything Mr. Thornton had assumed. Sometimes she did wish that he knew, and if left to her thoughts too long, she would imagine how things could change.

She looked down at the paper. Her reverie had been so long, a drop of ink had soaked into the paper and spread, spidery veins of abandoned intent.

Frederick described Spain as a piece of heaven, his blasphemy charming because it was so sincere. Margaret was of a different school, fresh from her graduation in a course of wishing for greener pastures. She had once thought Helstone a piece of heaven, after all, and had it proved to her that Eden was indeed out of reach.

She put away her writing things and prepared for bed. It would not do to dwell and delay her decision long, but she could sleep on it. Spain would keep.

Her sleep was fitful, her dreams thick with factory fluff and Yorkshire voices.

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She had resolved upon doing no more for the present than seeing what could be done for Frederick from London. It was a sound decision, as she was not sure she was yet prepared to leave all behind. She had declared independence, true, but there was a great comfort in the routine of her Aunt Shaw's breakfast table, especially after a bad night's sleep.

“You have made money.” Henry was smug and victorious, as if he were the author of this fiduciary triumph. That, and her slight headache, made Margaret feel sarcastic, a tone she never could conceal well.

“What, since yesterday? While I slept? How clever of me.”

Her heart beat so loudly whilst Henry spoke blithely about how she may soon be seeking a new tenant, she was sure she would be betrayed. Henry watched her face, his countenance curious and sly. She tried not to return his gaze, focusing on her breakfast and making as quick an escape to her rooms as manners would allow.

Safe in her room, she sat down on the bed and tried to comprehend what she had just heard. Was it possible that Mr. Thornton, the great businessman and manufacturer, would be brought low because he was honorable? While it happened, Henry Lennox could smirk and make light of the situation far from any of suffering of that kind. It was a cruel twist. She thought of the old tale of
Mr. Thornton’s father, of his suicide and what had resulted. Surely such a thing would not happen again.

She dared not give it thought. She believed John Thornton a stronger man, and he would have his mother’s strength if his faltered.

Yet it was unjust, was it not, that some men could take wild, unwise risks and succeed, whilst men who toiled for their success would be punished for their lack of imprudence? She had shaken his hand, felt his callouses even through her glove. If Margaret was sure of anything anymore, it was that Mr. Thornton had earned his success.

Other hands could run Marlborough Mills, and do it well. She had no illusions there. Was it enough, though, that the mill should be successful, if not under his direction?

She sat there, lost in her wonderings and an increasing sense of loss, before the clock chime reminded her of a meeting with her financial advisors. Henry would be waiting downstairs, having cleared his morning to escort her and explain if need be.

So Margaret stood, and smoothed her dress, attempting to shut up any unbusinesslike effusions of grief. She had come to a decision. She would need help to make it a reality.

When she went downstairs, she missed the look in Henry’s eye, appraising her composure and step, a glint of impatience and rekindled hope. Had she seen it and recognized it, she would have turned and not come down at all. But Henry was wiser that he had once been, all impulsivity behind him, and he only offered his arm without comment.

“Am I to understand correctly that this money could be spent as I choose, with no harm to my overall income?”

It was a blunt, unwomanly question, and the banker had not yet learnt to humor Margaret as some had. He assumed her ambition went as far as improvements, Roman ruins or some other such folly. Thus his face was a picture of mirth, and it unsettled Margaret and set her teeth on edge.

“Yes, Miss Hale, that is the general idea.” He folded his fingers and exchanged a look with Henry, who sat to Margaret's left. Margaret kept her countenance, though she shifted her skirts away from her companion and pressed her lips more firmly together. The banker went on. "You have a great deal set down in property in Milton-Northern, which will generate interest for some time to come. Mr. Bell left you comfortable. In addition, there is some fifteen thousand pounds, resulting from his last scheme, which is unlikely to gain much interest at present. It is wholly separate from your other assets.”

His tone was condescending, but Margaret determined not to hear it, and focused on what the words actually meant. She had more questions, and she wanted to ask them without falling under any suspicion from Henry.

“What could be done to improve the rate of interest, then?”

Another smirk of amusement, but one rather more intrigued. “Investments, of course. Speculation, if your interest tended that way.”

Her eyes narrowed at this last. No, she would not be so unscrupulous, even with no dependents. “What kind of investments?”

“Oh, property, that is always a safe scheme. As you know, most of your assets are tied up in
property in Yorkshire. We could seek out options for you. Business is another scheme. You might fund a new venture, or invest in an existing business venture.”

This was what Margaret had waited to hear. Her heart was hasty and she would temper it, even while a vision of a cotton mill (she refused to name it, not yet) appeared in her mind. She pushed it away. Here was reason and sense, and now Henry agreed with the banker.

“It would be worthwhile to look into sensible business ventures. You could loan the money and get much better interest than you would with the bank.”

How much he injured his own interest, Henry would soon know.

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Though her heart skipped at the thought of standing before Mr. Thornton once more, under such circumstances, she had no thought beyond making her proposition and coming home directly. She knew Mr. Thornton would consider it an insult, might be angry, anything. Charity was an unforgivable offense in the north.

But ah, there was the sort of speech she thought she had left behind her.

Henry was eager, she knew, to have this time alone with her. She asked him along primarily to give weight to her proposal. It had to chafe Mr. Thornton that she was landlord of Marlborough Mills, and he may reject her out of hand if she came unaided. In the deepest part of her heart, Margaret did wonder if jealousy would help or hinder her cause.

Upon arriving at the mill, however, she was disappointed. Word that Marlborough Mills had ceased operations must have missed her, and she had not anticipated that Mr. Thornton might not be in Milton. What could take him from there, especially at this very moment? It seemed the trip was for naught. She would not go quite yet, however. This was technically her property, and she wanted to see it. She needed to see it, let the truth sink in, come to terms with what she had rejected.

She asked Henry and the Milton banker who held the keys in trust to wait for her awhile. Henry, knowing he must tread lightly, acquiesced. "We will call for you in an hour."

Margaret walked inside. It was like the day of the riot, when she had arrived to ask for a water-mattress, but the silence was less fraught, less anticipatory. Yet the difference made no real matter, because the sorrow of the place was so similar. A place of great industry, of prosperity in its most basic form, brought to a sudden stop. The world rewarded caprice, and shunned diligence.

She could not walk this path without remembering scenes both painful and somehow precious. She had goaded a proud man into action, and Mrs. Thornton had been right in a way, though Margaret had been insensible of it at the time. She’d shown to the world her inmost heart, when she threw her arms around John Thornton.

She closed her eyes as she passed the very spot. He had tried to push her inside, keep her safe, though she was so much at fault. She could not regret what she had done; had she not come to his side, what violence might have resulted? Her hand came to the place where the wound had been. Had she not woken when she did, would she have rejected him so cruelly? She knew she might have, not knowing everything in her heart until it was far too late.

She would make amends now. Margaret walked on, into the mill itself. Cotton fluff still littered the floor and floated about the air. Whereas it was once a snow-white Hell, Margaret saw it now through such different eyes. This empty place, this shell. It waited only for a moment to spring
back into action, anxious to know where master and worker had gone.

Their ghosts were there, too, Margaret knew.

A voice broke the silence, and Margaret started. There, behind her, was Mrs. Thornton.

“Come to look over your possessions have you? He’s not here, if you’ve come to crow over him, he’s not here.”

Mrs. Thornton was, as ever, dressed severely, her hair pulled back tight, her face giving away her emotion unbidden. Margaret was not surprised. If ghosts could speak, here, someday Hannah Thornton's would, through years of dust and decay. Margaret’s heart went out to the woman, who would not recognize it.

They stood together quietly, and the misfortune Margaret spoke of engulfed them. It was difficult to stand long in the silence, though the look on Hannah Thornton’s face suggested that she endured it as a kind of punishment. How long had she been standing there, in truth, Margaret wondered. All morning? And had she slept at all, anticipating the sounds of a day’s work that would not come?

Mrs. Thornton shrugged, attempting to shake off a remembrance that gave her discomfort, and stiffly offered Margaret tea back at the house. She punctuated this remark by making sure Margaret understood that she and her son would vacate the moment they were given notice. Margaret, of course, had every intention that they would remain, but without the son here to act as go-between with his mother, Margaret would not speak of her scheme.

Tea was taken, briefly, and Henry appeared to claim Margaret before long. If Mrs. Thornton had any comment to offer on Margaret’s traveling unaccompanied with a young man, she left it alone other than to look sharply and gravely at Margaret.

They boarded the train in silence. Margaret's mood had soured considerably compared to the morning's trip, and Henry was still walking on eggshells. They took their seats in the same manner, and though Henry pressed himself into a corner so as to make way for Margaret by his side, she sat across from him, and no one joined them in their carriage.

Margaret had expected the day to go so much better than it had. She did not realize how much she had looked forward to seeing Mr. Thornton, the picture in her mind so clear now, of a smile gracing his countenance, of his hand grasping hers. Now this trip was over, she knew she could not simply make another trip, and she would need to write to Mr. Thornton to make her proposal. It did not have all the attraction of bringing her proposal to him in person had, but she was determined that he know her intention. She would write this very evening. The paper in her writing desk would have a purpose after all, and she hoped it was as worthy as Spain.

She dozed, remembrances of Milton fading into light dreams. She felt warm, as though held close, and heard through the sounds of the train faint entreaties to be well, to not be so injured. Margaret, Margaret, come back to me.

The train came to a stop, and she woke, dazed. Were they in London so soon? "Are we...."

No, just a delay. “I think we have to wait for a northbound train to pass.”

It may suit some constitutions to stay idle in an uncomfortable train compartment when it was not necessary to do so, but Margaret’s was not one of these. She gladly took to the platform to stretch her tired legs and clear her mind.
To have the picture in her mind made flesh, though, almost immediately upon leaving the train! If ever she was discomposed, this was that moment.

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It was a tone she'd never heard from his lips, even when he proposed to her.

"Found it in the hedge row. You have to look hard."

His voice was so soft. She kept her eyes on the rose.

"Why were you in Milton?"

It was the same tone, but the words called her back. "On...on business. That is, I have a business proposition." She tried to stand straighter, wished fervently for a little of the backbone she'd seen his mother display. And then she caught his eye, and she almost couldn't go on. Henry, she thought. She wanted nothing less than to have that soft tone shift to a harsh one, but she had to explain her thoughts in a clear manner.

"You don't need Henry to explain." Mr. Thornton's hand was on her arm, and any thought of Henry was banished.

She had no memory, later, of explaining her ideas to him. The look in his eyes threw her into a pleasant kind of turmoil. The rose in her hands kept her distracted, too. He'd gone all the way to Helstone and kept this one souvenir. There could only be one reason.

She chanced one more look at his face. “So you see, it is only a business proposition. It is you who would be doing me…the service.”

He took her hands in his, and she could hear nothing but her blood pounding in her ears.

She had often though about his hands. They were rough, yes, clearly the hands of someone who had done hard work. They were also gentle. She was overcome, and held more tightly to the hands of John Thornton than she had held to any man’s, as much to convince herself that he was really here as to show affection. He was here! She took his hand to her lips and sought to apologize and right every wrong between them in that one reverent kiss.

His touch on her face, bidding her to look at him, burned her skin. She would be able to recall that touch all her days. Margaret could hardly look up, but she gathered her courage and met his gaze. Had anyone ever looked at her as he did? Love – she knew that now, she would never have dared believe it and had once scorned it. He had not loved, but did now, and would.

He - John, she thought, his name is John and I love him, I do - leaned in to kiss her. Had she ever wondered what a kiss would be like? She would never have imagined this, the way every cell in her body came alive, the twist in her belly.

She was his. This was how it happened, the joining of souls.

When the train whistle blew and the call for London sounded, she moved without thinking. She knew she did not intend to leave, but she could not say the words aloud. Henry was disappointed, yes, but resigned. "Goodbye, Margaret."

Mr. Thornton - John - took her satchel without any answer to his question. She simply smiled up at him, and he returned it.
She held up the Helstone rose and breathed in the scent. "I cannot believe you went to Helstone. Why?"

He shifted a bit so that he was closer to her. "I wanted to come to London. I was not sure you would receive me."

She touched his face. "I never gave you cause to imagine that I might. I can easily believe you thought me without feeling of any kind. Had you come, however, I would have welcomed you."

"I know that now. Without that knowledge, I had to make do with being where your spirit lay. I wanted to know the place that had birthed you, had been such a part of you. Being there, I could almost feel you near."

She kissed him for that, but shook her head. "Helstone will always be a part of me, I will not deny that. What I knew of it, though, lives in memory alone. If I have a Paradise, John Thornton, it is wherever you are."

The rose went back in his pocket, with a kiss and a half-formed thought that she would press it when she had the chance, to have the memory of this day preserved.

Margaret pulled out a piece of paper, dipped her quill in the ink, and described Paradise as she knew it.

"I am sure you will remember Mr. Thornton, for you remarked on his scowl, and I told you to remember that something had happened to cause that scowl. I am writing now to tell you he has reason to smile, dear brother, and I hope will do so all his days. I might write that I am engaged and you might attempt a journey and find me wed. Let us dispense with that, for John and I are married, and you will say I should have told you, so only remember that time passes differently by post! Do not be alarmed at this change in my name or my position, or even at my permanent residence, as you might once have done. We spend happy Sundays in the countryside, and I am only sorry that Mother never saw the wild beauty of the moors; it is not soft, calm beauty like that of our youth, but you would love it, I know you would. I am happy, Frederick, and I hope one day to visit so that we might rejoice in our family, you with your darling bride and I with my cherished husband. Spain must wait, but only while we reestablish the mill and build the relationships necessary to be successful once more. Have faith and patience. Send me a letter full of news and I will be your ever faithful...’

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End

End Notes

Thank you for giving me an excuse to watch the train scene a dozen times and more to get in the right headspace to write this!

The title is from a poem by Thomas Heywood, from which Mrs. Gaskell pulled the title of

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