The Manufacturer and His Wife

by Silberias

Summary

Margaret was truly concerned for him, he knew, for she called out for his safety while still not fully conscious after the blow to her head. If only she had had enough possession of her senses not to say it in front of the servants. Now they quietly say they were engaged with plans to announce it after the strike lifted, a ramshackle plan approved of by his mother and Margaret's parents and obeyed by necessity by the man and woman caught in it. John had hoped he would marry Margaret under fairer circumstances.

Notes

Because despite how utterly satisfying that thirty second kiss is after four hours of drama and misunderstandings, sometimes you just want to grab one of these two and shake them. Which is why most of my fics are exactly that. This is no different!

Though it is called The Manufacturer and His Wife because this is the first fic I started on after I watched N&S but kind of the last I'm probably going to post. Seems like a good title to end this little series with yeah?
Margaret was still unconscious when he returned to the house after dealing with the police. He had expected to see her laid out on the settee where he had left her, but his mother had installed her in a guest room. The doctor was present, and her parents had been summoned. It was all very properly being taken care of. When his mother’s glance betrayed him to the Hales, they saw him hovering in the doorway. Something of his worry must have shown on his face because Mr. Hale stood up, patting his wife gently on the shoulder as she held Margaret’s hand in her own. Doctor Donaldson was speaking to the woman in low tones that John couldn’t quite catch as Mr. Hale approached.

“May I beg a private conversation, Mr. Thornton?”

John could only nod, tearing his eyes from Margaret at the last moment he could allow himself. She had been so still, the blood on her temple had been so bright even as it soaked into her dark hair, and all he could think was that if she were dead he would see that he was dead as well. John was not so strong as his mother in that respect, he’d realized. He was his father’s son too.

The study was far enough from the guest room that they could speak alone without anyone eavesdropping. Well, perhaps Mother would sneak to listen at the door, but Fanny was far too preoccupied with fretting in the sitting room to any of the servants who would listen. He thought briefly of pouring a drink for the two of them, but reconsidered the idea. If he were in a private conversation with Mr. Hale concerning a marriage or a grand teaching position for the former clergyman then he might do that. But his friend’s face was so grave that it was not the action to take.

“Margaret has not been completely unconscious since you brought her back into the house. Over the last two hours, I was informed by both Mrs. Thornton as well as Donaldson that twice she woke for a few minutes. She…”

John clenched his jaw, not wanting to hear whatever words of his cowardice she had offered up in her delirium—but Mr. Hale continued as though greatly embarrassed.

“They—they did. My daughter is insensate, in my belief, but I’ve been assured by my wife and your mother that that is not the case. Not when she was asking for John and asking that they not bring him—you—harm. She only settled when your mother assured her that you were safe and would be at her side soon.” His friend seemed as perplexed as John himself felt. Nonetheless, the admittance begged an answer, some sort of conclusion.

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“And others heard this, I am to assume,” John said, his voice low. Of course Margaret would call for him by his Christian name in her mind, as he did her. He found himself in agreement with Mr. Hale but he also was a man of Milton. The upper society here was all gossip and meanness, assumptions made into facts by unremembered glances or sighs—so though he was on the side of his friend, he also knew what the man was about to say, what the man had to say if he loved his daughter half so much as John did.

“They—they did. My wife is distraught, though she has composed herself in the face of servants not her own in another woman’s house. She claims that Margaret, my only daughter, has ruined herself with her actions today. That people will believe her some sort of wanton, and be shunned by all society. Your mother reluctantly agrees, and put forth the idea of a yet-unannounced engagement to…solve the issue.”

John nodded, planting his hands wide on his desk so that he could lean there as heavily as he
pleased. He wanted to marry her, he had for a great long while. But not like this, not so coerced, not in so cold and calculated a manner as what his mother suggested despite being in the right with it.

He wanted Margaret to love him. He wanted her to flush prettily when he asked her if he might visit her alone soon, and he wanted her to laugh with happiness when he spoke into words something they both would’ve felt and wanted for some time. He even wanted to walk into his friend Mr. Hale’s study, Margaret on his arm, and politely ask for the man’s blessing on them.

“Mr. Hale, before I talk on that matter I want you to know something.” The older man, having lost focus during his monologue and the following silence, fixed his bespectacled gaze on John’s face. They always gave one another their full attention, he’d never had a friend of such a manner other than his mother. Never before had he had a friend, only ever men who warily regarded his profits against their own. Peers only, no one to confide in or think with.

Perhaps this solution would bring his friend some measure of comfort. Mr. Hale loved Margaret deeply, which is why he was upset at this turn of events. That much John could understand easily.

“I do care for your daughter—I had hoped to come calling on her more often. I had hoped that our spirited discussions might lead to a spirited and mutual affection. I have planned on asking her to marry me for some time, but have been unsure of the direction and level of her feelings for me.” Mr. Hale visibly relaxed. He probably worried of a loveless marriage, having had one founded on mutual love for many years himself.

“According to the women in our lives it would seem that there is something directed towards you, and of a level higher than anyone might have previously assumed.”

Wise words, but John knew them to be false, despite the tight warmth which had flooded his chest upon learning of Margaret’s brief stints at consciousness. Margaret thought him unnecessarily cruel, though he wondered if perhaps he might take her on an outing to Hamper’s or Slickson’s to change her tune. Perhaps she thought them all the devil in different shoes, but might be persuaded that he was a lesser evil. Evil. Margaret Hale thought him evil if she thought him anything.

She also thought him a coward—her goading words before he’d gone to face the mob. He was lucky that she wasn’t of Milton, else the idea might have stuck more firmly within her. It would have been cemented when he’d not yanked her back behind him. He had in effect hidden behind her—any man of Milton would have seen that and known it as cowardice. His own mother would have thought him a coward if she’d heard of it instead of seeing it with her own eyes.

He knew all of this intimately. There was no need to speak of it, however. He had been silent too long, and his friend was growing nervous.

“Indeed, even I had assumed such. Now, I have business to finish, and then to begin—please allow me a few private words with Miss Hale when she is recovered. Not today if she requires rest, of course.”

“Of course—of course. Then,” Mr. Hale paused, hesitant and sad for his daughter, “then it is settled as your mother suggested? My wife has nothing to cling to in this, save that, and she has been feeling more than poorly of late.” Through the desperate tone there were also notes of sorrow in Mr. Hale’s voice. The feeling was likely less for Mrs. Hale and more for Margaret. John was sad for Margaret, though reserved nothing for himself. He was at least conscious for this decision—one which Margaret might not buy into, and that would be an awkward event indeed. It was not only her reputation to play with, after all.

She woke up shortly before supper, but was quite disoriented according to Donaldson. The doctor
urged that she remain undisturbed by all save her own mother and her mother’s maid. This was abided by, with John’s mother gruffly facilitating places for the Hales to stay. Mr. Hale stayed up late with John as he reviewed his accounts, smoking and discussing their Plato even as John bent his mind towards his ledgers.

“You know, I have a son.” John paused, finger in place on the page as he looked up to meet his soon-to-be father-in-law’s eyes. The other man was staring pointedly at the small glass of brandy in his hands, slowly turning it to probably avoid fiddling with it. They shared similar habits when embarrassed, it would seem. Perhaps that might make him more agreeable to Margaret in some way—he was human in the ways that her father was human. Then again, knowing Miss Margaret Hale, that might prove to be a sword with a double edge.

“No, I do not believe you’ve ever mentioned him.”

“I wouldn’t have, I suppose,” the other man took a small sip of his drink, “he was in the Navy. He was labeled a mutineer after he saved the lives of children and others. Apparently that is what happens when one maroons the captain in a boat in the middle of the Atlantic. Lives in Cadiz, last we heard. It upsets Mrs. Hale to talk of him so we do not—it sends her so low to think that she will never see him again while she lives.” This didn’t surprise him. His own mother would likely lose the will to live if he were to die before her. She’d done so much for him, and continued to do so, that she’d forgotten how to live for herself.

“Why are you telling me now?”

Mr. Hale chuckled slightly, finally setting his brandy aside as he stood.

“You’re to be the father of my grandchildren, Thornton. Perhaps you will have a son on whom my wife might dote on as she did Frederick—and you’d best be in a position to understand why.”
Margaret was much more alert the following day, though still confined to the bed at her mother’s wishes. John’s mother, the doctor, and Margaret herself all felt she was well enough to move about but her mother had asked so plaintively that John had heard it out in the hallway where he waited his turn for Margaret’s audience. *Please, Margaret, for my sake—you do not know the fright we had yesterday, I want you more than well enough to stand when you do stand. Please.* There had been a broken note in the woman’s voice, and though it was awful to think it John wondered that such a woman had ever managed to raise a daughter such as Margaret to turn out… well…like Margaret.

Her hair was pinned back a little but not completely, and she was in a shift likely borrowed from Fanny. It did not seem that it would have been a choice Margaret Hale would have made. Too many extraneous ribbons. Over her shoulders was draped an ornate little shawl that he’d seen a few times over Mrs. Hale’s frail form. It occurred to John that he wanted to get one of his mother’s cotton shawls instead—cotton from the very first weeks of production at Malborough Mills, keepsakes from his start at success.

“Mr. Thornton, thank you for your hospitality—though, and please do not take offense for I mean none, I would have preferred making my recovery at my home in Crampton. It isn’t restful to sleep in a place other than one’s home.” He smiled a touch and nodded. He knew the feeling well. “It was and is freely given to you, and your family, Miss Hale.”

At those words a bit of crossness flickered in her eyes. Someone had told her of the hoped for arrangement to save her from Milton gossips gossiping their way all the way south to London, ruining her reputation and her chances with a few choice words. She would be ruined from Milton all the way to Helstone where she’d come from. Every so often, John longed for the times when their family had been too poor to have servants. No servants, no idle eyes to feed wagging tongues and pricked ears.

“I—“

“Please let me speak just for a few moments,” he interrupted, “and then you may fling your ire at me insofar as you wish. I slept very little last night myself—strangers in the house. Though, they are strangers who I desperately wish to see as unstrange.” That stilled her tirade.

“Then please continue, Mr. Thornton.”

He ticked a smile at her before glancing around the room his mother had installed her in. The bed was large enough for two, and he was reliably informed that Mrs. Hale had spent the night next to her daughter, nursing her—with the help of the maid—through a few more fits during the night. Mention of his wellbeing and nearness had calmed her during several of them. As if the servants needed more ammunition to spread among Milton society.

“A frantic embrace in public might have eventually faded, if nothing came of it. If nothing was said of it by anyone. It—it was after, while you were recovering, that you spoke and were overheard.” She bent her head forward, and a lock of hair, stray from its fellows, fell forwards as well. How he wanted to reach out and tuck it behind her ear, but he knew the motion would be unwelcome.

“Miss Hale, there are feelings in my heart which in any other circumstance would have soared to great heights yesterday afternoon as you lay in bed. I love you,” he let that sit long enough in the
silence of the room that she looked up at him, her eyes wide and color rising to her cheeks, “but believe me that I take little joy at this turn of events. I know that those words spoken, words you probably won’t ever remember, weren’t your own. But they cannot be taken back now. Not in Milton.”

“What has been decided, then?”

“Nothing has been decided.”

That got her temper up, and he was glad of it. A Margaret who had no spirit, no will, was not the Margaret he wanted to have eventually agree to be his wife. He wanted the woman who had been the voice of moral conscience over the voice of reason-informed fury the first day he’d seen her. There was a conscience in him, but hers was unadulterated by the world around her. At least until she’d come to Milton.

“Then why are you here?!” The louder voice she used seemed to pain her, for she winced and raised one of her hands to her head. The bruise from the rock was ugly, on the wrong side of her hairline at her temple. John wished nothing more than to see her skin unblemished once again. He put his hand out, palm up in a request that she put her own hand in his. After her pain subsided, Margaret hesitantly did so.

“I am here because I was selfish last night and let others think that something had been decided. After I wrestled my reason against my conscience I knew that I had to make things right. Yesterday my mother suggested that we announce an engagement, and say out of the sides of our mouths that we’ve been engaged for several weeks. It would be easy for Milton to believe. I call on your family often enough, and you’ve come to the house alone several times while I’ve been away in my offices at the mill, to visit my mother expressly—you always seem to walk you home. Yesterday you threw yourself between me and an angry mob at the risk and fulfilled promise of injury to yourself—and there are many who heard my words that you would go back inside or I would take you there.”

“But. I hear a but.” He smiled in thanks that her quick mind hadn’t been somehow damaged permanently by the blow to the head. Her fingers were warm against his, and he put his other hand over hers to hold her—though he resisted tracing the fine bones in her fingers. Of all the women to fall in love with, she had to be this woman didn’t she? Life continued to show him that he was a man of no luck, and that the hard path would always be before him.

“But that choice, to reveal a secret engagement, is one to which you were allowed no input—and in the light of morning, I know that if we marry you must have that input. Margaret Hale, I love you but I don’t wish to marry you in such a way as this.” He averted his eyes from her face, framed as it was by her roughly put up hair, her wide eyes staring at him with great attention. He had to chuckle, just once, and rub his thumb across the inside of her wrist as he did. “I wish to marry you, but I will only do so when you wish to marry me.” He looked back at her and watched something in her face change as he spoke, a change from the lingering frustration into something else. He didn’t dare think it respect, though in any other visage he might have claimed such.

“My mother is greatly distressed,” she said softly. It didn’t need to be stated that it would be the end of Mrs. Hale if her daughter fell to ruin. Even if John hadn’t known about the lost son the woman had weighing on her heart, he knew that her daughter was where her last hopes were placed. Little did Margaret know, but his own mother had placed some high hopes on her as well. She ached that he was so alone, and had a reluctant sort of affection for Margaret’s strident opinions. Of all possible outcomes, the best in Hannah Thornton’s mind was a happy marriage to the Hale’s daughter and the worst was where neither Margaret nor John suffered in public opinion.
“Aye, as is mine though it takes her son to know it. She…her fears are not yours to know.”

“Because they concern me?” Nothing got by her, he felt.

“Yes, I won’t deny it. Though they’re not yours to know because they won’t be yours to bear out. We each have our own loads, and we are never given more than God would know us able to bear.”

They sat in silence for a long while after that, staring into different distances. John had quite retreated into his mind when Margaret put her remaining hand over the small pile they had going at the edge of her bed. It was as though they’d continued their conversation in silence, descending into quiet rather than escalating into a row.

“Must I love you to wish to marry you?”

“This is not some contract to be negotiated,” he countered, barely managing to tamp down hot anger at her words. Both their futures were invested in this, but also his heart. Love was speculation, of a sort, in the end. “But—I will answer you as honestly as I’ll let myself. I will continue with you in our mothers’ scheme if you truly believe that you might someday love me.”

She had a small smile on her face, and it was lovely to see it. The slightest promise that that smile might be the first thing he saw every day and the last each night as he lay down to sleep was the stuff of his dreams of late.

“Would you then consider taking time to be patient with me as I learn what is rude and what is polite here in Milton? I fear that I’ve been taught to speak at length and in euphemism, which is not the way it is here.” His eyes felt hot, far, far too hot as though fighting for tears he’d not let fall in more than fifteen years. For an agonizing minute yesterday he had believed her dead—never was he to ever hear her emphatic declarations of his misdeeds, never to hear her sweetly talk of her father. The fluttering pulse in Margaret, before he’d left her to the care of his mother, had been his only hope for several agonizing hours whilst he sorted the police and the rioters out.

“If you’ll teach me to be the better man that you wish I were, then I shall help you.” He was well aware he was undeserving of a woman of her background, but if they were to make a go of this they would each have to try.

“No—no, I’ll not,” he tried not to flinch as though she’d struck him, “I’ll learn to see that man, because he must be there. Your mother wouldn’t worry so much over you and your mill if you weren’t. She has to be the one with the harder heart.”

That brought out a belly laugh from him after the slight shock—though he quickly quieted it when she winced at the loudness. Her head must have still been paining her terribly. She kept her hands wrapped up in the warm little pile they’d formed over the last three quarters of an hour.

“Indeed she must. I argued terribly with her to put in wheels—”

“Wheels?”

“A—a wheel? Well,” he sucked his teeth for a moment, surprised by the question, “the wheel at the most basic isn’t necessary. The work and workers can get on without one. I am the only master in all of Milton to have them in all of my work sheds. The air isn’t poisoned with so much cotton dust, if there is a wheel. My machines make more cotton when my workers don’t go home sick from breathing it in. They work shorter shifts at the looms for more pay—at the end of the week I don’t pay much more than Watson but they work faster. The faster the orders are filled the more money comes in for payroll and expenses of running the mill. Save for those who come to
Malborough from other mills, the hands here don’t sicken as quickly. You no doubt see that as moral, while I see it as purely business, so let us not argue the point. At the end of the day, my cotton workings do not cause the harm they can and currently do in other mills.”

Her eyebrow quirked up—but. I’m sensing a but. He huffed out a laugh, squeezing her fingers briefly.

“But the wheel comes at a great expense, and I had it in my head to put one in every building. I won, after several months.” Margaret’s mouth managed to stay closed, but he could see her shock. Yes, it was truly shocking, he knew. He remembered, too.

“Yes, Miss Hale, please remember that Christmas-white air on that first day we laid eyes on one another. That is the cleanest air inside a cotton shed in all of Milton. We, the masters, know that the cotton will send the hands to an early gave. The others say that the workers know the risk and still show up to their times—men such as we can hardly stop them, they say. I say that there is no other work to be had, and that an early death by whatever means is a terrible thing.”

“That is why you take on workers dying of…fluff…in their lungs?”

“They need the money and whatever time they still have to help their little ‘uns grow, and I can almost always find a place for ones such as that.”

She was smiling at him now, despite the gloomy topic. It was a flicker, but he smiled back at her as well. The smile and her eyes softened after a few moments.

“Ask me.” That brought him to sit up a little straighter, tightening his fingers around hers once. Margaret’s eyes were steady on his.

“You must ask me now, before one of us says or misunderstands something to turn the conversation. Please, I don’t mean to drive you away, but I’d like to take an hour to lay back in quiet—my head has been pounding since I woke up last night, and again this morning. You must ask me while everything is still perfect.”

“You, Miss Hale would indeed look at this scene as perfect.” Her smile was hesitant but bright. With a deep breath and a racing heart, John started as she’d asked.

“Margaret, though we will sometimes vehemently disagree until we each feel the other will never see reason, though you’ll always be of confident ideals and I of sterner pragmatism, would you agree to live with me and begin to love me as your husband—help me muddle through our lives in such a manner that every day I will thank God that you are my wife?” It wasn’t the fiery proposal of the books his sister read—she’d once spent an afternoon in gushing awe of one character’s words—but he felt that it was well enough. He wouldn’t take back any of it, for he’d meant every syllable.

“Yes, on the condition that you help me thank God for every day that you are my husband,” she said quietly as he untangled their hands, watching as he leaned forward to take one of hers and kiss the knuckles there. Then he stood up, bending slightly to kiss her temple just above the bruise.

“Now, go before your stress or my fatigue make either of us cross with the other,” she said softly as his lips lingered just a second too long for the light peck he’d meant to give. That jerked a laugh out of him, and he kissed her forehead again before leaving her to rest.
Milton was not much surprised when Mr. Thornton, manufacturer and magistrate, started walking out with Miss Margaret Hale. There had been that scene up at the mill, and then there was that other business where she had apparently been crying out for him whilst unconscious. The servants had all heard it, and they’d quietly passed it on—*only in utmost secrecy would I tell you ought of what happened up at the house today, Millicent*—and it had been passed on to the ladies of Milton society of all levels and from there to their husbands and so on.

Mr. Thornton *did* call on the Hales a fair amount, it was conceded easily. He couldn’t *always* be a-visiting for lessons from old Mr. Hale, though, because everyone knew that the man’s public lectures were unattended and unwanted. Miss Hale wasn’t the prettiest face in Milton, but she had a quality about her that must have drawn the manufacturer to her. He was also the kindest and most honest master out of all the mill owners in town—and that must have drawn her to him as well. Kindness begot kindness after all.

They made a handsome couple, it was soon decided by those who didn’t have daughters they’d wanted to marry to Thornton. Both were tall and dark headed, though her hair was nearly brown. Her bright eyes complimented his deeper-set darker ones. It was obvious that they were very much in love, the Milton matriarchs remarked between themselves, and however had they managed to keep their engagement secret for so long when it was obvious how deep their affections ran?

John had figured the trick and Margaret gladly played along—he would look to her, if they stood apart in a roomful of people, and smile just a tick. Not much, not even enough to be called a true smile. Just a twitch indicating that he was looking at someone he cared for. This wasn’t hard for John, who frequently had to remind himself that he was engaged to Margaret under duress, and it didn’t seem to be hard for Margaret. Sometimes she would startle him, swishing quietly up to his side from a direction he couldn’t see her from, and put her small hands at the crook of his elbow. Those times, when she wandered to him on her own, he would actually permit himself a real smile and settle a hand over hers before returning to his conversation.

Her parents were relieved at this as well, and John sometimes wondered how much of it they believed and what they knew to be a fiction. Mrs. Hale seemed insensate to the fact that just days before the riot her daughter had been unwilling and unhappy to share a room with him. Mr. Hale, John could tell, was allowing himself to be cautiously happy for his friend and for Margaret.

The only person who John did not attempt or even think to correct was his mother. She stood fast at her prediction that a woman who did as Margaret had done before the mobbing workers had been the actions of a woman made desperate with a tender sort of love. Hannah Thornton spoke so little of such things as *tender sorts of love* without sarcasm or wit in her tone that John couldn’t help but leave her uncorrected. In all honesty, his mother saying ought about *tender sorts of love* was about as impassioned as she got on the subject.
It was obvious to everyone he spoke with that he was experiencing that tender sort of love because he allowed Margaret to drag him to the homes of some of his workers. They were sometimes happy visits—awkward and stilted for his presence but something about Margaret made people forgive that—but many of them were somber. She often visited the home of Nicholas Higgins and looked after the man’s daughter Bessie. John hadn’t realized how badly the woman was beginning to worsen when she didn’t return to work after the strikes ended. Instead she was at home, bedridden and barely able to breathe.

Higgins had forbidden his other daughter from working in any of the mills, already unable to come to terms that his eldest was dying. John forced the open spot Bessie left on her father—though the man had tried to refuse at first. John had had to lean in close and curtly point out that rents had to be paid and that although the younger girl was earning a bit of money as a maid for the Hales it wasn’t enough to actually keep up with bills. They both knew no other master in Milton would hire the man, and that Higgins knew no other trade than cotton.

In a moment of crudeness, Higgins had demanded a full week’s wages up front and stormed out in the direction of a pub after John gave the money over from his own pocket. The other Higgins girl and Margaret were out at the market, and John was left alone with the semi-delirious Bessie. He installed himself at their small window and looked out at the sad little street the family lived on. He’d had his mother and sister in a residence not unlike this one when he’d first quit school. The money they saved by moving to the one-room affair had tided them over until the money he saved started to accumulate in a meaningful fashion.

He’d hardly ever seen the street their window looked out on back then, but he was quite convinced that it was that tiny place that had formed his mother’s habit of hovering in windows and surveying the view—and his sister’s fascination with grand staircases. John took in a deep breath and closed his eyes, thinking on Margaret and her ridiculous baskets of groceries. Perhaps he might be a little less hard if there had been some daft Southerner giving his mother food so that the three of them ate in the morning and the evening just after his father’s death.

Back then it had been him to eat a full meal in the mornings and Mother to eat in the evenings—Fanny had never wanted, though, but that had come at a price. She was flighty and ridiculous, without a moment’s thought on the cost of her style of living. He loved her for it—it meant he and his mother had succeeded in sheltering her from the storm Father’s death had plunged the family into.

It was a shame that things were working in such a way that Higgins and Bessie had been unable to do the same for the youngest girl—keep her in blissful ignorance of the true way of her life. She would turn out resourceful like himself and his mother, though, and perhaps that was a blessing as well. He could not see it--

“She cares for you very much, Mr. Thornton, else she wouldn’t be so insistent that you know those she calls friends.” Bessie Higgins’ smile was soft, even though her eyes fell closed as she went back to dozing through her fever. He softly cleared his throat and went back to looking out the window, pleasantly warmed by the thought that Margaret’s friends approved of him enough to talk about her. There were few in his life that he would permit knowledge of his feelings, and fewer were among that group who would impart those feelings to others.

Chapter End Notes
I did research, though, I promise. I just did it on clothing and wedding breakfasts and honeymoons. Make of that what you will.
Mr. Hale, just as their lesson began to conclude just days later, sobered at the sound of weak coughing from another room. John had long ago learned, especially over the last several weeks, that the sound was to be ignored. Mr. Hale did not want to admit that his wife was so gravely ill, and Margaret would only elaborate that her mother had a lingering cold. For all their open, southern ways, they were as insular as any family in Milton—and though he was close, he was not yet family.

“My wife is—has been—ill for some time, John,” his older friend began. The words seemed to cost him something dear. Margaret and the servant’s voices murmured in the room the coughing was still coming from. The study seemed to grow quieter in contrast.

“You and Margaret agreed on a longer engagement, which I am in support and favor of but…” the silence ate up Mr. Hale’s words, forcing him to come to a halt. It was a painful subject, death, no matter how it came up or about.

“But,” John continued slowly for his friend, “your wife might not be well enough to attend her own daughter’s wedding, or even attend any associated festivities, that is what you mean to tell me Richard.” This house did not speak of the seriousness of Mrs. Hale’s condition, so neither did he bring up the seriousness of her illness. She was dying, and that was a fact that they all knew on some level.

“If we might perhaps—“

“I will speak to Margaret, I’m sure she will agree.” He didn’t need to hear Richard awkwardly ask for the date of the wedding to be changed. It suited him at the moment. He could sense a change in the winds as to his business—a lean time was ahead as they stretched from the thick, warm fabrics of winter to the lighter, airy ones of summer. The strike had not helped. If they could save a few pennies on the wedding, it would make him sleep easier at night.

It would have to be a small wedding—in their best clothes since there would be no time to fit a dress for Margaret. Perhaps they might conduct it here in the Hales’ home—he was sure an argument could be made to the vicar that it was necessary for Mrs. Hale to be present at her own daughter’s marriage ceremony. Perhaps also keep the wedding breakfast small, something that could be held in the house at Crampton rather than Marlborough Mills. Mrs. Hale wouldn’t be overly taxed, and could easily retire should the need arise.

He would also perhaps get to walk through town with his new wife at his elbow, and that made John’s heart swell with pride.

“Surely Plato has not become so interesting to you as to have you smiling so, Mr. Thornton,” Margaret had come in with a small tray for tea, her hands dainty as she set it down. She poured a small cup for her father and then for him, taking none for herself.

“No, Margaret, my dear Plato has not brought that smile to John’s face. I think that that smile is
reserved for when you walk into a room—when you are not present his smile is also absent.” John felt his cheeks flush with the slightest amount of color as he looked pointedly down into his tea. He didn’t mean to be so obvious—there was no hiding his regard for Margaret, but the lady might not appreciate his candor to be pointed out. A small question remained in his mind what her feelings for him were and he did not know how to phrase it to her if he should ask. Part of him deeply feared overstepping some boundary of what she considered polite, so he kept his worries silent.

The sound of coughing again made its way into the little study. Margaret, who had just settled into her seat, started to get up when her father jumped to his feet. He patted her shoulder as he left the room, a parting glance directed at John himself.

“Daughter, stay here with Mr. Thornton, I’ll attend to your mother. You never see the man, looking after Mrs. Hale whenever he is here.”

Margaret stood up after the door clicked shut and stole the tea her father had abandoned, sitting in his chair. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her give him a long, appraising sort of look before her mouth settled into a firm line and she tucked her slippered feet up onto the seat of the chair, hiding them completely beneath her skirts.

“Does your mother require anything? Is there a want of some drug Donaldson has been unable to procure for her?” It wasn’t the best way to bring up the fact that Mrs. Hale seemed to be wasting away by the day, but he had to do it somehow. Much as he didn’t like dancing around the point he was learning to take a little longer in order to be fully understood by his Southern friends and fiancée. In what seemed to be an effort to spare his sanity, Margaret in turn appeared to be trying to use less euphemism in her speech and be more direct.

“She does poorly, and there’s little we can seem to do for her. Donaldson has told us…” she curled even more tightly into her father’s armchair, “that we must prepare ourselves. He says,” her breath hitched but no tears fell from her eyes, “that she shall not survive until the summer to see us marry.” John set his tea down so he could lean forward and extend his hand out to the woman he was going to marry. Margaret, after a long moment, set her own (stolen) tea down and lightly put her fingers into his. Her fingers were warm from the heat of the teacup.

“Margaret, might we get married Thursday after next? In this very room should you wish it. All the banns have been read here and in Helstone, as well as that horrid little church in London you told me of. We can have them read a fourth time this Sunday, to announce it.” Her eyes, until then looking steady into his own, dropped to her lap and he had to gently tighten his fingers around hers to keep their hands together across the small distance. “Margaret?” He waited another few moments, counting heartbeats. She needed time, he decided as he let her fingers slip from his.

“Mr. Thorn—John—that is, I—”

He swallowed hard, disliking having said so much before listening for her answer. He felt like a schoolboy around Margaret sometimes, a child in the mold of a man. He had, however, found that patience was the best virtue with Margaret—a woman who would answer his every query if he but gave her time to reply. She also forgave better when she wasn’t rushed into it.

“We shall look as though we have shamed ourselves, lost our characters,” she finally murmured, not looking at him as she spoke.

“Not if we are honest, my dear, not if we each go against our natures and give air to a sadness nearly inexpressible.” John waited a full measure to see that Margaret was understanding of his words, and couldn’t resist an impish remark.
“There are some who will always believe us to have shamed ourselves, even if we had wed in the summer. Even if our first child is born two years after today, they will believe it.”

She smiled hesitantly at that, he could just barely see it. She wiped once at her eyes and then looked up at him with her usual confidence. Her hand found his and laced their fingers together gently, her eyes leaving his and looking around the small study. Her father’s bookshelves crowded and concealed the wallpapers which peeked out hopefully with curliqued gaudiness at the edges and near the ceilings. He knew that when she looked at such papers she saw a lack of taste or understanding of elegance, but he knew that when most people in Milton looked on those same papers they felt pride.

Intricacy in this modern age of industry was expensive—far easier to make, sell, and later buy plain clothes, dishes, and papers for the walls. The time and delicate work required for curls and flowers came at an expense and was sold at an expense. It had been that way when he’d been a young man at the head of his family and it was the same now.

For people who sometimes had come from nothing, the idea of spending a great deal of money on something frivolous appealed to them as a way of showing off their hard-earned wealth. It didn’t matter what it looked like at the end of the day.

“Only, I think we should have a church wedding. Mother won’t be able to attend, but instead she could save her strength to make an appearance at the wedding breakfast.”

It sent a thrill up his spine to hear her speak these words, despite the reasons behind those same words.
Chapter 5

They took a week in Heston, the small one-road town near the sea just a short train-ride from Milton, as their honeymoon. It had been embarrassing to admit some of his own reasons for the speed of their wedding. His mills weren’t in trouble, but they were close enough to it that he was guarding his pence as he could. He promised his new wife, as they settled in on the train, that he would be sure to make it up to her with a proper honeymoon when his business felt more stable. Margaret’s soft smile at each declaration was enough to keep him from regretting his misering, and she murmured that she would rather him keep his keen business senses than become a brainless swain.

Their wedding had been small and quiet—her friends from among the hands had attended in their faded finest, sitting on the Hale side of the aisle. One of his own former employees, Bessie Higgins, stood (supported by her sister and a cane) as Margaret’s maid of honor while Mr. Bell stood as his best man. Mr. Hale had mouthed the marriage words along with the vicar, tears welling in his eyes. Later they had walked, her with her veil drawn away from her face and over her hair, to the house in Crampton for their breakfast.

His few guests had been told to arrive at eleven, to give the new bride and groom some time to receive congratulations from the bride’s parents. Mother had sent down the servants from the house to help in the small kitchen and to set the tables with food and plates. When he and Margaret climbed the steps into the house, they were greeted by minor pandemonium as his mother dictated to Dixon who dictated to the servants who looked askance at Mr. Hale as head of the house.

Margaret smoothed things immediately and led him upstairs to her father’s study.

“You look rather well in this, Margaret,” he murmured, touching the blue satin ribbon circling her waist. She blushed prettily and leaned in to wrap her arms around his body in a soft embrace. Downstairs he could hear the continued bustle of servants, as well as the slight coughing of Mrs. Hale in another room. A shiver went through him as he held Margaret—his wife. Margaret Thornton, nee Hale. He was standing here in the study of his father-in-law, with his arms wrapped around Mrs. Thornton.

“You look very fine in your blue coat, John.”

He squeezed her just a little bit before letting her go and urging her to sit down. Kneeling in front of her he took both of her hands in his. The noise downstairs faded as he looked into her blue eyes. A week was nothing, a lifetime not nearly enough. He would somehow survive the thought that she was only his for this lifetime.

“I love you, Margaret Thornton. I will do right by you and never leave your side should trouble come to us,” he bent his head to kiss both of her hands. By the way her breath caught, he finally ascertained just how much she knew of the circumstances of his father’s death. John had long ago forgiven his father, but the end of that man’s life shocked many people. It had given him a rod of steel down his back, however, because though his father’s worldly troubles were over the man had left behind a wife and two children whose troubles were only just beginning.

Their meal had gone off without a hitch. The many levels in the house allowed for food to be served throughout, which meant Mrs. Hale did not have to brave the two flights of stairs from her room, merely crossing to her sitting room and taking her meal there. Many of the guests circulated through this room as this was also where John and Margaret were installed for the hour or so that Mrs. Hale had been able to manage.
Margaret had stayed up all night with nerves and made productive work of her time—when he went to change into his traveling clothes after the last of the regular guests went their way there was a smile pile of cards on the table for him to sign. Thank-yous for attendance and gifts, awaiting his signature next to Margaret’s. The first few were a little unsure with the placement of T’s and R’s, but by the time he himself got to the bottom of the pile it was obvious that she was very familiar with her new name.

Whatever the last of his doubts had been they were erased by this—she was not yet wed to him when she’d written these. What sort of scandal might she have caused if someone had found her small notes of thank-you? He frankly didn’t want to know—his mother would educate him, or perhaps Mrs. Hale’s maid Dixon, but he couldn’t care less. No one beside himself knew, all was well.

Of particular interest was a note to Mr. Bell—thanking him for his great gift to her father, and that she hoped he might use it for good and that she would ensure John would use it for good as well. He made a mental note to ask her how a gift for her father might become something he himself would use someday. He did not sign this last card.

And now they were in a small private car, Mr. Bell waving them off. It was no great secret that they were going to Heston, but nonetheless there was tradition to be obeyed. I’s to be dotted and T’s to be crossed. John was ever so glad that the countryside was rushing by them and that for at least a little bit longer there was no one to judge their actions—namely his newfound task in teaching Margaret to kiss, and learning how she liked to be kissed.

Margaret had foregone taking either of her bridesmaids with her—Bessie was too ill, and Mary wanted to be with her sister more than she wanted to travel to Heston. She was not afflicted by illness and knew she had time later in her life to see the sea. There was no real need for anyone else—it was not an arduous, months long journey they were undertaking. He would not have to find activities that suited three, he could instead devote his attention to Margaret.
Their hotel was nice, and he did not mind that his wife’s hair was a little mussed from their attempted explorations on the train. He resolved to explain it to anyone that she’d fallen asleep after her sleepless night and the excitement of the morning. Nothing could be farther from the truth as they unpacked what they’d brought with them. They were sure to fall into exhausted sleep tonight, but not for a little while yet.

There were lamps to light and shoes to be left outside the room to be polished. He had spent a few minutes admiring Margaret as she took down her long hair. It fell in exquisite curls down her back as each pin was removed. She rolled her neck to loosen the muscles there and then combed her fingers through the strands to loosen them from the kinks that had developed over the day. John thought she looked positively wild, a fact which had him turning to his own small chores rather than stare blatantly at his wife.

On a whim he decided it was brisk in the room and that he wouldn’t have it, going to the fireplace and adding another log. After it caught he busied his hands with ensuring the windows were well closed and drawing the shades on them. The pattern caught his eye—an old one that hadn’t been sold in years, but had been quite popular when he had been young. He’d helped old Mr. Quayle sell more of this stuff than there were drapes in Milton.

Margaret touched his hand to get his attention away from the window he’d just shuttered. Her simple jewelry had been taken off and put away as well as the modest wrap that had been tucked around the top of her bodice. John dearly hoped that he hadn’t gone pale at the sight of her, but from the blush that rose to her cheeks he wondered if he’d failed. She cleared her throat softly and nodded to herself as she turned around.

“Can you help me manage the buttons? I realize now why women bring someone with them on their honeymoon. They can properly ambush their husband when he returns from his brandy.” Her teasing tone might have once offended him, caused him to think that she was referring indirectly to him. It was just one of her pretty southern ways, however, that had her speaking in this manner. Where it once would have made him irritable, now it tweaked a smile into the corner of his mouth.

He gently brushed her hair from the nape of her neck and prayed that she didn’t feel how his hands trembled. It was hard to believe that Margaret was here, and here she would remain. Though the room grew close around them as his focus narrowed to the tiny buttons on her dress, going all the way down to her slower back. It was her regular brown dress, but had been paired with her traveling bonnet, black gloves, and a thick shawl.
“Your mother brought this with her after that rock hit you at the mill. You wore it the day I walked you home when you were better.” The brown fabric of the dress was gradually pulling away, revealing the lavender petticoat beneath. John knew some men who were entirely ignorant of just how much clothing went on a woman, but he had lived his adult life with his mother and sister—there had been mornings when Fanny had dashed through the house in search of Mother’s comforting hums as the elder woman gently but firmly laced up her daughter’s corset. Sometimes the maid just couldn’t quite lace it right, he’d been informed once when he’d dared ask.

He didn’t know much, he readily admitted, but he knew that getting the brown dress off was but the first step.

Margaret lifted her arms when he finished with the buttons and he helped her wiggle out of this first layer—completely unprepared to see her facing him when he finished laying out the dress over the back of a chair. It was just a row of a dozen buttons keeping this garment on her body, the line traipsing down her front. She could have managed these herself, but his wife’s hands lay still at her sides.

“It will horrify Mother, but this is the petticoat I was wearing the day of the riot. Be good to her and don’t tell anyone,” Margaret softly teased as he started unbuttoning it and revealing the bodice of her corset. At least—he’d thought it to be the bodice as he realized there to be a small hoop skirt resting above it. He must have groaned or made some small noise of frustration because Margaret chuckled softly and brushed his hands away to quickly open the last of the buttons. He got the three layers off fairly quickly, seeing that his new wife began to look quite diminutive without her skirts and petticoats.

“You are lucky that you’ve married a woman without means, John, because I only have two corsets—a loose one for travel and a formal one.”

“Why is that lucky?” he asked, his voice far more gravelly that he’d have liked it to be. Her back was to him once again as she fiddled with where the laces of the corset were hidden away. Over her shoulder he could see the swell of her breasts as they tried to escape the restricting garment.

“Because I only brought the one for travelling with me. Now, you have to unlace the entire thing before we can get it off.” Suddenly he couldn’t breathe. Margaret’s hands held the ends of the laces, but he didn’t take them. John instead smoothed his hands down her barely covered shoulders, down her shoulder blades, and from there to the front of her corset, over her stomach. Curled over her as he was from behind, his lips were just a hairsbreadth from her jaw. Margaret settled her hands over his, leaning back against him. All of these clothes were going to be his constant companions for the rest of his life, in one way or another, and it was overwhelming because they were mere detritus compared to the person standing in front of him.

“I love you, Margaret.”

It was important for him to do this, say this, before it might be misconstrued as something said in mindless passion. While he was still well buttoned up and in control of himself, so she would know it wasn’t anything or anyone but her husband saying it to her. They still had stumbling misunderstandings now and then, and he wanted to get this evening off on the right foot.

“I—I deeply care for you, John, you are a wonderful man,” her voice was soft, warm in the manner she used when speaking of her father Richard or her friend Bessie. It didn’t matter her words so long as she was using that tone when speaking to him. “Now,” her voice turned teasing, if a little nervous, “get me out of this, if I could forego it entirely every day I would.”

“You are entirely too cheeky, Ma’am,” he replied, kissing her just once below her ear as his hands took up the laces she’d dropped just moments ago. “I will have to put you to work figuring out
cravats and waistcoats in a few moments.”

“Surely you can’t have more than one of each though, Sir,” she replied with a small laugh. Once he figured out the general workings of each lace, John made quick work of the corset. To think that beneath this, his wife had a shape that only she knew of. The last time she had been so undressed had been that morning they agreed to marry, but then she had been thoroughly doused with blankets (her mother’s worry and his mother’s sense of propriety).

The thin chemise she now stood in was a marvelous pure white. He took a step back in wonder as Margaret stretched her arms out wide, taking in a deep breath that he could see swell her shoulders out to their full capacity. With her hair tumbling down her back, she had never looked freer as she turned around and wound their hands together.

“Now, for your turn.”

She reached first for his cravat, gently loosing the knot and then tugging it from around his neck. He almost expected her to go next to the buttons hidden beneath the cravat, but instead she took up one of his hands and worked the buttons loose from around his wrists. John kept his eyes on her, even though her attention was centered on her work.

Margaret hooked her fingers briefly into his waistcoat before popping open one button after another. It occurred to him that he might dress more speedily in the morning rather than quietly bemoan each layer it took to become presentable—Margaret donned far more cloth than he did on a given day, and she managed to be ready for the day at the same hours he was. If there was anything in this world that made him irrational, it was the idea of competition—competition that he was lagging behind. Nothing motivated him better than this.

Margaret was alike to him in that temperament, though her mind at the moment was bent on taking clothes off of him. Her hands were only barely trembling as she tugged his shirt out from his trousers, and he helped her shrug it off of his shoulders. His wife’s fingertips were hesitant on his abdomen, then, but they did not falter as she carefully explored his body.

When she looked up at him he swayed forward just a few inches and kissed her for the first time since they’d departed the train earlier in the afternoon. Her lips were warm and full on his own, but there was the new factor of her chemise brushing against his bare chest. Margaret’s hands found pleasant places to roam over his back, but he felt a little shy putting his hands on her waist as he was.

“Have you done this before?” her voice was very soft, breaking their sweet kisses and tilting her head so his lips were against her forehead. Her question took him off guard but he resolved to answer nonetheless. She deserved the truth, she needed it.

“Once, my father took me…to be educated. It was just a week before the news of his ruin reached us. I have always associated such ventures with poor memories.”

“Such ventures, do you mean those of your father or his idea of education?” her voice teased him a little, even as she hugged herself closer to him as she spoke. It was permissible to speak of these things, he realized, and he would be in more trouble for withholding information from her than anything else.

“Both, and then those educational recreations seemed to become a mark of a certain character. What a man would choose if given the option. It did not seem respectable, and I do have to look at myself in the mirror every morning when I shave.”
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