Thoughts of Miss Elizabeth

by Silberias

Summary

Bess Thornton takes after Father’s family in regard to understanding the great majority of Southerners.

Notes

Written awhile ago. Just more fic because Richard Armitage’s voice made me. And don’t try and tell me Hannah and Margaret wouldn’t punish the kids with making them work in the mill.

Sixteen year old Elizabeth Thornton knew that her mother’s extended family looked askance at her whenever she visited. Aunt Lennox dearly wanted Elizabeth to form some sort of attachment to Cousin Sholto and sometimes Elizabeth could feel her aunt’s eyes on them when they spent time together. It was a common theme in the woman’s life, according to Father who had imparted this knowledge with a wry, laughing smile. But Elizabeth’s reticence around Sholto was less the problem—these days she was quite sure that it was how she spoke. Her northern lilt was welcome in neither Great Aunt Shaw’s nor Aunt Lennox’s homes, and she sometimes heard them talking of hiring an elocution tutor for her. Aunt Lennox had great plans of a débutante party, plans which Elizabeth’s mother rolled her eyes at often.

If she had her druthers, borrowing a term from Mother’s maid Miss Higgins, Elizabeth would
druther that Aunt Watson or Nana take charge of planning such a party. She knew she had to be presented in town for a season, to attract suitors. This would have been more fair, in her opinion, if her brothers Aaron and William were also forced into such contrived social situations. Her mother had been able to beg a lack of funds in her youth, but with Father’s mill so successful she knew that that wasn’t possible for herself.

Perhaps, Elizabeth thought, she might persuade Father to only force her out for one season if she threatened to marry Sholto. Her entire family well knew that Father had little patience for the young man. Sholto Lennox had been raised spoiled and had worked for nothing in his entire life—his father at least had worked hard to attain his military rank, and his mother worked hard at whatever social gatherings she hosted, but twenty year old Sholto so far had shown no glimmerings of talent. Elizabeth, meanwhile, knew how to operate the machines which provided the wealth for their family. Nana had taught her, over the period of a few Sundays when she was ten. She still remembered her stern grandmother’s hands clamping around her own tiny ones and her harsh words of warning.

*These machines will kill their operators as soon as work for them. You must respect how fast the belts move, how hard the hammers pound, and the fact that they will grind you between their gears far faster than they can be shut off. Your fine little shoes, your mother’s books, the crisp white shirts your brothers and father wear, even my lady’s maid are all supported by these machines, Bess. Children your age lose their fingers to them at least once a month, and grown men and women lose arms and hands nearly as often. At other mills they even die in the accidents, but that hasn’t happened here for several years.*

When they’d been old enough, Richard and William had had the same days of training as she had. It was a punishment in their household for cruelty or derision to the lives the hands led—a day in the factory, at one of the machines in some fashion. It did not matter to the hands working around them that they were the master’s children, then, it only mattered that they help the machines keep turning. Mother even forced them to wear masks which—though they kept the cotton fluff out of their lungs—left heat rashes on their faces for days afterwards.

Perhaps it was this apparently coarse punishment that left her London family looking at her in such askance when she visited. She was respectful to their servants and did not throw tantrums at them if they got things wrong—as Sholto and Aunt Lennox did on occasion. They always remarked that she was too quiet for a girl of her age, and where was her mother’s spirit—and why wasn’t she coarse like her father, and why wasn’t she a girl like Aunt Lennox had been in her youth. They tore her in such varying directions with their expectations that Elizabeth hung back from many interactions.

She sometimes wondered if they might sometime have Sholto up to Milton and force him to work in the factory for a day. She always got a smile from imagining the horrific mask that Mother would put on his face, and the stern yelling of one of the two managers as the spoilt boy struggled to keep up with the machines. It might be the making of him as the military had made his father. It had certainly been the ‘making’ of Elizabeth’s two brothers. Aaron, at eighteen, was working as a manager at Father’s second mill. The head manager there, an old friend of both Mother and Father named Higgins, was getting on in years and the mill would be under Aaron’s watch within a few years at least. William was still at school, but on his breaks he often worked as a clerk or a relief manager at Marlborough Mills with Father.

The only person in their family who did not know how to work the machines and was not allowed to work as a manager on the floors was Mother and that was because Father forbade it explicitly and entirely. It made Mother angry with him, but she’d never gone against his word for as long as Elizabeth could remember.
If only she could somehow convince Father to forbid her to go to a London season, as he’d forbidden Aunt Watson so many years ago. Aunt Watson had apparently complained bitterly, although these days she was quite against the idea that she’d ever wanted to go at all. It showed how old the conversation was that neither Father nor Nana rolled their eyes at these antics. It would hurt Father’s feelings, in some bizarre way, if Elizabeth were to ask that she not be presented to London society. He had worked for respect in the world, for the ability to hold his head high as he walked down any street he might choose—and he wanted the same for the rest of his family.

Elizabeth knew he would not understand the lion’s den he would be sending her to with a London season. So she made her peace with Aunts Shaw and Lennox fussing over what parties she would attend, and said not a word to him. It would send him so low, and it was hard to comfort him away from such emotion. Mother at least sent the appropriately pitying smiles her way, and that was enough.

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