The Manufacturer's Rematch

by Silberias

Summary

When Mr. Thornton calls on the family during Fred’s visit, Margaret invites—and gets—him inside the house. They each get a second chance, with fewer secrets between them this time around.

Notes

North and South obsession will continue for a bit. Will return to regularly scheduled programming soon.

Margaret grabbed his arm as he tried to leave after hearing the laughter up above. She knew he wouldn’t cause an impropriety to turn into a scene by wrenching his arm from her fingers, and when he didn’t tug away she released him slowly. His eyebrows were knitted together in great confusion, and Margaret decided to throw all to the wind. She did care for him, and she cared for what he thought of her word and herself.

“My mother would thank you personally for the fruit if you would but come in,” she said quietly, taking a single step backwards to coax him back up the steps. With a slow pace, he eventually followed her. His eyes, the color of a springtime sky in Helstone, were fixed on hers as though looking for some amount of deceit. Some cruel ploy.

Once he was inside she closed the door behind him and leaned on it. Mr. Thornton was silent, still staring at her. She smiled a little—she did suppose it to be very odd, her behavior. Frederick’s...
laughter upstairs sounded through the whole house again, likely loud enough to be heard from the street once again. Mr. Thornton cocked his head to the side, still distrusting of the situation.

She closed her eyes, praying that John Thornton was as good a man as she and others thought him. That he was not the overbearing master turned magistrate, at least not today.

“Mr. Thornton, you must keep this secret to your grave—for if you do not, you will send four people to early graves. One from illness, two from ropes, and me from heartbreak.” The tilt of his head leveled out to normal once again in curiosity and perhaps shock as well. Not often did young women speak so seriously about death to men who’d proposed to them just weeks before.

“If you feel you can, you may come upstairs and meet my brother. If you feel you cannot, then you must leave this house and walk straight to the courthouse to bring a constable back here.” Mr. Thornton took a step closer to her, his mouth hanging open just a touch in shock. Margaret leaned back into the door a little, wanting to lock it, keep him here if he decided to turn her brother in. But, God help her, she had been slow to understand her feelings for this man as love and she wanted there to be no secret between them.

“You have a brother?”

She nodded, biting her lip to keep silent. Let him think, don’t interrupt, don’t let him jump to conclusions. He took another step closer to her.

“Then why,” he said, incredulity in his voice, “do you bind me to such secrecy?”

“Because the authorities have named me as the ringleader of a mutiny at sea, and I have been on the run from our Queen’s navy for the last eight years. I visit at the moment from Cadiz, to see my mother through the last few weeks of her life.” Fred’s voice was closely followed by his appearance behind Mr. Thornton. Margaret changed from praying that Mr. Thornton would keep their secret to praying that Fred didn’t insult the mill owner too much.

John Thornton did not turn to face Fred, his eyes still fixed on Margaret as though he was drawing strength from looking at her. It made her warm, despite terrifying her.

“I am a magistrate, Miss Hale, and I am not one of those trading magistrates who do as they please bother the law.” Margaret lifted herself from the door and crossed the two steps forward to close the distance between them. His eyes followed her, even as he had to dip his chin to allow it.

“Fred, please—go—Mr. Thornton will not give you up for at least a few more minutes.” Slowly her brother left and went back upstairs. She raised her hand, palm down—waiting for him to take her hand, something which he eventually did.

“Mr. Thornton, you are a good man. One of the best I have probably had the fortune of meeting. I, on the other hand, am among the worst. I knew I could trust you with Fred’s secret because you care for me—” his hand clenched around hers at that.

“Margaret, I do not care for you—I love you—“

“And,” she said in the midst of his interruption, bringing her other hand to wrap over his, “if I told you that I would die of grief if you breathed a word of this secret, that you would keep it. You’re right to distrust me, because that is a cruel thing to do to a man after rejecting him in the most awkward and halting way possible.” They stayed silent, each of them for a long time, as the conversation upstairs gently lifted once again. Margaret felt her nose and eyes grow hot with impending tears, and she rubbed her thumb along the back of his hand as she bowed her head to hide the reddening of her eyes. Her father always got so low when her mother cried, she knew not
to show this man her tears.

“I dearly wish you had come to call on me even a day later than you had, after the riot, Mr. Thornton.”

“And why is that?” his voice was no more than a whisper. One tear slipped loose from her lashes, rolling slowly down her cheek, but her sob was contained—if only barely.

“Because I might have been in my right mind. Because I might have listened to my heart instead of seeing Boucher’s gaunt and desperate face and hearing Bessie’s wheezing and crying. I was up that entire night, holding her as she wept and coughed. I’d been home less than an hour when you came to see me.” More of her tears slipped, but she dared not raise one hand to wipe them away—as long as none of them dripped onto his hand he wouldn’t know.

Mr. Thornton put a hand up to her cheek to thumb away her tears, and she knew she’d failed. Very little got past John Thornton, after all, she thought as she broke into quiet sobs, squeezing her hands tighter around his. She wanted so much to stand with him as his wife, to be a steady support to him as he’d been to her. She wanted more from him than the hesitant and wary embrace he wrapped them in with his free arm, curling her around his hand trapped between her two.

“Margaret,” her name was a whispered prayer from his lips, just above her ear, “Margaret would you give me that morning back, someday? To say things properly as a man in love ought?” he must have intended that as some sort of comfort, but it only made her cry harder, trying to keep quiet to not draw attention from the people upstairs.

“Why can’t I give it back to you today? Why?” she was likely going to leave a stain on his crisp clothing, but she couldn’t care.

“You wouldn’t give me the chance to compose meself?” There was a laugh in there somewhere, she knew. “You lure me into your home, you threaten to die of heartbreak, you spring on me the fact that you’ve a brother, and now you want me to compose you a decent pro—“

“I don’t want a decent one, I don’t even want a repeat of what was said that day—I just want you to ask me to marry you, just those words. Nothing more.” He released his arm from around her shoulders and put a step between them. She felt cold without him so near.

“Margaret Hale, I will—but only if you promise to stem this flood of tears, or at least try.” She sniffled pathetically, nodding as she tried to control her breathing to stop the sobs.

“There, there,” he murmured, wiping the last few drops from her cheek.

“I would see you happier than you have been of late, Miss Margaret, and if the prospect of marrying me and my temper and living in my house with my mother would make you happier then I will see my half of it done. Would you agree to marry me, despite the fact that we will likely often quarrel in finding the middle ground between the morally and economically sound at my mill? I can only hope for your positive answer, for I know now that you are quite capable of resisting.”

She closed her eyes with a smile and nodded again, bending her head slightly as she answered him.

“If your aim is to see me happy, then you have found the words with which to do so. My family does not have much, and I myself even less, but I will give you this promise along with my hand—whatever quarrels we have, they shall not be for public consumption as they have been in the past. They shall be ours alone.”
He laughed, hesitantly as though he wasn’t yet used to the idea of being allowed to be happy.

“I would not ask so much, for I do claim to know you, but I will gladly accept your promise.”

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