A Better Understanding

by Owlkin

Summary

A very AU one-shot that examines Margaret's state of being after Mr. Thornton storms out, after the proposal. And should Mr. Bell find his god-daughter, what sort of wisdom does he have to dispense? *Update 10/25/16* dusting off notes to re-write next chapters.

Notes

This may seem very AU for multiple characters, but it IS fanfiction and this is just an interpretation/projection after watching that scene. I do not own the book, series, or characters.
Chapter 1

Margaret picked up the leather gloves and held them carefully, her eyes flitting to the door that had not managed to close completely, a traitorous part of her hoping he’d come back. Still angry no doubt, but it would perhaps give her a chance to take back her harsh words. She had never spoken thus to a person in her entire life and she was utterly ashamed. Her current understanding of herself was muddled as it was, and the weight of her mother’s illness, and Bessie’s deteriorating health had all but stripped her calm and poise from her.

She sought a chair and heavily sat down, the gloves resting in her lap as she absentmindedly stroked the soft and worn leather. An inspection of the interior revealed an almost threadbare midnight blue silk liner.

A favorite pair then, she thought as she ran her fingertips across the fabric. A man of his wealth and standing held onto a pair of gloves out of sentiment. She recalled her words to him, her accusations, and her own supposed dislike so blatantly stated.

In truth, she wasn’t sure what she thought of him. But to say that he harbored no true feelings, but thought of her as an acquisition of sorts . . . It was uncalled for, she knew, but she had felt such panic-stricken embarrassment that she had used what words she could to distance herself from the man. The naked hurt on his face had pierced her, knowing that she had caused pain, and the indignant anger he displayed was nothing like how Henry had reacted to her refusal.

To liken the experience to her encounter with Henry produced different feelings entirely.

With Henry Lennox, she had felt utter confusion and discomfort at having been proposed to by a close family friend. With Mr. Thornton . . . The confusion was there but also an underlying sense of awareness. As if she had known on some small instinctive level that those small conversations and little looks had meant a little more to him, that he was trying to reach out to her.

Margaret had firmly told herself that she was unused to the man’s ways and thus tried to pay it no mind, especially when they had ceased to disagree with each other. And to think, in truth, Milton’s most eligible man had fallen for her.

And the riot at the mill had been the tipping point. She had reacted upon instinct, had been carried by the adrenaline in the crowd at their faces had turned ugly. She had thought that they wouldn’t hurt a woman and thus sought to protect the person next to her, that was all, surely?

Her actions however, had been seen in an entirely different light. As if she had set her cap for him. As if she had actively sought to ensure him this whole time. She closed her eyes in mortification, the prick of tears behind her eyes present as her breathing hitched. A voice, warm with concern, broke into her thoughts. “Margaret? My dear, you look positively dreadful, whatever is the matter?”

Margaret opened her reddened eyes to see the fatherly visage of Mr. Bell leaning over her. She quickly wiped at her eyes, embarrassed that a few tears had already leaked out, and avoided his gaze. “I am well, only a little ill at ease.”

His astute gaze regarded her for a moment before he took a knee next to her chair. “Did I hear Thornton’s voice earlier?”

She stared down at the gloves in her lap and nodded.

Mr. Bell pursued his lips, “And take your current state is the result of your refusal of his suit?”

Margaret’s head snapped up, “How could you know of it?”

The man smiled wryly, “I like to observe people, as you well know, and I happen to know Thornton very well. He has a high regard for you. And I also have taken your measure, my dear, thus I do not understand your tears.”

Mr. Bell’s kind words prompted a steady stream of said tears to roll down her cheeks as he hiccapped and shook her head forlornly. She honestly didn’t understand them either.

He reached out place a handkerchief into her hand, “You are not the sort of woman to cry at things, I think. Made of stronger stuff. But that aside, I must ask, why?”

Margaret looked up hastily, “Where is my father?”

“Napping in his chair when I left him,” Mr. Bell promised as he rose awkwardly to his feet and dragged a chair closer to hers. The sight of her tear-filled eyes was rather a distressing sight and he hurt a woman and thus sought to protect the person next to her, that was all, surely?

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“Napping in his chair when I left him,” Mr. Bell promised as he rose awkwardly to his feet and dragged a chair closer to hers. The sight of her tear-filled eyes was rather a distressing sight and he was rather thankful that her fragile father was not there to deal with his daughter’s situation.

She dotted at her eyes and took a steadying breath, “It is true, that Mr. Thornton . . . Came here to declare himself and offer marriage. And I did refuse him.”

“Is it most surprising to hear, my dear, for I thought you two were rather well-matched,” he said kindly.

Margaret scoffed lightly, “I was so startled that he was there, he talked of the riot, then . . . His hesitancy . . . I knew what he was going to say, and I panicked.”

“You speak of your experience with Henry Lennox?”

Margaret looked at him with an alarmed expression. “You know about that?”

“I know everything, dearest. But go on, what happened then?”

“I told him . . . That I found him offensive and accused him of taking advantage,” she said with a wince. Mr. Bell patted her hand sympathetically. “Did you mean it?”

“No truly,” she said miserably, “I fear I was projecting my frustration, and . . . To be truthful, I didn’t think he would have ever offered for me. What with our personalities, our families, my own circumstances . . . My mind was grasping for reasons. Negative ones, I grant you, but logic stated that one such as he had better prospects and that we had never gotten along well.”

“And why,” Mr. Bell said carefully, “would he not want a beauty like you? A woman who challenges him,” he said with a fond smile.

Margaret shook her head, “No, I know many times I let myself get carried away, but I do not think Mr. Thornton would wish for such a harridan.”

Mr. Bell guffawed, “You are a spirited woman, not a shrinking violet. And that is precisely why he has been drawn to you from the start.”

“I do not see how, for I manage to insult him in some way whenever I open my mouth to speak to him.”

Chapter 1
"him," she murmured as a fresh tear trailed from the corner of her eye. It had been so easy to think of him as an overbearing master, but as time went on, she had begun to like him as a person. Little by little, she found the smallest thing to appreciate. His attentiveness to her mother, the friendship with her father, and the forthrightness with his mill and workers that even they seemed to appreciate. She grimaced as she next confessed, "I even told him that I disliked him, and always had."

"Is that true?" Mr. Bell asked gently.

"No," she whispered, "He does not treat me as a gentleman of London does, but he has never . . ." Patronized me in the same way that Henry has, or those in Aunt Shaw's circle. I fear I did not know how to react."

"All ladies have their own form of armor, it was unlucky for Thornton that he found out yours consisted of heated barbs." Mr. Bell tried to joke lightly, but it fell flat as he glanced at the miserable look on his god-daughter's face. He wrinkled his nose and decided to play another card, "I had thought you returned some of his sentiment, dear."

Margaret shyly looked startled then as she looked at him with reddened eyes. "T-that is to say I do respect him as a person, and appreciate the service he has done my family."

Mr. Bell chortled again, "No, no. I mean you appreciate him as a woman does a man. Do you mean to say you have never felt a tender regard for him?"

She blinked rapidly, opened her mouth slightly, but no words came out. Her eyes moved to the floor, ceiling, then to the gloves in her lap in slight bemusement. With her face scrunched in thought, it was hard not to think of the small girl he had last seen in Helstone, her nose in a book. He allowed her to form her own conclusions, but an academic such as he, he prided himself in being well versed in research and experimentation, so naturally he knew the course ahead. There was no telling how long it would take, and if they would manage to stop impeding their own progress, but it was a wonderful eventuality in his mind.

He wondered if the boy botched their conversations on a regular basis or if he had more than ample assistance from Margaret . . .

"Mr. Bell?"

He returned his attention to her and smiled once more. "I am sorry, sometimes my thoughts wander."

Margaret gave a wan smile in return but it did not reach her eyes, "I am familiar with the sensation."

For a few moments, she looked reluctant to continue, but with an encouraging nod from him, she took a breath. "I confess that he invokes a certain amount of strong feelings, but I had assumed it to be distant . . ."

"And now?"

She looked utterly torn, "I find that I do not dislike him as I had professed," she admitted in a small voice. "That wasn't so hard, now was it?"

Mr. Bell shrugged and quipped, "I missed my calling as a counselor? Now, what shall we do about your predicament, hmm?"

"Nothing," she said sadly, "For I have already driven him out."

Mr. Bell tilted his head towards the door, "Have you now? Then who is that standing there?"

With a gasp, Margaret looked up into the sheepish and apologetic eyes of one John Thornton. The man stood awkwardly in the door frame, with one hand still poised on the door knob. "I forgot my things," he murmured as he stared at the floor.
Mr. Bell stood smartly, "I had better run off now, errands to run you know," he said with a wink and an impudent clap to Thornton's shoulder as he slid out the door quietly.

Neither of the individuals left in the room moved for a few minutes, each careful to keep their eyes trained on the floor.

At last Margaret shakily stood and offered his gloves solemnly, desperately not wanting to meet his gaze and the condemnation in those blue eyes, so she stared down at the tomes sitting on the table.

His hesitant voice drew her back, "Margaret?"

The use of her Christian name startled her and hesitantly, she looked up.

Mr. Thornton looked utterly vulnerable as he shifted uneasily from one foot to another. And there was an unmistakable flush across his high cheekbones that she had never seen on the somber master before. She bit her lip and held out the gloves firmly, "Pray tell, how much did you hear?"

"Most of it," he murmured, "I left quickly enough but made it no further than the end of the street before I realized what I forgot," he indicated as he reached out to take the gloves from her. He looked down into her tear streaked face, "I also came to apologize for my lack of-"

"Whatever do you have to apologize for?" she blurted, aghast that he felt the need to make reparations.

His brows drew together as he frowned, "I needlessly upset you further when I raised my voice to you. My disappointed hopes aside, I should not have spoken to you so."

Margaret shook her head and gave a mirthless chuckle, "And I should not have treated you so callously. Perhaps you had more than enough provocation."

Mr. Thornton smiled sadly, "So I heard you say, but I would not have caused you such pain."

"I have no intention of avoiding the Hale home," he asserted, "But considering the talk that already surrounds the two of us, I shall try to ensure that for appearances sake, our interactions are limited. At least for a little bit. Best you continue to throw a few heated barbs in my direction, lest you confuse our acquaintances," he quipped.

She turned red in mortification but Mr. Thornton appeared to be fighting a dose of hearty laughter. "Not entirely how I planned to spend my afternoon, but it has not ended as badly as I surmised," he offered.

Margaret meekly offered, "I would not have you feel uncomfortable in my presence because of things that were said, nor have you avoid your lessons with Father."

Mr. Thornton gave a short bow of his head, "I think this is perhaps a good time to take my leave. I shall return later this evening for my lesson, perhaps you might join us?"

Margaret's eyes lit up ever so slightly at the offer and she nodded earnestly. It went far in soothing the slight ache that had been present in John Thornton's chest since he had rushed out of the door earlier, and his posture relaxed slightly as he gathered the forgotten top hat and gloves.

With a last parting look, he strode out of the room and left Margaret to her thoughts once more. She held onto the loaned handkerchief tightly and let out a gush of air. Quickly, she gathered her shawl and a small basket, heading out the door to the Princeton district with a small smile on her face and a distinct desire to tell her friend the extraordinary events that had happened in the space of an hour.
This is left open-ended, so they have a chance for something a bit earlier but I am not shoving them together. I may return to it shortly after some other fics get some attention.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Margaret goes to see Bessie. And Mrs. Thornton sees that her son might have gotten somewhere.

Chapter Notes

Thanks all for the feedback. I never anticipated doing more than a one shot for this and it grew. I read a bunch of reviews this morning and it just settled my resolve to spend another hour or so tonight writing.

Bessie stifled a slight feeling of panic upon hearing a loud knock and looked up from her mending as Mary ushered Margaret through the door. The slightly flushed look on Margaret's face was rather telling as she quickly shed her outer garments and took a seat across from Bessie.

Her friend was most welcome on a day like today, for there was no noise in the street and the low hum of the mills was nonexistent. Her father had come home late the previous night, a look of utter dejection and pain across his features. He only managed to mumble that the strike had been broken, some sort of violence had happened at Marlborough Mills. When Bessie tried to press him further, he only spat out that it was the work of Boucher and a group of half mad idiots that managed to assault a young woman, and bring down their cause simultaneously. He had left early this morning, before either one of the girls had even stirred and she had not seen him since.

Mary had made their meager breakfast and they had quietly worked around the house waiting for word. Word that they could return to work, if the strikers would be punished, or even if they no longer had a place. Any sort of distraction was a welcome one and Margaret was a rare soul who brought a sort of lightness to their lives, despite the gravity of the situation.

Bessie barely contained her amusement after taking in her friend's bright eyes as she bent her head back to her work. "I see another silly smile, I think," she teased.

Margaret clasped her hands in her lap and tried to affect a more serious mien. But inexplicably, a glow was still there as she took a bracing breath, "I felt I had to come and share with you the events of this afternoon, for I can scarcely believe them myself."

Her friend chuckled and placed the article of clothing on the table, "Do tell then, I haven't seen such spirit in your eyes since your last row with Thornton."

Margaret turned pink at the mention of the mill master and shut her mouth, prompting Bessie to let out a peal of laughter, "Oh no, don't tell me you're a-smilin' because of him?"

Margaret gave a shy smile, "It seems we are in agreement to become better acquainted and rather less combative with each other."

Bessie arched a brow and grinned, "Yes, please."

Margaret gave her friend an almost scandalized look but it was tempered with something that bordered on content as she played with the bangle about her wrist. Bessie decided to give her a reprieve and leaned forward to clasp Margaret's hands, "So you don't dislike him as much as you've said before?"

Margaret shook her head, "No, I believe I willfully misunderstood him."

"That's something though, innit?" Bessie asked kindly, "Maybe there's hope for the both of you yet."

Margaret resisted the urge to roll her eyes, "I did not agree to anything other than a wish to know him better."

"That is a wee bit surprising," Bessie commented as she leaned back in her seat, "Considering the amount of attention he pays to you, and accordin' to the workers who've seen you together, you have a rare gift of riling the man up."

Margaret's eyes flashed, "No more than he does me."

"Well, you'd be right bored with a regular sort of gentleman," Bessie reminded her.

"I have not spent enough time amongst gentleman in general to be able to form an opinion of my likes and dislikes," Margaret said with a frown.

Bessie pursed her lips, "Whatever brought up the conversation, as it were? He didn't come all the way to the house, the day after the strike mind, just to talk about how you haven't got on. Doesn't seem like him."

Margaret looked a little guilty as she recounted more her tale, with Bessie's pale eyebrows climbing higher and higher on her forehead.

There were more than a few minutes of silence as she digested the information then promptly burst out laughing, "You're a pair, what now then? He going to take you out walking? Discuss the price of cotton over tea?"

Margaret touched her brow self-consciously, "I thought to see him when he calls on my father for I am normally invited as a courtesy, but Mr. Thornton suggested we use it as neutral ground."

"Neutral ground? Ye've managed to turn a courtship into a battle," Bessie snickered.

"It isn't a courtship Bessie," Margaret said quietly, looking down with a blush, "Not yet, anyways;" Bessie replied gleefully.

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John knew that a large grin on his face, the day after the strikers broke down his mill doors, would look more than a little . . . Inappropriate. He managed to keep his face sober, but his head was up and his steps brisk as he strode back to the mill.

Hannah Thornton had stood by her post at the window to watch for her son's return, and
straightened when she saw his tall dark figure appear at the gate. His face was a contradiction; the familiar planes of his face serious yet relaxed.

He looked up into the window, caught his mother's eye, and offered a little smile up.

Her eyes narrowed and she gave a small sigh, but wrinkled her nose and the corner of her mouth turned up to acknowledge her son.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Dixon and Hannah cope.

Chapter Notes

I am so very sorry for the long wait. I acquired two new hobbies, Zumba and I got Rosetta Stone around Christmas. Thank you all for the reviews and kudos.

Margaret carefully pressed the hot iron on the length of snowy white curtain, sprinkling starch as she slowly moved the metal across the fabric. She had gone through the motions almost methodically, her mind seemingly elsewhere as she performed what she considered one of her own household tasks.

Dixon watched her carefully out of the corner of her eye as she bustled around the kitchen, her lips pursed in a disapproving frown. She knew well enough what was on Miss Margaret's mind, but she had been reminded more than once by the spirited girl, that her sour opinion of Mr. Thornton was not welcome within her earshot. The young miss perhaps knew Dixon too well to suppose that the loyal servant would completely dispel her pre-conceived notions of the mill master. But such opinions were based solely, in Margaret's opinion, on the fact that Mr. Thornton was in fact regarded as a tradesman by some in their circle.

Although these notions had been hard for Margaret to dispel at first, she acknowledged that she vastly preferred the straightforward approach of these northern men and secretly appreciated that she was not treated as some delicate ornament, as she would have been in any other London circle.

She smoothed her hands over her apron and gave a small smile as she carefully picked out napkins from a wicker basket of clean laundry, her eyes glowing.

Dixon wrinkled her nose and gave a deep sigh as she took out her frustration on the bread dough on the table in front of her, kneading viciously with a scowl.

Hannah Thornton was more or less having a similar experience as Dixon. Only she was not quite as successful at keeping her objections to herself. To John, her look of indignation as she craned her head up at her son's tall frame might have been amusing if she wasn't so irritated.

"You mean to tell me . . . that you two had it out, you ran off for a bit, came back and all is well again?"

"It doesn't sound all that well when you say it like that," John said dryly.

"A puff of smoke, that's what a girl's love is," Hannah bit out, "Does she not know her own mind?"

"I think . . . " John began carefully, "We both needed to air out a few grievances, without the pretense of good manners."

With a sharp tilt of her head, she held back a glare as she gazed upon her dear son's face, "John, were you not the one who told me that you were sure, that Miss Hale could not care for you? That she would turn up her nose at your northern ways?"

The corner of John's mouth curled up as he idly picked up a newspaper and sank into his chair, "I don't quite recall, Mother, did I? And was it not you who practically reinforced the rumors that Miss Hale did in fact, harbor a tender regard for me?"

Hannah scoffed, looking away and shifting in her seat. "By all accounts, before the day of the strike, you'd think she'd have none of you. I can't imagine went through her head . . . throwing her arms about a man."

John lifted his head with a dark look, "Which she did at her own expense, mind."

She inclined her head begrudgingly, "Aye, she did at that, but she still exposed herself."

Her son neatly folded the paper and stood smartly, "As it were, since she has agreed to my calls, the gossips will have little to talk about soon enough."

Hannah shook her head, "My son is one of the most eligible, handsome—"

John snorted with derision and strode to the sideboard to pour a brandy. His mother only raised an eyebrow, "Whether you acknowledge it or not, you are something of a catch in this city. And your courtship with a young lady outside of the Milton elite is not something the tittle tattles of this world will let go of easily. Best resign yourself to open scrutiny."

John shrugged and sat back down, "I shall be more concerned with pleasing her, not those who pretend to be our friends."

"John!" She said sharply, "The relationships with those manufacturers that you can so easily cast aside were hard won. If you wish to proceed with this, best you do it right."

He cast his blue gaze upon her, "And will you help us Mother?"

Hannah looked uncomfortable for a moment and uncharacteristically fidgeted with the handkerchief in her grasp. "I won't pretend that she is what I would have chosen for you, but if you are happy . . . " she grumbled.

John gave a rare toothy grin, "I am. However, I'm no fool, I realize that you and Margaret are not on good terms, but it is my wish that you try."
Hannah wrinkled her nose, "Margaret, is it?"

"Mother, please?"
The pleading look she sent her was her undoing. She sighed, "Fine. But don't you come to me if this ends in tears."

John rolled his eyes, glancing at the door as Fanny bustled in with her arms full of packages. She haphazardly dumped them on the dining table and bustled quickly into the sitting room. "Is it true then?"

"I am afraid we need more context, Fanny dear," Hannah remarked with an arched brow.

Fanny gave an exasperated sigh and began to untie her bonnet strings. "Is John really going to marry Miss Hale?"

"And so it begins," Hannah muttered.

John frowned. "I am happy to say that she accepted my suit, but where did you hear of a proposal?"

Fanny's eyes held the look of a panicked animal for a fraction of a second before she casually brushed a long blonde curl over her shoulder. "Well, it might be said that you were seen in Crampton, in your best no less, and only a day after the riot. What else could you be there for?"

John wordlessly looked at his mother, who only shrugged and picked up her embroidery. "You both seem to be made of stern stuff, we'll see how you handle the next few weeks."

Chapter End Notes

So Hannah's reaction, so we are clear, is not quite approving but she acknowledges her son is a grown man.
Chapter 5

Their next meeting.

Chapter Notes

The lesson is a bit AU, but I want a little bit more of the characters, like we see at the station at the end of the series. OH OH OH, if any of you get the chance, check out the 1970s North and South series with Patrick Stewart. It is a little bit odd seeing the man who plays Jean Luc Picard as Mr. Thornton, but after a few views I went with it. I still prefer the 2004 version. Thanks for all the reviews! They trickle in and make my day!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Margaret held her tea cup in her hand and flit her eyes up demurely to glance at her parents. Richard and Maria Hale were blithely unaware of their daughter's quandary as they quietly conversed with each other from the comfort of their respective arm chairs. Mrs. Hale, while not in the full bloom of health, had shown more vigor in the past few days than she had in that month. It heartened those closest to her upon seeing a more content expression upon her face as she once again took an interest in her surroundings.

Her daughter, however, wore an expression of being ill at ease. She had not yet disclosed to her parents the nature of her conversation with Mr. Thornton and she knew she had ought to. It was not quite a declaration of courtship, but with the two individuals involved, it could be construed as such from an outsider's perspective. But how to explain that which she didn't fully understand herself?

She sighed and placed the cup atop the saucer, drawing the attention of her father. "Such a melancholy expression, my dear, is your friend Miss Higgins not fairing well in her health?"

Margaret shook her head gently, "No, indeed. She is no better but I can say she has not worsened in her condition."

Mr. Hale smiled genially, "Ah, well that is something, is it not? Come now, what troubles you?"

Mrs. Hale looked up from her perusal of the flames in the fireplace to regard Margaret with a quiet expression. Margaret delicately gulped and placed her cup aside, smoothing her skirts as she sat up a bit straighter. "I suppose I was just thinking about how badly I have misjudged Mr. Thornton," she said slowly.

Mr. Hale beamed, "I think of him as a very good friend and am glad you do not seem as averse to him as you did before."

"He has always been most attentive since we arrived," Mrs. Hale ventured in a soft voice, her eyes examining Margaret carefully as she lifted a fine lawn handkerchief to her mouth.

Margaret's cheeks warmed a little, "I confess that my opinions had been colored by the time I spent in London, but I wish to know him better Papa. I know I was not a very good conversationalist at the last lesson you invited me to, but might I be permitted to sit with you again tonight?"

"Of course, my dear! You know how I enjoy your presence, and the addition of a third mind in the room will be most refreshing," Mr. Hale exclaimed. "This is quite a difference from last week, when you seemed to barely tolerate his presence," he joked.

She knew her cheeks must be crimson from the amount of blushing that Mr. Thornton's name invoked, but she steeled herself as she answered back quietly, "I suppose I had a lot of growing up to do since then."

Mr. Hale's merry expression dimmed for a moment and turned thoughtful as he regarded her, but he nodded in acquiescence with a small smile and went back to his conversation with his wife, whose frail disposition was at odds with the sudden knowing gleam in her eyes as she turned back to attend her husband. Margaret idly toyed with the bracelet about her wrist and glanced at the clock on the mantle.

Four hours. She could wait four hours with tolerable patience. Or perhaps she would see if Dixon needed any assistance below stairs.

John Thornton paced the floor of the mill with agitation. His body and mind went through the motions as his eyes flitted across the machines, across the hands and faces of the workers, but still she permeated his thoughts. As he ascended the platform overlooking the floor, he dug into his waistcoat for his pocket watch and glanced down at the time.

Four hours. With a nearly inaudible groan, he tucked the watch away and braced his hands on the railing to stare off into nothing. It took all of two minutes before he strode back down the stairs and headed for the small warehouses that housed the raw bales of cotton, stripping off his black coat as he walked. He expected one of his bi-weekly shipments today, and a turn at lifting the heavy bales from the wagon would be a suitable distraction from the blue-green eyes of one Miss Margaret Hale.

Dixon was no fool, she knew what was to occur that night, for there was a noticeable bloom in Miss Margaret's cheeks as she bustled around the small kitchen, eagerly assisting with the preparation of the small cakes that Dixon had proposed for the master's lessons.

That tradesman was to come to the house.

Dixon softened a bit when she looked at the excited expression on Miss Hale's face, but things were what they were. It weren't proper for a young lady of her standing to mix with these Northerners, no matter that the Hales were in reduced circumstances, or that the prospective suitor turned more than one head in Milton.
John arrived ten minutes early to his lesson and quickly adjusted the bundle under his arms before raising hand to the beat the knocker against the heavy door. It was several minutes before the round face of the family servant, Dixon, greeted him with a scowl. She ushered him in and offered to take the bundle, but he shook his head in the negative, holding the package tighter to his body, but offered his hat and coat which she bore to a side room. As she returned, she lifted up her nose slightly in agitation but led him up the stairs to the family sitting room where the three Hales were holding court in their comfortable surroundings.

He had always admired the coziness of the space, more so than the austere and formal living space that his mother created, although he would never say so out loud. But the Hale's sitting room felt lived in, and gave out a sense of warmth that he had not felt in some time. John could attribute it to Mr. Hale's paternal nature, but he knew the real reason he felt such contentment was because he felt her presence here.

The subject of his thoughts rose from her seat and offered a courteous bow of her head, the small curled wisps of her hair falling in a pleasing way about the planes of her face. After casting a quick glance about the room, he noticed that Mrs. Hale was absent as he gave a short bow to both Mr. Hale and his daughter.

His instructor noticed the perusal and quickly interjected, "I hope you will excuse my wife, she retired early to take advantage of an early night of rest." John inclined his head, "Not at all." He held out the package hesitantly to Miss Hale, "I thought that she might enjoy these."

Margaret took the package and carefully undid the strings, revealing a dozen plump oranges. Wonderingly, she looked up into Mr. Thornton's uncertain countenance and exclaimed, "I had thought these were not available in the market."

John looked down for a moment, "I sometimes send for them from London, they are a personal favorite of mine and I hoped your mother might like them. My physician swears by their rejuvenating properties."

She carefully placed the brown paper package next to the tea tray and gave him a genuine smile, "I assure you, they are her favorite as well. You are most thoughtful, Mr. Thornton."

"Indeed," Mr. Hale agreed, "I do appreciate your kindness sir."

"It is nothing, for I feel you are offering me a greater gift of knowledge," John replied honestly. "Well, well, shall we get down to it then? Margaret, dearest would you be so kind as to pour us our first cup of tea for the evening?"

Margaret nearly leapt up as she bustled over to the small table and first poured her guest a strong cup of black tea with a touch of milk. Not unlike before, her hand brushed his slightly as she transferred the cup to his hands, but this time she met his eyes with a light blush in her cheeks. He looked down at his tea, made just to his liking, and gave her a small smile in return.

She dropped her hand and resumed her task, pouring a cup for her father as she listened to him speak upon Greek history, and the factors leading up to the Peloponnesian wars. Not the most fascinating subject, but one she had heard him speak of often enough and felt able to concentrate on other matters. She fought a ridiculous urge to giggle as she took stock of her situation. Which was of course, completely unbecoming. She was not one of those ladies who tittered on other matters. She fought a ridiculous urge to giggle as she took stock of her situation.

So not a lot of dialogue but more of a build. So I can have more meaningful conversations later without the readers going, "That . . . doesn't seem in line with the characters."
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

In which the situation of the mill comes to light and Milton loses another young soul.

Chapter Notes

So this is a sadder chapter, for I must follow cannon a bit. Or movie cannon at least. I want to thank all the reviewers who took a moment to give a word of encouragement or criticism. The story is picking up some readers and I only updated today because of the nice words you all gave. Thanks again and ON TO HAPPIER TIMES!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John stared at the figures with a blank expression. Numbers he had been taught from a young age to track and follow with diligence had seemed to turn against him.

A moment of child-like confusion struck him. Had he not carefully followed the tenets of his business and balanced his losses against his gains? Correspondence from his peers in Milton hinted that perhaps he was not the only one to feel the strain of the failed strike, but then again, he was one of the few that did not participate in the speculation of the British market.

Dark and clogging thoughts crowded his head, bringing back images of a stern headmaster sending him home from school, his mother's wan face greeting him as he arrived in the dusty outskirts of Milton, and the undeniable truth that he was now responsible for the well-being of his entire family at the age of fifteen.

The little stack of pamphlets that had been distributed, albeit kindly, by Watson and Slickson, each detailing an advance in technology or an advantage in the foreign markets had been cast aside in disgust when first received. John eyed the layer of dust that had settled on top with a dispassionate gaze. Perhaps it had been his inflexibility that had led to this, the forgone conclusion that his business would fail without an influx of funds or orders. The many open books in front of him now seemed a fruitless endeavor and all happy thoughts of Miss Hale had turned dark within the space of an hour.

How could he possibly entertain a courtship with such a woman when he had nothing to offer? He knew enough of her personality and background to understand that she would not be concerned with money, but as they progressed further into a potential relationship, would he be able to take care of her?

John burrowed his face into his hands, then up to his hair, mussing the tidy black hairstyle into strands that almost stood on end. It was long past closing hour at the mill and here he was, pouring over accounts that yielded no positive results.

Those who already had orders with the mill had yet to pay. Prospective clients seemed wary of the cotton trade all together. It was a fabric deemed too low for the elite of Britain to pay for and had not yet appealed to the general masses as a suitable alternative to linen or wool. It was not meant for a climate such as England, even with its hot spells in the summer. More often than not, he wondered if he had not better fared with a different trade. It was a point of pride in the north to be among the forward thinking manufacturers, the inventors and the idealists.

He snorted and thumped his head against his desk. His workers likely called him many things, but an idealist was not on the short list.

John tugged his pocket watch out and peered blearily at the time.

One o'clock in the morning. He sighed and tucked the watch away into his waistcoat, taking a deep breath.

Breathing, one thing he could still manage he supposed.

The fate of over one hundred workers in his hands. Men, women, and children.

His breaths came shorter as his chest seemed to constrict. In a few short months he could be responsible for making all these individuals redundant, and potentially desolate . . .

He folded his arms over the desk and laid his head down. For just a moment . . . To catch a few minutes of sleep before he reviewed the incoming revenue once more . . .

Margaret held the cold still hand of her friend in a loose grip.

She had better a few days ago, truly she had, but there was no longer a faint rosy tinge to those cheeks nor a steady sparkle in her eyes, For all that she had suffered, Bessie Higgins had truly departed from this life to a better existence. Of this Margaret held firm to her belief, for it was the only thing that gave her comfort as she listened to the stifled sobs of Mary as they waited for Nicholas to return home.

It was perhaps a small blessing that Bessie had passed quietly in her sleep and in the comfort of her own bed, without the body wracking coughs that often accompanied the illness in her lungs.

A small part of her guiltily thought of her mother and her illness, and what it might mean if her own family found themselves in a similar situation as the Higgins.

Mary swallowed a cry as her father brusquely barged into the small home and stared at his youngest with a queer expression on his face. Slowly, his head turned to Margaret and the still figure that lay upon the bed. For a moment, it seemed he stopped breathing as he stared at Bessie's lax expression. He approached the bed almost as if in a trance, whispering to Margaret, "Were you here when it happened?"

Margaret raised her eyes and shook her head slightly, "I am sure it was peaceful. Look at her face, Nicholas, there is no more pain."

He stiffened, his eyes frantically looking everywhere but at the body, "Are you sure she ain't in a faint? It's happened before."
“No, Nicholas,” Margaret answered sorrowfully, “She is dead.”

He sank to his knees next to the bed and hesitantly reached out to grasp Bessie's arm, his eyes quickly pooling with tears, “It ain't supposed to be like this, she's not meant to go before me.”

Margaret said nothing, but placed Bessie's hand within the other atop her waist and stepped back to allow a respective distance for the mourning father. Nicholas sunk in a deep breath before a keening wail slowly arose from his chest as he placed his head on the mattress and sobbed.

She clasped her hands and brought them to her lips, fighting the urge to join in his grief, but the empathetic side of her rose as she beheld the sorrow that welled within the family at losing their eldest daughter. With a quick murmur to Mary, she excused herself after Nicholas had exhausted himself, promising to return the next morning to assist with funeral preparations but allowing the family their time alone.

Tightening her shawl around her, she then wiped at her eyes and began to walk slowly back to Crampton. It was more the memory of the walk rather than the awareness of her surroundings that brought her closer to home. Knowing that one of her closest friends was gone, and at such a young age was a foreign feeling to her. Underneath her own grief was a confusion at the fairness at it all. Bessie was her own age and had expired so quickly, and because of her situation in life had died in relative poverty. It was as Nicholas had said, she as the child was not meant to expire before the parent.

It was not until that she bodily walked into another individual that she became aware of herself again. Her downturned face literally collided with a firm chest. Horrified, she gathered her tossed about wits and prepared herself to make an effusive apology, only to look into the worn and drawn visage of Mr. Thornton.

Horrified, she hastened to straighten herself, “Mr. Thornton, I beg that you forgive my lapse, I did not see you.”

As tired as he was, the corner of John's lips managed to turn upwards, “Your trajectory would suggest otherwise, I myself was preoccupied.” It was here he noticed her red eyes and frowned, “You are not well, it seems, would you like me to escort you the rest of the way home?”

Margaret shook her head, keeping her eyes low, “I can manage well enough, but I thank you.”

John's eyebrows took a definitive downward turn as he closely regarded her countenance, “I wish the same, but perhaps you wouldn't mind the company, for I just came from your residence and would like to relay the message I left with your father.”

She looked up in confusion, “I suppose, if I do not take up too much of your time.”

Hesitantly, he took the proffered limb and attempted to match the long strided gait of the mill master, who seemed to realize the short stature of his walking companion and compensated accordingly. It took a few moments as they winded around the crowds of people making their way home before he hesitantly offered, “It seems that business with the mill will keep me away from lessons with your father for the time being.”

Margaret, who had been unconsciously clinging to the warm limb in the brisk spring weather, looked up with a startled expression, “Oh... I hope not for a permanent duration.”

He murmured back, “I wish the same, but for now I will be occupied with matters of business. But Miss Hale, I must confess you seem distressed, is there not something I might do for your relief?”

Margaret quietly answered, “I just would like to be home as soon as possible.”

John looked down at her solemn expression for a moment but continued leading the way through the narrow streets in silence. A steady stream of tears had begun to trickle down her cheeks as they walked, and John who had a slight inkling of her point of origin, silently offered her his handkerchief. She whispered something that might have been thanks as she ducked her head and wiped at her eyes.

He bent, “You are sure you do not wish to speak of it?”

Margaret choked on a small sob, “A friend of mine has passed, and I fear I was not prepared as I thought I was.”

Upon reaching the small flight of stairs in front of her home, he handed her up and offered an earnest gaze, “Then I am sorry, for I know the sensation of feeling alone.”

She said nothing, biting her lip and avoiding eye contact as her grief came bubbling up to the forefront. If he wished to comment on the change in her demeanor, blessedly, he did not but tipped his hat as he bid her good day. She nodded jerkily as he strode off, offering her a small smile as he turned round the corner.

After checking in with Dixon and asking for privacy, she excused herself to her room and curled up tightly under her quilt still fully dressed. It was almost unforgiveable in her mind to feel such distress when Bessie's own family was likely beside themselves in grief.

As the sun began to sit lower in the sky, a now familiar chill began to permeate her small room, prompting her to roll under all the covers and shiver. Her own sadness was nothing compared to that of those suffering from the strike, this she knew, but a small part of her keenly felt the loss of her companion and true friend.
I posted this earlier on FF.net, I was lagging a bit. Whoops.

"Margaret?" a soft voice called, rousing her from her sleep. It was only a few hours since she had fallen asleep fully clothed. By now, her parents had gathered in the drawing room for the evening and would wonder at her absence.

She opened her eyes, wincing as she felt the loose pins of her coiffure jab in her in the scalp as she shifted her head. Turning her stiff neck to the door, she espied her mother holding the door tentatively with a forlorn expression on her face.

"Dixon said that you had come straight to your room, my dear, whatever is the matter?"

Margaret sat up slowly, her eyes watering as her mind started to recall the events that occurred earlier in the day. Struggling to retain her composure, she kept her gaze down, "I apologize for alarming you, I fear I experienced a trying day."

Her mother closed the door gently behind her and moved to sit on the bed gingerly, taking Margaret's cool hand in her own warm ones. "Will you not tell me of it?"

Margaret lifted her eyes and regarded her carefully. For any casual observer, Maria Hale was a delicate woman of fragile constitution, but Margaret remembered her from before their move to Milton. A woman of kindness and quiet observation, who could always ascertain the source of her children's foul moods and dissipate any unpleasantness.

She did not know what prompted her to open her mouth haltingly and relate the tale of how she came to meet Bessie Higgins, but as she did, she became aware of the tears trickling down her cheeks and her mother's tender ministrations as she withdrew her own handkerchief to dab at Margaret's cheeks.

Margaret sniffed and wiped at her eyes, "I am indeed sorry for relating such a sad tale to you . . ."

"Oh my dear child, while I would not have chosen her as a companion for you, I am glad you had someone to talk to, and I am equally grieved to know that the young woman died as she did," Mrs. Hale said sadly, patting Margaret's hand comfortably. "I know that I have not been myself since I arrived, but do not think that I have been unaware of your own struggles. You have done remarkably well, dearest, and have been such a comfort to your father and I. We are indeed proud of you," she finished quietly.

Margaret scoffed lightly, "I have been narrow-minded and more than a little spoiled."

Mrs. Hale sat a bit straighter, "I do not believe so . . ."

Margaret shook her head, "No Mother, I have. I spoke of the south with such reverence, completely unwilling to see the merits of our new home, as different as they may be. I have offended others with these views and for that, I regret my behavior."

Mrs. Hale was silent for a moment before replying. "I think you have been more successful than your father and I, and that shows a maturity of spirit. You have assisted in the running of the household, a duty which should have fallen to me, and I have heard you complain little."

Margaret gave a small smile but looked away, prompting her mother to bring up something else her keen eyes had noticed. "To be sure, the gentlemen here are not those of London, but you never were particularly fond of them, were you Margaret?"

Her daughter blinked and met her mother's gaze warily. "I suppose not."

Mrs. Hale nodded, "I had thought as much. For I myself was not inclined to the hordes of young men and their empty accolades, I found I much preferred someone to have a good conversation with."

Margaret stared.

Her mother continued, "Your father was one of the few who made a genuine effort, and he was so very handsome. Still rather so, in my opinion," she remarked, drawing a blush to Margaret's cheeks.
"As I said, I have been slower to adjust but I do recognize when one of my opinions no longer holds any merit," Mrs. Hale said slowly. "And I hope you understand me well when I say I would like you to find happiness here."

Margaret nodded, slightly in wonder at this turn in the conversation. Her mother placed her handkerchief in Margaret's hands, leaned forward to kiss her cheek, and murmured, "Come down soon to the sitting room and we will talk some more."

Margaret gripped the handkerchief tightly and watched her mother leave. Her sorrow still weighed heavily in her mind as she straightened her clothing and smoothed her hair back. The tightness in her chest and lungs was no longer present, but a sort of blind weariness pervaded her, and the arrival of nightfall as she had slept was a bit disorienting as she gazed out a window, but there was also relief in knowing that the day was over, and she could once again seek the solitude of her room.

She was just... worn. And altogether too tired to cry anymore. Holding the burdens of her family and harboring her own grief had taken its toll and for now, she just needed to put one foot in front of the other.

Upon reaching the sitting room, her father stood and greeted her warmly, directing her to the sofa and softly offering his condolences. She patted his hand and he returned to his seat, picking up a letter from the side table. "I received a note, my dear, from Mr. Thornton."

Margaret turned her head at this and stared at the small square of partially unfolded parchment. Her father opened it slowly, "He says that business at the mill will keep him away. Dreadful business, nothing has quite been the same since the strike. I am most aggrieved to know that so many are suffering in its wake."

Mrs. Hale looked uncomfortable but ventured, "Is it so very bad?"

"I am afraid so, for I understand that many of the masters have not yet recovered from the time that their mills closed," Mr. Hale said grimly.

Mrs. Hale cast her eyes down meekly and sighed. "So much tied into commerce; livelihoods, families..."

"And reputations," Mr. Hale remarked. "Mr. Thornton worked hard to raise his family back up, and now by a twist of fate, he now struggles to keep them afloat."

Margaret hesitantly spoke, "How do you know of this?"

"Mr. Bell has quietly kept me apprised of their situation," her father murmured, "And that of the industry here in Milton. I am afraid that such a setback spells trouble for all of the masters unless they can find additional funds to operate."

"Surely the Thorntons will persevere," Mrs. Hale said with some alarm, "They truly have been so kind and attentive since we arrived."

Her parents' voices faded away as Margaret grimaced and shifted uneasily in her seat, thinking of the especially cold looks that Mrs. Thornton had shot her way.

And of Fanny's offhanded remarks, not meant to inflict hurt, but nevertheless rather callous. She understood, to a degree, that Fanny had mostly been sheltered by her mother and elder brother, but now in hindsight, allowing her unbridled Thornton honesty loose on Milton society was rather a jarring sensation for anyone within earshot.

And that of Mr. Thornton himself... It was a curious sensation to almost crave the open discussions they had and at the same time, be rather put off by his observations. He was not used to withholding information or altering what he saw as the facts. And despite her churlish attitude towards him, and his rather standoffish manner with her, they had seemed to acknowledge the other as an individual.

"Margaret?"

She looked up quickly into her father's searching gaze and gave a tired smile that did not quite reach her eyes. Standing slowly, she asked quietly, "I think I will retire, Father, with your permission?"

"Of course, my dear, and I will look in on the Higgins tomorrow morning," he assured her.
She nodded, and came over to kiss his cheek gently and clasp her mother’s hand on the way out of the room, not registering that two pairs of worried eyes watched her exit.

John quietly shut his office door behind him and made his way down to the yard, and across to the house. It was only mid-day and he had stopped to take his usual quick tea with his mother before going back to work, but the news that he must impart made his feet drag.

They were weeks from being completely bereft of funds. Many of their customers, dyers and warehouses alike, had not paid for their orders. New machinery he had ordered in preparation for an expansion into another warehouse still sat in packed boxes.

His payroll was safe, for another week at least, but he knew that an announcement would have to be made that day to the workers. And now, he would have to tell his Mother that once again, they would be living in more modest means.

Adam Bell scrutinized the letter in front of him, more of a note really that came from his friend Richard Hale. Already knowing the particulars of the strained relationship between Thornton and his goddaughter Margaret, he supposed it was only a matter of time before one of her parents came to realize that there was something more than polite civility between the two of them.

The letter’s contents contained its usually pleasantries but seemed to dance around the topic of Richard’s now absent pupil and his worry for the man he almost had come to affectionately regard as a son.

Mr. Bell was acutely aware of the downturn of Milton business, for it all but consumed his correspondence. His lawyers were trying their upmost to convince him to find a new tenant, or to sell the property outright before the decline of Marlborough Mills impacted its value. But he considered himself rather sentimental in the fondness that he had developed for the bustling energy of the mill.

And of his tenants.

Thornton was not a bad sort, on the contrary, he was one of the most upstanding masters in Milton. His rigidity in refusing to speculate was rather understandable, naturally, but he did not doubt that more than one mind considered the implications of what might have happened if Thornton had taken part in Watson’s lucky scheme.

It was almost unpardonable, in Bell’s mind, that such a man and his employees be brought to their knees by the fickleness of the cotton industry. Thornton had a strong head for business, and despite being a stern taskmaster, had begun to earn a reputation amongst his workers that he had no doubt was due in part to Margaret’s influence.

But, knowing Thornton as he did, the man would bristle like an affronted porcupine if offered financial assistance, even if it was a loan. If worded carefully with a casual nudge in the direction of some solid investments, and a bit of frugality, the mill master would be able to recover both his mill and dignity intact.

And the sooner, the better.

He drew a fresh sheet of paper from inside his desk and dipped his quill into the inkwell briskly, looking outwards for a moment before chuckling and addressing his letter with a flourish.
It was as Mr. Bell predicted, for Mr. John Thornton looked at him with incredulity as he leaned back in his desk chair, shirtsleeves rolled up.

His correspondence to his solicitors had proven to be successful, and within a week he had sought a meeting with his tenant to lay out the terms of his proposal.

With some amusement, he noted that Thornton's expression was more akin to that of a landed fish, mouth agape, than an agitated porcupine, and perhaps that was for the better. Shock was easier to navigate than anger or misplaced pride after all.

Before Thornton could come to his collective senses, Mr. Bell quickly drew out a contract and two certificates of deposit that he laid out neatly on the desk. Thornton's eyes followed his quick movements and eyed the certificates warily, "What are those for?"

"They are for me to educate you Thornton, and without trying to dance delicately around the topic, you need to understand that not all investments have a poor foundation," Mr. Bell replied, his hands placed over his walking stick.

Thornton sighed and shook his head, "I do not have the capital to invest in any scheme, solid or otherwise."

"Not as of yet, but with a small loan, nothing extravagant of course, you can get the mill back to a functioning capacity. Enough to see you through the market's slump."

"They are for me to educate you Thornton, and without trying to dance delicately around the topic, you need to understand that not all investments have a poor foundation," Mr. Bell replied, his hands placed over his walking stick.

Thornton's eyes narrowed as he crossed his arms over his chest, "Pray tell, why the generosity Mr. Bell? Surely you have better uses for your money than investing in failing mills."

The older man straightened and gave a small grin, "I am an old man, Thornton, frankly I can do what I want with my money, and although I do not like to play favorites in Milton society, I do believe you are on my shortlist and I want you to succeed dear boy."

"I am sorry then."

"Oh don't be. My doctor tells me I have several months at least. Not everyone has the luxury of planning their exit from this life. But my heir will receive the bulk of my funds and properties."

"And how shall I go about contacting him? Through your solicitors?"

"He is a she, and I hardly think that is necessary when she lives here in Milton, my goddaughter Margaret Hale shall inherit when I retire to my property in South America," Mr. Bell said slyly.

Thornton looked stunned for a moment, "I am sure that Mr. Hale is appreciate of the care you have bestowed upon his daughter."

"Oh yes, well I have not quite informed him of the entirety of what Margaret shall receive, didn't want to overwhelm the poor fellow, but it eases my mind to know that she shall want for nothing. You are not put off are you Thornton?"

"What? No, no, just surprised, it has been a day for them," Thornton said vaguely, rubbing a hand over his face.

Mr. Bell cleared his throat, "So you'll accept my offer?"

Thornton stared at the contract for a brief moment before reaching for his pen and slowly dipping it into his ink well, not looking up as he spoke, "You will inform Miss Hale before you go? She is fond of you, he said under his breath.

"Naturally, I will inform her of all things before I depart. But for now, I will get these documents sent to London and wire to have some cash released to you now," Mr. Bell said, quirking an eyebrow at Thornton's now slightly miserable expression. "Come now, man, what is it? You should look a bit happier to not be losing your mill."

Thornton tapped his pen against the wood of the desk, carefully choosing his words, "I am sure you are not ignorant of the fact that I have chosen to pursue a courtship with Miss Hale with her consent."

"Of course."

"And you do not think that in light of these recent developments, that it may cast a poor light on that courtship, that I am seeking the deed to the mill and the vast amount of money that Miss Hale would bring into a marriage?"

"Some men would be happy to hear that their bride would come with such a large dowry," Mr. Bell remarked, "You certainly would not be the first."

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"Some men would be happy to hear that their bride would come with such a large dowry," Mr. Bell remarked. "You certainly would not be the first."

A dark look passed over Thornton's face. "She has only now agreed to see me, there is no talk yet of marriage. Furthermore, I will not accept the loan or the financial advice unless you stipulate in your will that she retains her rights over her own property and funds."
Mr. Bell had a glint in his eye that Thornton did not particularly like, “Your situation could be remedied even quicker if you offered marriage soon and took the entirety of the funds.”

That was apparently the last straw as Thornton stood up, “I thank you to stay out of my personal affairs, we will move along at our own pace, thank you and good day,” he said curtly, trying to get this trying man out of his office.

Mr. Bell smiled jovially causing a flicker of confusion to cross Thornton’s face, “I have no doubt that you will handle the situation most admirably, but you understand that one in my situation has to be sure.”

Thornton leaned forward across his desk, hands braced, and glowered at the older man, "I confess I do not have the patience for the games you play Mr. Bell, I prefer to speak plainly to ensure that no ill meaning can be taken. I will accept the loan, as I have little option at this point, but I will not allow my concern for my business to impact my personal relationships with others.”

“I never thought you would, dear boy, and I hope you will forgive me my methods, but I have the highest hope for you two, and nothing will give me greater joy than to have you both well settled,” Mr. Bell said in a softer tone, folding the now dry contract and tucking it with the certificates into his coat and drawing out a small list, placing it on the desk.

Thornton groaned and sat back down, still glaring at Mr. Bell, “Then say what you mean, man. There is a word for people like you.”

“Philanthropist?”

Thornton shot back, “Sadist.”

“Oh do not be bitter, Thornton, now take my list and keep an eye out, I think I have a good handle on these sort of things after all, I have managed my own affairs with little mishap,” Mr. Bell quipped, finally moving to the door.

The mill master rolled his eyes and picked up the piece of paper, “Surprisingly, so you have.”

“That is the spirit. Now, I take it you have been invited at your usual time for a lesson with our friend Mr. Hale?”

“I was, but I reluctantly had to cancel, considering the situation,” Thornton replied.

“Well best send a note and say you can come after all, I’ll be there and we’ll have a jolly good time of it,” Mr. Bell said cheerfully.

Thornton’s brow furrowed, “That is rather short notice and could be seen as impertinent.”

Mr. Bell guffawed, “Not at all, do you really think that Hale, or Margaret for that matter, will be put off?”

Thornton turned an uncharacteristic shade of pink and said nothing, drawing out a fresh sheet of stationery.
John cleared his throat uncomfortably and straightened his shirt sleeve under his coat before hesitantly knocking on the door of the Hale residence.

Dixon, with her usual cheery countenance he thought sarcastically, gave him a door look as she ushered him in, taking his hat and gloves. There was a faint scent of fresh bread in the house, in addition to the dried lavender that seemed to be present in every room. Almost instantly, he began to relax in the familiar surroundings, giving Dixon a small smirk in response to her prickliness.

"The master and Mr. Bell are already in the parlor," she grumbled as she disappeared into another room with his things.

Instead of irritating him with her lack of courtesy, he felt amusement at her fierce and protective nature towards the Hale family. It was not a trait found in his own household and servants, but he admired the older woman's loyalty, especially to the women in the house.

He climbed the stairs briskly, his eyes following the faint glow that the lit parlor gave as he approached. All three individuals, including Miss Hale, stood as he entered and greeted him cheerfully.

Mr. Hale strode forward and offered his hand, "Why John, we were most pleased that you were able to join us tonight. It does my heart good to see you in better spirits."

John cast a sideways look at Margaret, catching her eye to let her know that he was not offended, but offered a wry smile to Mr. Bell. "How kind."

Now Margaret blushed with mortification, "Mr. Bell!"

Mr. Bell guffawed as he watched the two young adults smile shyly at each other, "Do you find it a struggle with some individuals, Mr. Thornton?"

John gave him an exasperated glance, "Some may test my patience more than others."

Margaret flushed and directed her own gaze upon her godfather, "Indeed, Mr. Thornton, I sometimes find myself in a similar predicament."

Mr. Bell wrinkled his nose and sat down in his armchair, "Such censure from the young ones, I feel this is almost backwards, Richard. Whatever I have ever done to vex you all?"

There were several moments of silence where John looked at him incredulously, Margaret stifled a giggle, while Mr. Hale elected to diplomatically shuffle his books on the table.

Mr. Bell clasped a hand to his heart dramatically, "My dear, I have no children and I consider you to be a member of my own family, it is my moral obligation to tease you."

"I am not a member of your family," John said lightly, accepting his tea from Margaret with a giggle, while Mr. Hale elected to diplomatically shuffle his books on the table.

Mr. Bell waved a hand airily, "You are too much of an easy target to resist."

Mr. Hale opened his mouth in shock, "Adam, really, must you berate my pupil so?"

John gave him an exasperated glance, "Some may test my patience more than others."

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"I am not a member of your family," John said lightly, accepting his tea from Margaret with a private smile, "Yet you do not show restraint with me."

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"I imagine you as an eccentric uncle then, Mr. Bell?"

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It was one of his more interesting nights in the Hale household, he concluded as he opened up his personal desk in his bedroom. In his hands were the documents that Mr. Bell had given him earlier, the current assessment of the British market and the signed loan document that would stay in his private records, rather than the mill office.

Margaret had been spirited in her debates with Mr. Bell and her father, and more often than not, John left off of listening to the other two men to simply watch her as she spoke. Her hands had moved animadverted and her eyes sparkled as she engaged her godfather in a discussion of English social economics. At first flabbergasted that she possessed such knowledge, he noticed that the other two men seemed at ease with her choice of topic, and thus cautiously joined the conversation.

The topics that they discussed; housing, amenities, and cost of living; were only known to him in the context of the northern manufacturing towns. The seeming poverty of the area was sometimes at odds with the prideful nature of all its inhabitants. It was almost downright appalling for a Northern man to ask for or expect charity. You stood on your own two feet here, or not at all.

John has shifted in discomfort at first, but tried to keep a relatively open mind. They spoke not only of southern rural towns, but of the sections of London that desperately needed to be updated. Mr. Bell had brought up the plans that the Prince Consort, Albert, had made public with the permission of the Queen. By building safer dwellings that were made of quality materials, it was possible for the inhabitants to have a higher quality of living.
He had countered the argument by pointing out that rapidly developing areas do not always have ready access to such materials, and the need for space often outstrips the need for quality.

Margaret had narrowed her eyes for a moment, but good naturedly parried back that regulations put into law would force builders to construct better. He conceded the point, but privately wondered if the housing in Milton was in a similar situation. Not having been invited into his workers' homes, he could not say with clarity what their living conditions were like, but he knew the price of coal in a hard winter. And the cost of fresh food shipped in from the warmer south. He did not think he could ever permanently forget the feeling of going hungry.

All were things that merited further consideration later, but for now, he pulled a fresh sheet of parchment from his desk and began to compose a letter to his bankers with a wince. Just because he had the money now and the solid advice did not mean that it still did not grate to be throwing money at a scheme. Mr. Bell had reassured him that a certificate of deposit was a relatively safe way to let a decent chunk of money accumulate interest as it sat in the bank.

The next venture he would consider, was the rapidly growing south American countries that most of Mr. Bell's money had been derived from. Everything from vineyards, maize, corn, and orchards required financial banking. And the high demand from neighboring countries almost guaranteed a good return on an investment.

John sighed as he sealed the envelopes and placed them aside to be put in tomorrow's post.

Despite Mr. Bell's assurances, he still worried about how the loan would impact his pursuit of Margaret. He sat down on his bed heavily and lay back still fully clothed, his eyes closing wearily as he slipped into pleasant dreams of a Southern lass.
Maria Hale sighed heavily as the pain lodged deep in her belly brought on a new wave of nausea. She held her handkerchief up to her mouth as she fought the urge to vomit, emitting a small choking cough that brought a dribble of blood to her lips. Carefully, she peeked down and saw the latest visible evidence of her deteriorating condition.

Doctors would prescribe a change of diet and an abundance of rest, but it would not halt the disease, this much she knew. Some medical knowledge had been gained in the past twenty or so years, and thus Dr. Donaldson was not completely unaware of the vagueness of her illness.

“A cancer of the lower stomach,” he had informed her quietly, then asking if such a thing was common in her maternal line. Maria had blinked, then haltingly admitted that her mother had passed from similar symptoms, but that her grandmother had outlived her daughter at an advanced age.

Dr. Donaldson explained that the disease, when present in women, had the tendency to be hereditary but not always, he hastened to reassure her after seeing the horror reflected in her eyes as she considered the fate of her daughter. She had watched her own mother wither away before her eyes, and now she knew with a grim certainty that she would do the same to Margaret. Her daughter was a strong young woman, the doctor had quipped, and showed no common precursors to an ill disposition. It was a small comfort, but nonetheless, Maria keenly felt the anxiety of passing a disease on to future generations.

He had left after speaking a few words to Dixon regarding her care. Her loyal Dixon had taken the news stoically, for she had seen over time that her mistress had not been well, but there was still the sheen of tears in her eyes as she tucked the a throw gently around Maria. Maria grasped Dixon’s hand gently and bid her sit next to her. “Dixon, you must not tell Mr. Hale or Miss Margaret,” she said faintly.

Dixon opened her mouth to protest but Maria quickly shushed her, “They are burdened enough without worrying more than they should about my health.”

“Mistress, this is not somethin’ you’ll be able to hide for long.” Dixon whispered.

“No, I suspect not, but to announce it now would cause too much distress when I only now have seen them both looking far more cheerful than they have,” Maria said gently. Dixon scrunched up her face, “I can’t be thinkin’ of what you mean, mistress.” Maria gave a shallow chuckle, “No, I imagine you would prefer not to think of the reason why this house has seemed lighter in comparison to when we first arrived. He is a kindly man, Dixon, I do wish you would not be so scornful towards him.”

Dixon sputtered, “Mistress, he has designs on Miss Margaret! HE! A tradesman!” Maria pursed her lips thoughtfully, “I believe he does, and I find that it does not upset me as much as it might have.”

Dixon huffed and folded her hands primly over her starched apron, “Miss Margaret is the daughter of a gentleman and a lady, she is too good for the likes of him.”

“And when has Margaret ever shown an interest in men before? I knew it would take a special man to attract her, and I had hoped dear Henry would have suited, but I see now that Mr. Thornton would be a better match.” Maria mused quietly.

Dixon stood and fretfully began to poke at the embers of the fire, “If only the master had not left the fold of the church, we would not be here in this godforsaken-”

“Dixon?” Maria said sharply, “It is not your place to question Mr. Hale’s motives in relocating his family, for we are here now and must make the best of it.”

Dixon said nothing, but sullenly kept her eyes on the ground as she stood. Maria sighed and let her head fall back to rest against the wings of the armchair. “Furthermore, I wish for you to be more obliging to Mr. Thornton when he visits. For he brings great joy to Mr. Hale, and I suspect that Margaret is not averse to his company.”

Dixon gave a short jerky nod, “Will that be all, mistress?” Maria gave her a small smile and allowed her regard for her oldest friend to show, “Please, do not be cross with me Dixon, you would not oppose my wishes, would you?”

Dixon lifted her eyes then and have her a sorrowful, but tender look, “No mistress, but I still don’t like keeping this from them.”

“I know you do not, dearest, but this is for the best, for now,” Maria said sadly.
"Indeed not, Richard," Mr. Bell interjected with exasperation, "But you must let me finish. I have no family of my own, and as she is my goddaughter, I want her to be well settled in life. We both know her temperament, and I do not want her to marry as a means to get by, as it were. Being financially independent would be a boon to her, and I daresay she would handle the money wisely."

Mr. Hale was quiet a few moments before speaking, "You must think me a poor father for not being able to provide for my family."

Mr. Bell fought the urge to roll his eyes, "Can I not be allowed to shower one of my favorite persons with heaps of money? I am eccentric, and I generally do what I like, Richard, do not take this as a slight, but as reassurance that she shall be able to do as she likes when she comes of age."

His friend then grinned slightly, "She may invest it all in a series of orphanages or soup kitchens."

"Indeed she might," Mr. Bell quipped back, "A much better use than gowns and frills. There, you see? You are only cementing my conclusion that she will only use the funds for excellent purposes. It is agreed then," he said loftily, but with a distinct twinkle in his eyes.

Mr. Hale sighed and shook his head, but still gave his friend a look of acquiescence, "It seems I have no option to accept this, then."

"No, you do not," Mr. Bell affirmed cheerfully.

Hannah Thornton was trying mightily to think good Christian thoughts of the Hale girl, but found herself jabbing her needle a bit more forcefully than necessary into the tablecloth she was embroidering.

John had arrived home last night, bussed his mother's cheek, and promptly gone to bed with a relaxed smiling countenance. No explanation of how his evening had been or why he looked like a grinning fool.

She looked at him from under her lashes, and watched him slowly open the newspaper to the business pages. Wrinkling her nose, she asked hesitantly, "I would have thought you finished that paper at breakfast."

The top half of the paper flattened for a moment, showing his slightly startled face and the upside down headline of what looked to be centered on agriculture.

She turned her head slightly, looked at the paper pointedly and then at his sheepish face, "Have you suddenly taken an interest in farming, John?"

He cleared his throat and carefully folded the paper up, before leaning back in his seat and regarding her with a considering eye. "It may be that I was thinking of it, amongst other things."

Hannah's eyebrows shot up, "I was merely joking, John, what would you need to know of such things? You are a manufacturing man, not a farmer."

John flushed, "I have been entertaining the notion of accepting financial advice from Mr. Bell, he knows of my wariness in regards to speculating, and offered solutions that have given him a solid return for many years."

Hannah felt the pit of her stomach drop as she regarded him skeptically, "Not a week ago, you professed that you would not take such desperate measures, even with the way mill business has gone."

He nodded carefully, "Aye, I did, but the mill is no longer in immediate danger. I was given a personal loan from with the condition that I would invest the additional money."

A swell of panic hit her, "You agreed to such an arrangement? Without consulting me or your managers?"

John's features tightened, "I value your counsel Mother, you know that, but this was a decision that had to make on my own. Mr. Bell is a shrewd fellow and does not follow the trends of speculation, but makes a study of what he believes has a high success rate. Given our circumstances, as you say, it was the best option without closing the mill, so I took it when it was offered."

Hannah's shoulders drooped slightly, "John, I did not mean to imply that it was a foolish decision, only if you had completely thought it through."

He stood and moved to sit next to her on the sofa, "I confess I was entertaining some other schemes as well, but my heart was not completely in it. Although I do not always see eye to eye with Mr. Bell, I do trust the man in regards to business. He would not have gotten this far and done so well, if he was not a knowledgeable man," John reminded her.

She shrugged, "Aye, I suppose that is true, but what made him take such an interest in you?"

John gave her a tight smile, "Perhaps he is just meddling, like he always does."

"John . . . " she said with reproof. He ground his jaw for a moment and took her hand.

"Mother, you know that I have . . . harbored a regard for Miss Hale," he began with a question in his eyes. She nodded and gestured for him to continue, "and I believe that has come to Mr. Bell's attention."

Hannah closed her eyes in mortification, "He thinks to encourage the match!"

John hastened to explain, "I have not yet approached her father for a formal courtship, as he has indicated that she would wish to know me better before venturing any further, but I think Mr. Bell has anticipated my intent and wishes to ensure that his goddaughter is well off."

Hannah glared at him, "While I commend Miss Hale on showing a modicum of good sense, I cannot believe that man would be so presumptuous to think that he can manipulate the circumstances to his liking."

"I do not think it was his intent to be seen as presumptuous, only helpful, in fact I was informed that he considers me a part of his extended family," John quipped lightly, giving her a decidedly large grin. "Besides, wealthy men can afford to give offense wherever they go."

His mother stared at him, "I feel I hardly know you now. Did you just quote a novel?"

John looked at her with a deadpan expression, "I do not know Mother, is that from a novel that you have read perhaps? You know how Fanny leaves her things lying about."
She looked back with a similar serious countenance, unwilling to ever admit that she ever laid eyes on such drivel as a novel. "When will the funds be available?" she asked brusquely.

John stood and picked up his newspaper, tucking it under his arm, "In a few days, after the paperwork has cleared the banks. I will be making arrangements soon to send out inquiries for the new investments, of which Mother, you can be sure that you will be consulted."

Hannah sat a little straighter, "You would allow my opinion in this?"

John shrugged his shoulder, "You have always had sound advice, you read the papers, and you are not afraid to speak your mind."

Hannah looked at him suspiciously and spoke, "Aye, I know all of these things—" which prompted a smirk from her son, "—but you have never said as such, nor spoken at length of speculation without changing the subject."

He nodded, "Aye, but the industry is changing, and I must too, if I want to survive. Besides, when have I ever not followed your advice," he offered with a smile as he rounded the corner and began to climb the stairs.

Hannah thought of the object of his affections, smiled ruefully, and called out to him, "I can think of one occasion!"

"Except for that!" he called back.

She kept smiling as she picked up the discarded embroidery and looked at the initials thoughtfully. Hannah knew well enough what, or rather who, was responsible for her son's transformation. She recalled the conversation she had with John, after the violence in the yard, when she had spoken of adding Miss Hale's initials to the linens.

The thought did not grate as much as it had on that day, but she still fingered the initials with a bit of melancholy. She herself did not know much of the girl, apart from their few awkward social interactions and the gossip of the servants.

Hannah looked back in the direction of the stairs and sighed, gradually coming to her feet and making her way to her writing desk. Tea was likely the least painful encounter she could think of at the moment, and it would have to be done while Fanny was out of the house.

She drew out her stationary and opened the ink well with a grimace, taking up a quill and scratching out a small note. After blotting and drying, she sealed it and sat back in the chair wearily.

Yes, tea was a suitable place to meet. At most, she would only stay an hour and if it all went badly, she would only be there for thirty minutes or less.

She stood, gathering the note and ringing for Jane to come. After a few moments, the flustered maid appeared and bobbed a curtsey, "Yes, m'um?"

Hannah handed her the missive, "You will deliver this to the Hale residence this afternoon and wait for a reply."

The maid took the note with mild confusion as she studied the lettering, dipping down into another shallow curtsey as she was dismissed. Hannah narrowed her eyes and called out, "And Jane?"

The maid turned around questioningly to look at her mistress. Hannah gave her a look that brooked no opposition, "Mind you do so quietly. If I hear gossip below stairs, I will know from whence it came."

Jane turned a shade of scarlet and scampered to the servants corridor to avoid Mrs. Thornton's gimlet eye, fully intent on avoiding the other girls on her way out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Remember I am not a doctor and this is not meant to be taken as scientific fact, I was aiming for uterine cancer that spread upwards.

Thank you for the nice reviews. They prompted me to sit down and take the time to write.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Margaret and Hannah have a short visit. With tea and their version of girl talk.

It is short and mealy, but it is a start.

Margaret perched on the edge of the stiff-backed chair and shifted uncomfortably with the fine china in her hands. The best that Milton had to offer no doubt, she thought wryly as she examined the porcelain.

Mrs. Thornton cleared her throat, drawing Margaret's eyes up self-consciously as she offered a small but polite smile. "I must thank you for agreeing to my invitation, Miss Hale," Hannah offered rigidly. "I fear I may have neglected my social calls these past few weeks."

Margaret blushed. "With the strike and the events that came after, it is no wonder that you were otherwise engaged. I am happy to be here." The younger woman then cast a slightly nervous glance around her, "Is Miss Thornton not joining us?"

Hannah's mouth threatened to curl at the corners, "Not today, I sent her to pay our respects to the Fosters and Latimers."

Margaret bent her head in acknowledgment and stared at the dregs collecting at the bottom of her cup, searching for polite discourse that would not somehow irritate Jo-Mr. Thornton's mother. "The weather has been unseasonably warm this month has it not—"

"Enough of this," Hannah cut in with a sigh, "I will speak plainly that I did not invite you to this house with the intention of discussing the spring weather. I have been informed to a degree of the situation as it stands between yourself and my son."

Margaret, mortified, hastily put her cup and saucer on the side table next to her, "Mrs. Thornton, I assure you that I have only seen your son in the company of my father or yourself—"

"And it was on one of these occasions that he made you an offer."

"If he did, then he also must have told you of the conversation after," Margaret's spine was rigid. The matron broke eye contact and shrugged slightly, "Only that you had refused him but consented to some strange arrangement to keep the acquaintance and socialize more frequently. In my day, that was called courting, girl."

Margaret shook her head, "Mr. Thornton and I . . . we have not always got on well," she said haltingly, "I did not want to enter an arrangement with reservations."

"Then why allow him to pin his hopes on you?"

"Because I am not indifferent to him," Margaret shot back with an edge of frustration to her voice. 'The color in her cheeks was high. Hannah noted, but she had not risen from her seat nor had she denied anything that had been put before her."

Hannah scoffed, "You either like him or you do not, for his sake and for yours I do hope you come to your senses soon."

"Is this why you asked me here? To warn me?" Margaret asked incredulously. "My first and foremost concern has always been his happiness, and to know that you hold that happiness in the palm of your hand with the ability to destroy him does not sit well with me, it never has," Hannah remarked bitterly.

Margaret stood up on shaky legs, "I wonder then at you inviting me to your home if you fear that I am such a danger to him, but I believe that enough time has passed, my mother needs me, so I shall take my leave of you."

Hannah stood as well, her eyes taking in the sheen of tears in Margaret's as they moved for the door. "Heed me well when I say that you will have to garner your nerves with a bit more steel, my girl. There are considerably more determined women in this city besides myself, who will be resentful of the attention you will steal away from their daughters. Are you ready for what it will mean to attract one of the most eligible masters in Milton?"

Margaret reached a hand up to secure the pins in her wide brimmed hat, "Mrs. Thornton, your son and I are still establishing whether we can stand to be in the same room with each other. If this can be accomplished, I believe that Milton society will be low on our list of concerns," she concluded before sweeping out onto the stoop.

Hannah allowed the ghost of a smile on her face as she shut the door firmly behind her. She ought to have company over more often.

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