An Earlier Arrival

by Silberias

Summary

Margaret Hale and her family arrive just weeks after a huge factory fire claims the lives of three hundred Milton workers. She is horrified at this--and the cause. An errant, accidental flame. Her reaction when she sees a man smoking, after this revelation, is purely on instinct. It is this way, through this incident, that she meets John Thornton under very different circumstances than she might have otherwise.

Notes

Because Margaret perhaps wouldn't have judged John so harshly for beating Stephens if she'd gone into the mill already horrified at how fast it could burn up with a single accident.
Chapter 1

As she wandered through the grim town of Milton, Margaret couldn't help but notice that the town didn't seem to normally be so grim. The sad little flower boxes in some of the windows, and surely not everyone wore such dark clothes and faces? It wasn't until a young woman, introduced as Bessie Higgins over the sad pickings of fresh fruit at the market, answered her questions that she understood. An accidental flame in one of the cotton mills—and that just a month before the Hales' arrival in Milton three hundred men, women, and children had been laid to rest. Not a soul had survived the fire, the entire mill burning to the ground in less than a half hour.

After returning to the hotel with half a pear—she and Bessie had genially agreed to split it after realizing it was the only thing worth having that day—her father mentioned that his old college friend Bell had gotten in touch with a man named Thornton. This man, a mill owner apparently, was to send over his foreman to help them acquire a house. They knew so little of Milton ways that they didn't know quite who was renting and what was a fair rent.

Margaret refused to let this man lead her and her father about town without knowing the man who employed him. She wanted to know ought of his character, and perhaps even his business.

Her father tried to stop her, but only halfheartedly, later as she pushed out of the office the foreman left them in. The sound of machinery drew her in, deaf to her father's worrying, and then the air was snowy and white—bits of fluff, floating without care inside a noisy, breezeless room. She'd known, and not just from her new friend Bessie, that Milton was primarily known for cotton mills. She'd known, also, that Thornton ran a cotton mill.

Bessie's words over the single pear—three hundred dead. My cousin and his wife among them— Auntie has been inconsolable ever since. Seventeen children—the only solace their mothers have is that the deaths was quick from the smoke and airlessness—were in her ears as she watched the cotton dust float. That flame had been an accidental one, she couldn't imagine anyone being allowed to smoke anywhere on the grounds of the mill.

There was a man, standing on a higher platform than the floor she stood on, tall and dark. His eyes were scanning the room in such a sharp, piercing manner that Margaret knew him to be Mr. Thornton—he had the eyes of a man who had many worries and few joys amidst his responsibility, and was so engaged and aloof that he must be the mill owner.

That was when out of the corner of her eye she saw a man taking what could only be a pipe from his mouth. Eighty three women widowed in just more than a quarter of an hour. Margaret ignored her father calling her back, and shrugged off the foreman who was trying to usher her back, and veritably stomped her way towards the man. She took his pipe and stuffed her gloved thumb down the small bowl, clutching it tightly in her fist to prevent any accidental flames escaping. The man she'd snatched it from stared askance at her right up until her free hand wound back and slapped him soundly across the face.

Margaret never knew how badly she'd kicked the hornet's nest with that, because before she'd even managed to turn her glare back on the man a vividly black suit coat was before her face.

"Stephens!" the tall dark man from the platform had apparently nearly flung himself down from the higher level, rushing to put himself between herself and the man she'd just slapped. The workman's fist was raised as though to strike her, and the man from the platform was obstructing the blow from falling. It took Margaret a few moments to catch up on what he was yelling over the din of the machines.
"A woman, Stephens? You'd dare strike a woman for saving your life? Be glad she got to you first, man, else you'd be leaving this mill with a beating atop of your last day's pay. Out—get him out!" Surrounded now by men, Margaret tried to hold her head high to face their coming recriminations. Her father was already mumbling something about how shocking her behavior was.

The foreman was given no chance for he left to take the man out of the mill—yelling at him the entire time, roughly dragging the hapless smoker along. Margaret thought briefly on the pipe still clutched in her hand, but she wouldn't give it back to the owner. What if he got a job at another mill and killed all of them with this same pipe? It would be awful to believe she had led to such an event.

That brought her to look up into the mill owner's eyes, even as he took the hand crushed around the still warm pipe. Both of his hands wrapped around her smaller one, keeping her fingers tightly covering the pipe. She felt a blush rising over her cheeks as she looked into his blue eyes.

"I must thank you, miss, for being without hesitation in this matter. Flames of any sort are banned in this mill for a reason—that man might have killed us all." His accent was thick and if not for the fact that she'd spoken with Bessie for an hour over a pear earlier in the day she would have perhaps lost some of his words. She tried not to stare at his mouth as he spoke.

Her father was trying to get the man's attention, but neither Margaret nor the tall dark man were of a mind to pay heed. His hands were warm, and his thumb rubbed very gently over her gloves. She wondered if he were even aware of it.

"Then I must thank you for not beating him out of rage, though I feel perhaps you might have been justified." Something flickered in his face, between annoyance and respect. His hands never wavered in their grip on hers. The pipe she held was firmly encased away from the cotton filled air.

"My name is John Thornton," he said, loud enough to be heard over the din of the machines surrounding them—but only just. An industrial whisper.

"And mine is Margaret Hale."
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

John overhears something that brings a smile to his face.

Chapter Notes

Stealing John's lines for Margaret in this, I know, I know.

John knew it was wrong to let himself in and make no announcement of his presence—though as Mr. Hale had said several days ago, he was to arrive on Tuesday at four, let himself in and come upstairs to the study on the second floor as he pleased, they would be reading Plato. There were raised voices upstairs, however, which made him keep his tongue to himself. A keen ear had to be kept in his business and it was hard to counsel himself against it.

Until now he had never seen any private facet of the Hale family—over the last two months they had come by once or twice a week to have tea and spend an afternoon with his mother and sister. Fanny had prevailed more than once that he should take a break from his mill to join them, and it had not been such a hardship as he'd imagined. Mr. Hale had an earnest, if naïve, streak to him, while his wife had a few tight lipped smiles to give over Fanny’s needlework. Miss Hale was quite pleasant to talk with, though they’d quickly figured out that they would always differ in opinion about cotton milling. It was with this understanding that they had most engaging conversations about the morality of business and the economics of the millworkers’ lives.

He had been thinking more of Margaret Hale in his few free hours than he’d have liked normally—which is why he stayed silent, to feed the curiosity and affection he had for Margaret in particular. He wanted to know how the Hales spoke to one another, what they discussed, without him present. Who were they, really?

“It does not matter how I feel, Mother, I’ll not—not—not trick a man into believing he cares for me! No matter my own circumstances!”

“But Margaret, you care for him. If you married him you’d be happy. I’d like to see my daughter happy in this awful place—“

“It isn’t awful, Mother, not to me! It would make it awful, however, if I ended up married to a man whose love grew out of artifice. Mr. Thornton deserves better than some woman who would manipulate him into caring for her. It does not matter what I feel.”

“Surely, though,” the voice of Mr. Hale was halting and unsure, “you do have some leaning in how the situation might resolve.”

He found himself waiting with bated breath. That lovely woman who had, of her own initiative, saved his cotton mill the first day they’d met cared for him. No one cared for him here in Milton save his own mother. He was too honest, even for a Northerner. He also had long ago found that
he couldn’t trust his associates’ introductions of young women—women who had been to finishing schools on the continent and’d come back to Milton with all the affectations of being fine ladies. He couldn’t believe such women truly cared for him, not when their fathers and brothers were jealous of his profits and his wealth.

“I’ve entertained daydreams, but that is all. I don’t want to possess him for the comfort of his fortune or the respect of his status here in Milton,” her voice trailed off a bit so that he strained to hear her words, only managing to catch—at last—“I want to marry him because I love him. If he were to lose his factory and his fine house and his silver pocket watch I would still have him if he’d have me.”

“Oh Margaret,” her mother’s voice carried a plaintive note to it, but the rest of what she said was lost as John became aware that he was not alone in the hallway anymore. The large woman looked like she’d spent many of her days happy, but at the moment she looked more like thunder.

“So you’re Mr. Thornton, that just and honorable man Miss Margaret speaks of so highly. The family is upstairs at the moment, I’ll fetch them.” She had the slightest tinge of North to her accent, and he hoped that she might keep his secret to herself out of camaraderie. Eavesdropping wasn’t among the characteristics of an honorable man, they both knew, but maybe she would take a bit of pity on him.

“I am here for a lesson with Mr. Hale—there is no need to bring everyone down on my account. If you would direct me to his study, however…” he trailed off as he heard light steps coming to a sudden stop in the stairwell. With hesitant eyes he looked up at the woman who apparently loved him by her own admittance. She met his gaze initially and then angled her focus to the floor as a flush crept up her neck. Margaret Hale wasn’t stupid or silly—she knew he must have overheard her words.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Thornton—my father is waiting upstairs in his study.”

“Miss Hale—your father speaks highly of your grasp of the material he has me on. Would you consider joining us?” She trembled a little but met his eyes eventually once again. “I would like the chance to know you better.” Her tremulous little smile was enough for him to know nearly exactly how many months it would be before he married her.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

John avoids bankruptcy, rioting strikers, and a row with Margaret in the space of an afternoon.

Chapter Notes

Oftentimes when I go for a subvert, I do it halfassed. Just like this one. Posting because I'm sick and because of reasons.

Investors trusted him more than they had before—before he’d gotten engaged and then married, before the strikes. He’d weathered the storm the union brought against Milton more admirably than this peers. They’d brought in Irish, while he had posted notices on the doors of his mill that his workers would not be replaced. If they wanted a job with him, they would come back before he had to fold his business, else when the strikes ended they would have no work to go back to. He had done the figures and gave the last date he could afford the strike before selling his mill to pay the last of his debts—and he listed out how many of them who’d worked for him would go permanently hungry then.

Margaret had been furious with him for being far too hard, and they’d fought.

“And what would you have me do, Margaret? Lie to them about the state of affairs my mill languishes in while the machines lay idle? Give all the striking hands the raise they desire, but at the speeding of my own bankruptcy as well as their ruin? Bring in Irish workers as Hamper plans to, as Mother has nearly begged me to?”

“I wouldn’t have you starve them! They’re all suffering—“

“Because they made a pact between themselves that I’ve no business in other than what spurs their choice not to come to their time!” They’d stood and stared at each other in the echoes of his raised voice, and it was her wide, judging eyes that brought his shoulders low from the fighting tenseness in him. He explained the workers’ motivations to strike, as he knew them, reiterating finally:

I tell them what I pay, I tell them when I light and damper my lamps. If I could pay them more, believe me I would. I cannot, and I’ve told them that. I pay what I can pay. I will show you my books if you do not trust my word that I cannot afford to pay them one shilling more in total than I do now.

Eventually his honest approach had won out over the strikers. They’d almost been moved to riot when Hamper had brought in the Irish, as John had predicted to Margaret that day, but had somehow been stayed. The leader, a man named Higgins, had come to John personally to end the strike at Malborough Mills—John remembered the man’s face, having taken on the man’s eldest girl out of sympathy towards her illness. Margaret had served them both tea in his drawing room,
asking briefly after “Bessie and Mary” and then sitting down to sip her tea quietly.

“Now, Thornton, they don’t much like what I’ve conjured up but they’ll take it because the facts is the facts. We’ll not last much longer on our side, not with the masters bringing in Irish—“ John interrupted with a righteous tone to his voice.

“I’ve said I’ll bring no Irish, and there’ll be no Irish here.”

Only to immediately feel hot shame well up in his heart that Margaret was in the room as Higgins replied back quick as lightning:

“And then soon there’ll be no Thornton here neither.” Amidst the shame, John wondered how staunchly Margaret had meant it when she’d said she’d take & keep him with or without his fine house. He didn’t devise tests to prove her worth, but nonetheless this was a test. For both of them. Her hands did not shake as they handed him another cup of tea, though. Higgins took his own tea from her, his fingers delicate and unsure on the cup and saucer. “The boys and their wives’ve come to the agreement that they’ll take a cut in pay.” That brought John to a halt, his tea halfway to his lips, and Margaret to sit straight up in amazement or horror—whatever was her particular bent that day.

“If you take on more workers with the money you save from shaving the rest’s wages. They’ll go back to work also if you promise to make effort to return the pay to what it were five year ago. You should be able to get enough orders out, with more hands, to recover from the strike.”

“And what have you all agreed on as makin’ an effort?” John didn’t think it crude to discuss his business in front of his new wife. His money was hers, his future hers—it would be an abuse to keep the dealings of the family finances tucked away from her. To treat her as though she wasn’t intelligent enough to understand the workings of economics. Higgins took a long sip of his tea, his eyes level over the rim of the cup.

“Buyin’ the cheaper cotton for a time, selling it for higher. Tell it to the bleedin’ hearts in the South that where the other masters bought Irish labor, you stayed true and didn’t betray the trust of the good Englishmen who work for you. Tell ‘em they’re paying for cotton milled by honest, English hands managed by an honest Englishman.”

Margaret made a little squeak of disapproval, but John was sure he was the only one who heard. If not for having serious words with Higgins, he might have looked at her in teasing askance. Their private talks were still as spirited as ever, if not more so, in the face of the prolonged strike.

“Honest English hands, you say?”

“Your lovely Missus here would know a thing or two about how hearts in the South work, it wouldn’t surprise me if the two of you—now that you’re wed—were able to drum up some investors. Show people the kindhearted but struggling master’n’his wife, and like as not they’ll take up a collection on your behalf.”

John leaned back in his chair after setting his tea down, wanting nothing more than to scrub his hands over his face and have a good dollop of whiskey to warm his cheeks and fuzz his mind. The terms made sense, and hopefully in some way appealed to Margaret’s pleas for kinder treatment towards the hands, for more understanding from his end of their plight. Besides, some of Hamper’s Irish would likely stay on even after the strike ended, leaving a fair number of good hands shiftless and starving. They would surely take less pay than starve? Higgins, one of their leaders, seemed of that opinion.

“You must give me eight months to set the affairs with the orders right. Eight months and the pay
will rise if I’ve made the profit up. If I haven’t then the machines will stop and my doors will close after your retreating backs—with two weeks’ pay of what your wages were five year ago. If your union finds that acceptable, then I’ll expect my usual two hundred hands—preferably those who worked here before and would come back—as well as whatever extra you’ve done the figures for. I’ll not be the one to shave your earnings this time around, so you’ll do those numbers among yourselves.”
Chapter 4

It had worked. Here he was, standing in a jumped up greenhouse—a wonder for size and imaginative reapplication of technology, but John had seen greater wonders in cotton mills—with Margaret at his side. Her hands were secure at the crook of his elbow as he “gladly” made acquaintance with a great many rich Londoners. Their simple thinking that cotton of all sorts was profitable without effort grated on him, as well as their supposition that he was some sort of saint for not filling his mill with Irish hands. It was the presence of his lovely wife, who came to his and his workers’ defense at equal turns in conversation, that kept a civil tongue in his head.

“Mr. Bell!”

“Miss Hale—Well, I must say, Mrs. John Thornton. A hearty congratulations, to both of you. Why you’re positively blooming. Your father wrote to me that he’d not see you with a better man if he lived to be a hundred, and I do think him correct—and you, my good man, it has been too long since I’ve clapped eyes on you.”

With one of his first sincere smiles of the day at a person other than Margaret, John shook hands with his landlord. The older man was the only reason Margaret was here on his arm today, he was quite sure. He had put John in touch with Mr. Hale and that had put Margaret in touch with him.

“I hear that you’re turning into a celebrity here or am I mistaken?”

“John is very popular. He’s been much praised for being so level-headed, though the way the Londoners phrase their accolades has put him off a bit.” Listening to her translate between his Northern attitudes and the Southern sensibilities, John couldn’t help but feel that Margaret would have been stifled by living the rest of her days in London, married to one of these dull Londoners. They were lifeless, the lot of them, and their words were airy and insubstantial—or sometimes they were vile, filled with subtexts of contempt or pity. The honesty of Margaret’s thoughts and feelings would have landed her with terrible men such as John had never—

“Margaret, is that you?”

He turned with her, his hand raising to cover hers. Whoever this man was, John did not like him on such easy terms so as to omit Miss from his wife’s former social address. Now she was Mrs. Thornton, and that was that.

“Good God, you’re as pale as a ghost are they even feeding you in that God-forsak—Oh. Excuse me, I don’t believe we’ve met.” The man was tall, with the face of a horse, and his clothes were of the finest linen money could buy. Though, John couldn’t help the smirk which flitted across his face, his sideburns were just slightly uneven. Carelessness of a man with no women in his life to try to impress and no real business hinging in personal appearance. A useless Londoner, then, who knew Margaret and was derisive of the North. There couldn’t be a better application for receiving John’s disdain.

“Yes, we are quite well fed at home in Milton—I’ve just had a touch of flu the last few days, you must excuse my paleness.” She leaned on his arm just slightly, holding his elbow a little tighter as she did, and he smiled at her subtle admission. Two weeks ago Margaret had told him, quietly in a room away from his mother and his work, that he would be a father before the year was out. “John, this is Henry Lennox. He is a lawyer, and my cousin Edith’s brother-in-law. H—Mr. Lennox, this is my husband John Thornton. You of course know my father’s friend Mr. Bell.”

Lennox spared a long look at them, taking in their linked arms, John’s hand over Margaret’s, and
a pained smile reached his eyes.

“A pleasure, I’m sure.” John nodded once, with no hint of effort towards an actual bow of his head. This man had presumed things about Margaret in the past which he had no business presuming. She’d told John, shortly after accepting his offer, of how awkward she felt to inspire feelings of love in another person. *I’m not so beautiful as my cousin, nor am I so vividly alive as your sister. I wonder less about your affection, though, than I did with Henry.* He’d asked who ‘Henry’ was, wanting to put the man out of her mind somehow, let her speak her piece about him and have done with it. *He decided on me because I mentioned marriage at Edith’s wedding, and decided that I was too naïve to live a life without him guiding me.*

“Mr. Lennox, I believe your party is missing you…” Mr. Bell was a master at conducting conversations and those he wanted privy to them, and soon had Lennox on his way—none the wiser to the fact that Margaret had as good as told him she was with child. Flu indeed. Only when the man was out of sight did Bell continue at any length.

“Now, I know that I absented myself rather unfairly from your wedding celebration several months ago and at present I can do little to remedy that other than telling you that in three months you’ll be glad that I am especially attached to my only god-daughter.”

“Three months you say? Whatever could—“

“My wife is as educated about the state of my finances and my business as I am. I’ll thank you not to patronize her even if you do believe your words to be above her comprehension.” John put no venom or spite in his tone, simply the weariness he felt at having to deal with yet another man who turned out to be of smaller mind than he’d originally estimated. This horrible place—where it was humid and thought to be pleasant of all things—with such horrible notions of women’s abilities had finally broken his iron resolve to stay and gather as much capital as he could.

Bell was quick to recover, a great proficient at the art.

“I am participating—and don’t you glare at me, John, I know your heart’s opinion on the matter—in a bit of a speculation. I’ll benefit greatly from it should the venture come to anything, but with no wife nor heirs I have the choice to keep it in a bank where it shall do no good to me or any other—or I could sign the bulk of it over to Margaret. A belated wedding gift. If not, then I myself won’t have lost all that much fortune. John—if you’ve ever considered gambling since…well, I implore you with all my heart not to partake in this yourself. Of all that’s risky, this makes the rest seem steady and advisable.”
Each morning he got up and kissed his wife while she took his hand and smoothed it across her expanding stomach. This made him smile into the kiss and that always made her laugh. The mill was recovering—with just two months left on his deal with Higgins and the union, John felt confident he would be able to begin raising their wages. The promise of higher wages certainly meant he did not want for hands to work the machines, which meant that orders were completed sooner. Margaret had had a stroke of brilliance that he keep the orders at the mill until at least three quarters payment for them was received—a visible proof to the workers that he hadn’t the money and an added impetus for his clients to get their cheques to Marlborough Mills sooner than later.

The spring in the South was unseasonably warm and the orders which poured in were accompanied by prompt payments. At the very least he would make some sort of profit with selling the mill, if he had to, and would be able to provide for his family in the absence of that great wealth. It meant that he could sleep with a bit of peace next to Margaret, his hand on her belly—feeling the occasional kick or elbow as the baby inside her tested the limits of her body.

Sometimes he would linger with his wife, usually after some nightmare that she’d disliked him upon her arrival in Milton and refused to marry him or some nonsense, and lay next to her in bed. He would be fully dressed and ready for the day, whereas Margaret would be in her night shift. It was one morning such as this that the servant sent to fetch him interrupted a barrage of kisses along her stomach.

“Mr. Thornton,” the voice from the hallway was timid, knowing that if by this hour the master was not downstairs to not bother him until the workbell tolled the five minute warning. “Mr. Thornton, there’s a Mr. Bell of London come to see you. The elder Mrs. Thornton has ordered tea for him and said you must come down immediately.”

Margaret smiled, kissing her fingertips and putting them on his lips as he started to protest the order.

“Your mother wants you to, I think you should. Go—I will get dressed and order breakfast. If you hurry, I’ll even share with you.” It took her another two urgings to get him to shift himself downstairs. When he did he was instantly on his guard as he took in the sight of his mother with a handkerchief pressed to her mouth and tears in her eyes. He’d never once seen her in such a way since his father had put a pistol to his temple all those years ago. Mr. Bell was trying, in his affably daft way, to comfort her and only straightened when John made his presence known in the room.

“Ahhh, Thornton, just the man I wanted to talk to. I fear I startled your mother, with this news, and I hope it does not startle you overly much. As you know, your wife Margaret is my god-daughter and is the child of an old friend. I have sought for much of my life to ensure that the Hales are looked after and, though she is now very much a Thornton, your wife still figures prominently in my worries.”

“There is little to worry about, Bell,” John said cautiously, coming up and laying a comforting hand on his mother’s shoulder. She leaned into the touch a little, which had him even more on edge. “My mill is successfully recovering from the strike, and with it the fortunes of this family. I would never see my wife or my mother put in unnecessarily hard times.”

“Well, the thing is, old boy, I’ve come to visit you on the matter of that speculation I mentioned months ago in London. It has paid off rather more handsomely than even projected to—some eighteen thousand pounds! Now, what does a man my age—with no wife, no children, no siblings—do with eighteen thousand pounds?”
“John,” his mother’s voice was soft, barely heard over the thickness of her emotion, “he means to give you and Margaret seventeen thousand pounds, two of it in trust for your unborn babe.” Ah, that explained his mother’s reaction. She had never in her entire life seen such a gift, either of size or of intent in giving. It had moved her that someone not belonging to her family might love those within it enough to think of—let alone attempt—such a generosity.

“Fif—fifteen thousand pounds? For my mill?”

“For whatever damn well pleases you, Thornton, though I would like to see some of it go towards a few of your wife’s harebrained schemes.”

“They’re not harebrained,” his mother muttered in her I’m-pretending-to-muffle-my-words-but-you’re-supposed-to-hear-every-syllable voice, “naïve and oddly planned, but they are not harebrained. The mother of my son’s child would never be described as harebrained.”

Mr. Bell had an affectionate smile on his face by the end of her diatribe.

“Now there’s the Mrs. Thornton I’ve known all these years. My lawyer is drawing up the papers in London at the moment, and I will return in a week or so with them. I felt that I ought to at least give you warning about such a windfall, Thornton, rather than dumping the whole lot on your head and escaping to South America.”

“South America?”

“To live the rest of my life handsomely on the thousand pounds saved out of the grand payout that I chanced on.”

“John, you must go and tell Margaret—she’ll be so pleased she’ll make you raise the wages for your hands and a dozen other things before lunch.” There was a teasing, but affectionate, note to her voice.

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