A Helstone Rose

by Sobriquet

Summary

"London train about to depart, London train's about to depart!"

Margaret decides to do things properly and returns to London with Henry.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

“London train about to depart, London train's about to depart!"

The shrill blast of the conductor's whistle cut into Margaret’s clouded thoughts. She went hot and cold as she was suddenly, startlingly aware of the presence of others on the platform, of their dishabille, of their great impropriety, and above all of Mr. Thornton's breath on her face, his taste on her lips. She stood unsteadily, slipping her hands – still holding the slightly battered Helstone rose – from Thornton's, her eyes flashing towards Henry in their carriage.

She moved towards the carriage. The ghost of warmth lingered on her face along with an acute awareness of the echo of softness and pressure on her parted lips. She kept her eyes down, contemplating how many eyes must be upon her after that exhibition, not least the two suitors from their different trains. Reaching the carriage door, past the risk of meeting a stranger's disapproving gaze, she looked up at her friend where he was standing in the doorway to their compartment, his own eyes averted.
“Henry, I–”

Henry was slow at first to acknowledge Margaret, but stern and resolved in his urging once he had, offering a hand to help her in.

“You should do things properly, Margaret,” he said quietly. “You must see that. Think of Edith and your Aunt Shaw.”

Margaret looked back at Mr. Thornton and hesitated, taking in his silhouette, facing away from her, expecting nothing. Again, she was brought sharply back to the moment with the second shriek of a whistle, and took Henry's hand to step into the carriage. Henry was right. She could change trains, go home with Mr. Thornton, but what would come next? She must do things properly; there were stains enough on her character already, at least in Milton.

Margaret took elaborate care adjusting her skirts on the seat as Henry slammed the door. The train began to move before she dared to look up again at Thornton, who was now watching her intently with something approaching his habitual scowl. She offered him a weak smile and lifted her hand as if to wave, but stopped as she realised just what he must think of her, behaving in such a way – again, in his eyes – and leaving without a word. And he still knew nothing of Frederick.

As she watched the station fade into the distance, Margaret strained to find any hint of Thornton's thoughts in his face as it disappeared from view. She kept looking, long after she could see anything useful, until Henry interrupted her focus.

“I am glad you are coming home with me. It is the wisest course of action.”

Margaret made no answer at first, absorbed in the realisation she was still holding the rose in her hands. She kept her eyes on it as she spoke, memorising the colour and shape and the peculiar indentations around the leaves that had told her this was a Helstone rose.

“Henry, I… That is, I wish…” Margaret paused, glancing back in the direction of the station, now long out of sight and twirling the rose in her fingers. “Will you promise not to tell anyone what happened? I know I should not ask, but I should so hate to see how Edith and Aunt Shaw would look at me if they knew. I…” She could not tell him that she had known this shame before, of exhibition and misunderstanding; it was telling too much. “I will take care not to behave that way again in public, I promise that myself.”

“If you wish it, I will promise. But you must be on your guard, Margaret.”

Henry did not suggest what she should guard against, although Margaret was confident in her guess, and their separate musings allowed them to pass the rest of the journey in silence. They were nearly home, their train passing through and over crowded London streets, before Margaret put the Helstone rose away.

When Margaret appeared on the drawing room threshold that evening, she was momentarily distracted by the delicacy and luxury that characterised their Harley Street home and its contrast to the empty shell of a mill she had visited earlier. Edith rushed to Margaret's side and took her free hand, the one not touching the rose she had concealed on her person. Margaret blinked and offered Edith a tired smile, which was all the encouragement her cousin needed.

“Oh, Margaret, how pale you look. Do come in and sit down for a while before you go upstairs. Where is Henry? The Captain is dining with the officers tonight, and we were hoping for some gentlemanly company, although I am sure three ladies can be merry enough if he is otherwise engaged. Did your business with Henry go well? Did you have a successful day?”
Margaret allowed herself to be led to the crimson damask sofa and sat down. “Henry has gone home. We have had such a long day, so I will only sit for a moment. If you will excuse me, I want nothing more than to wash and to rest this evening.” What Margaret really wanted was to think, and she felt ungrateful for wanting respite from Edith’s constant and cheerful chatter when it had so buoyed her spirits in the past few months. She had no way of determining the day's success, even to herself, so she resolved to be more cheerful than she felt, and engage them in some conversation, asking her own questions. “How have you spent your day?”

It was the right tactic for Margaret's mood. Edith coaxed laughter out of Margaret with tales of Sholto's adventures and gossip from their neighbours, and Edith did not require a particularly attentive audience, allowing Margaret's gaze to wander around the room and her thoughts to return to Milton, as long as she could provide timely encouragement. It was only Aunt Shaw's news that eventually caught Margaret's attention with any success.

“My great-niece, Miss Weir, the General's sister's granddaughter, has just announced her engagement. To a draughtsman from Coventry, can you imagine? Her poor mother. The poor girl!” Aunt Shaw showed Margaret the letter. Edith had evidently already seen it. “My sister-in-law writes that it is a love match, but I am not sure it can overcome his circumstances.” Edith hummed her agreement; Margaret said nothing. “Poor, foolish girl. Well, perhaps his prospects will improve, and my sister confides—” Aunt Shaw lowered her voice, conspiratorially, “—that the bloom may be beginning to fade.” Aunt Shaw sighed, and Margaret glanced at Edith's pitying face. “It is so difficult to know which is worse: to marry poorly, or to not marry at all.”

“Indeed,” agreed Edith.

Margaret, who perhaps did not check herself so well when tired, retorted sharply. “I think, Aunt, it should be much worse to marry poorly, but we may have different understandings of the word.” Edith and her mother were struck silent. Mortified by her own outburst, Margaret forced some much-needed civility into her tone, and tried to smile to lighten the mood. “I just think it should be a far worse thing to marry a man of poor or mismatched character than of poor circumstance, that is all. Men's fortunes may change, they may go up rather than down, and perhaps faster with a supportive and capable wife. And a man in an engineering trade, if he is clever and works hard, may do very well indeed.”

Margaret felt her aunt's disapproval in her gaze. “One might hope so, especially when she's rich as well. But these things, these love matches, don't always work out as you hope – just think of...”

Margaret knew exactly to whom her aunt was about to refer. Edith had often alluded to the misfortunes Margaret's mother had suffered, as a result of her marrying down for love, in her letters, without ever quite writing the words. Margaret had never risen to the bait and soon found herself writing less and less of Milton, and more of Corfu and London. It should have occurred to Margaret before now that Edith had heard that opinion from somewhere, and been less of a shock to Margaret to hear it so nearly articulated in her aunt's comfortable and familiar drawing room of all places.

Before Margaret could find a polite response of her own, her aunt rescued them all. “No, perhaps it's best we don't speak of that.”

Margaret could not help but agree. She had known others held these opinions – had heard their various incarnations many more times since their decamping to Milton – but not within her own family.

“I will say that one day you will be married yourself, Margaret, perhaps with daughters of your own, and you will know what I mean then. Love is not everything, in marriage.”
Margaret continued to exercise restraint. She was in no frame of mind to express her dissent and point out her aunt's hypocrisy without offending a woman who had been extremely kind to her at every turn for over a decade. “Please excuse me,” Margaret said, standing. “I very much desire a bath. Might you be so kind as to ask Dixon to bring a tray to my room?”

“Oh of course you want to wash that filthy place off you, dear,” said Aunt Shaw, also conciliatory now and rising herself. Margaret had often admired her social empathy, her keen sense of the mood of a room. Even when they had disagreed, they had never truly quarrelled – a remarkable thing for two such forthright women in close quarters for almost a decade. “I will see to it that your dinner is sent up, but you must come down if you need anything else. Edith wishes to wait up for the dear captain's return, so it will be no trouble if you wish for company.”

“Thank you, Aunt,” said Margaret, “but I am truly very tired. I will see you both at breakfast.” She wished them goodnight with a genuinely brighter smile, and escaped to her room.

When Margaret's footsteps had reached the top of the stairs, Edith picked up one of her favourite conversation topics with her mother, along with her sewing.

“Oh, Mama, don't you see? Margaret was so distracted, all sighs and half-smiles, and then so out of sorts when we told her about Miss Weir.” Edith leaned towards her mother, re-seated in her rosewood fauteuil, and lowered her voice. “I think she is in love, and it must be Henry. There is no other gentleman she has shown the slightest interest in, and they talk so often and for so long, no matter how dry the subject. Perhaps they talked today, maybe even formed an understanding. And he is not yet fully established himself, and so sensible, and she is disappointed to have to wait.”

“I don't share your optimism, my dear,” said Aunt Shaw. “Henry is much too serious about his work to compromise his professionalism on such a trip, and I am not so sure of her regard. I wonder if she left a gentleman behind in Milton, although she had little enough opportunity to meet one, and she's had no correspondence from the north.”

“Yes, exactly, so it must be Henry! And wouldn't that be the most wonderful solution, to have Henry to manage all her property as her husband, not her lawyer? It would be such a help to his career, and then Margaret could return to the things she is so good at, not all this business and finance, and she would stay here always. Yes – don't you see, Mama? It would be just perfect.” Edith's beaming smile narrowed to a smirk as she added, “We shall just have to help them along.”

Margaret slipped the rose into a drawer not likely to be searched by another as soon as she arrived at her room. A maid hastily brought up some hot water and Margaret felt a little of the tension begin to leak out of her as she washed her hands and face, waiting for Dixon to come up with a tray and help with her dress.

Thoughts racing over the confounding terrain of the day, Margaret went to her dressing table and opened the drawer to examine the rose again while she waited. She did not regret the kiss, she realised, nor any of her other actions. Her only regret was that it should have been so public. No matter how independently-minded Margaret was, she still had to be mindful of her reputation. After the riot, and Frederick at the train station... If she had departed with Mr. Thornton, left all her friends and family in London without a word, with only her one small bag, there would have been uproar. Henry had been right: coming home was the wisest thing to do. She only hoped Mr. Thornton would see it the same way, and that they would have the opportunity to say the things that desperately needed saying.

“What's that, Miss?” asked Dixon, entering with the most perfunctory of knocks and setting a tray of food down on a chest of drawers near the doorway. “A rose, is it? Now, where did you get that
on your trip to Milton with Mr. Lennox?”

Margaret's tongue tripped over any possible explanation but the truth, and she knew she could count on Dixon's loyalty, even if her other qualities sometimes failed her.

“Mr. Thornton gave it to me.” Margaret took a deep breath as she turned to show it to Dixon. “It's from Helstone, from the hedgerows, can you see? The colour and the indentations.”

“Mr. Thornton, eh? A rose seems a funny thing to be giving at a business meeting, but then I know aught about it after all. And from Helstone too!”

“Oh,” said Margaret, still holding the rose as Dixon helped with her dress. “The business wasn't settled. When we got to Milton, Marlborough Mills was all but abandoned; such a sad, empty place. Only Mrs. Thornton was there.”

“Old dragon guarding her keep, I'll bet,” said Dixon, conspiratorially.

Margaret smiled faintly, holding the flower to her nose and inhaling. She tolerated Dixon's inappropriately vocal dislike of the woman. Dixon made no secret of what she thought of Mrs Thornton, the widow of a failed businessman who had once slighted her mistress, Mrs Hale being a proper lady, whatever her kindnesses later.

“And how did you come by it, if Mr. Thornton weren't at his mill? More to the point, how did Mr. Thornton come by a rose from Helstone?” Dixon asked. “I thought you said they'd all gone, after your trip with Mr. Bell.”

Margaret blushed, reaching for but not quite grasping an adequate answer; any variation on the truth would give Dixon a false impression of the truth of the matter. Regardless, Dixon observed all.

“There you go, Miss,” said Dixon, shaking her head and stepping away, her work done. Margaret slipped into her warmest dressing gown. “You would choose him. You've always been headstrong; I just hope you'll take care.”

“Excuse me?” said Margaret, distracted by returning the rose to its hiding place and unsure of what she'd heard.

“Please, Miss Margaret, you must think very carefully about—” Dixon busied herself with collecting garments for the laundry while she found the necessary words, then faced Margaret straight on. “I've spoken before of how I loved your mother better than any other in the world, right from when I first knew her as Miss Beresford up to the day she died. And I wouldn't condemn you, Miss, to the great unhappiness she endured at the end of her life – whisked off to that god-forsaken town at the whim of…” Dixon brushed imaginary dust from Margaret's dress. “God rest your father, he was a kind enough man, and they loved each other, that was plain enough to see, but your mother could have had so much more if she'd picked more wisely.”

“You forget yourself, Dixon,” Margaret snapped, rising from the dressing table stool, imperious even while undressed. “I am grateful for your devotion to Mama, and for your loyalty to my family in our troubles, but you have overstepped the mark. Your advice and your opinions on this matter are unwanted and inappropriate.”

“Miss—” Dixon started, but Margaret cut her off with a raised hand.

“Goodnight, Dixon,” she said, choosing the better part of valour and preventing further upset, having said her piece. “Thank you. I will manage the rest myself. We will not talk of this again.” Margaret could not bring herself to demand a second promise of secrecy with regards to the day's
adventures, so she trusted to Dixon's protectiveness and reluctance to gossip about the family, even with the other servants in Edith's household.

Dixon sniffed, but obeyed, leaving Margaret to her whirling thoughts, swept up into a further frenzy by Dixon's admonishment. Margaret hadn't thought of it like that – of course, some of her friends may see Mr. Thornton as a step down; certainly all of her London friends would.

Once Margaret had washed and eaten and changed into her nightgown, it was still early. Though Margaret was tired, her temper and her emotional discomfort meant she did not feel inclined to sleep.

Confident of her solitude for the evening, with Dixon chastised and all the chores seen to, Margaret took the rose out again and smoothed out the crumpled petals with her fingers. She had seen thousands of roses like this one during her girlhood. She had helped tend them and cut them and arrange them, and had even worn them on several occasions, each a joyful memory evoked by the scent. This latest memory had elements of joy – her heart beat faster as she thought again of rough, strong, warm hands on her skin – but it was marred by uncertainty, both of past and future.

Margaret laid the rose on her dressing table, intending to press it in a heavy tome as a keepsake. It was only a single bloom with a short stem, but the longer Margaret looked at it, its shape and colour and those telling indentations, the more sure she was that although she must keep it, she could not lose those details in pressing it. Margaret reached into the bottom drawer of her dressing table for something to tie the rose with. Once it was secured with ribbon – she had no string to hand, but could hardly ask for assistance in something so sentimental and, if she were to avoid gossip, secret – she took it to hang and dry in her wardrobe, and returned to sit at her dressing table.

Margaret sat there for a long time with pen poised over paper, trying to soothe the maelstrom of her thoughts by finding the words for a letter. She hesitated over whether to begin with a reiteration of her business proposition – an appropriate letter to her tenant – or to opt for a more passionate approach. Neither option won.

Her eyes burned with tiredness after such a long day. Neither rapid blinking or holding them wide open relieved her, and she found herself distracted enough from her missive to drip ink onto the page. With a sigh, she finally admitted defeat for the evening and set aside the quill. There were so many things that needed to be said and none she was yet confident enough to commit to paper. Her mind was whirling with the many things he might be thinking of her. She could not even be sure whether the fond would win out over the disdainful and her head ached when she tried to untangle the thoughts, to pick them apart and smooth them out.

With one final glance at her mirror, eyes inexorably drawn to the wardrobe door as if she could see the rose on the other side, Margaret blew out her candles and went to bed.

At breakfast the next morning, Henry had joined them. Margaret caught his eye for just a moment when the gentlemen rose as she entered, late, and felt colour rise to her face as she took the empty seat next to Aunt Shaw. She knew intellectually he would keep his promise, but the mere thought of the opposite alarmed her. He was an honourable gentleman through and through, but she had seen how quickly he could size up a situation and calculate his words to his best advantage. She was also aware of his continued regard for her, and his dislike of Mr. Thornton.

“You look much better this morning, Margaret,” said Aunt Shaw as Margaret smoothed a napkin into her lap.

“Yes, you have some colour back,” agreed Edith with almost a wink to her mother. She hadn't
missed her cousin's blush at seeing their guest.

“Yes, thank you.” Margaret studiously avoided everyone's gaze as she reached for the dish of poached eggs. “A quiet evening was just what I needed.”

“Margaret, you were unwell?” asked Captain Lennox.

“No, nothing like that. I was just a little tired after our trip to Milton.” She caught Henry's eye again and looked away embarrassed. For all that she had considered Thornton's feelings at length, she had not considered Henry, and that embarrassed her further.

“You must have had an eventful day,” Edith said, glancing between the pair, “to be so tired.”

“Indeed,” said Henry, watching Margaret carefully. “It was eventful enough... although I'm not sure it could be considered a success.”

Margaret glanced up sharply at that, unsure of his meaning. They held each others' gaze for a moment, Margaret undecided over whether he intended assessment or challenge. When Henry noticed Edith's close attention, he studied his breakfast instead. Margaret followed suit.

Edith exchanged a glance with her mother. Aunt Shaw shook her head, but Edith was undeterred. She knew what she had seen.

Captain Lennox led the rest of the breakfast conversation, amply supplemented by his wife and mother-in-law. Margaret passed the remainder of the meal in near-silence, offering only pleasantries and occasional encouragements, as she had the previous evening. When the gentlemen left to see to their business, Margaret excused herself to pass the day in relative solitude.

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After dinner, with Henry in attendance again, Margaret sat in an armchair next to the fire with a book. Although she was having considerable difficulty focusing on the words, Margaret was determined to persevere through at least one chapter. She only glanced up briefly when Henry took the adjacent chair. They sat together in silence for a few minutes, Margaret failing to read her book and Henry tending to the fire, before Henry caught her attention in the most effective way.

“Mr. Thornton came to my office today,” he said quietly, conscious of Edith's continued scrutiny. Edith had not asked him for specifics of the previous day but he knew her hopes continued, no matter how he tried to douse them.

Margaret shut her book and placed it on the table at her side. She pulled the rich Indian shawl tighter around her shoulders, despite her proximity to the fire, and gave Henry her full attention. She had spent another hour sat at her dressing table that afternoon trying to articulate her thoughts on paper, but the words had not come. She rarely had difficulty finding words in person, however, even if they did not always serve the purpose she intended. Perhaps Henry could give her the clue she required.

Henry leaned in and spoke quietly. “He wishes to meet to discuss your… business proposition.”

“Oh,” said Margaret, leaning in as well. “Did… did he say… anything else?”

“No to me.”

Margaret felt disappointment cluster in her belly; of course he would say nothing else. Perhaps there was nothing else to say, and he was only here for business. After all, Margaret's proposal – which required no further personal contact and little correspondence once it was settled – might be his last chance to keep Marlborough Mills, if Henry was correct.
Henry turned to look at Edith, who was smiling into her needlepoint. Confident that she was not listening, merely watching when not watched in return, Henry continued in the same low voice. “He has taken rooms nearby, and does not seem to be in a hurry to return to Milton. I suppose not, as he has little enough business to attend to.”

Margaret felt the tightness of her disappointment relax, to be replaced by a sensation of butterflies she seldom experienced. If he had taken rooms, not just a hotel for a night or a return train, he must have more to accomplish than merely settling a simple business matter with her. Even if their business was not the entirety of his purpose in London, there would at least be opportunity to see him, speak with him – a dinner, perhaps, or he might call?

“I am at your service in this, Margaret,” Henry said quietly when she did not speak. “What would you have me do?”

Margaret smiled, remembering her company, and took Henry's hand. She had not expected an offer of help, least of all from Henry. “Thank you. I would be grateful to you if you could arrange a meeting. Soon, perhaps?”

“Very well. I propose we meet here, tomorrow, at eleven.” Glancing quickly from their joined hands to Edith, he caught her lowering her head over her sewing again. “If that suits you, Edith. Margaret and I will have business to conduct. We shall need the back drawing room. Undisturbed, if you please – no children or servants coming to and fro while we talk.”

“Oh, certainly!” Edith beamed as she stepped out to give directions to the housekeeper, eager to have everything arranged just so.

Margaret looked to see her aunt and the captain engaged in quiet conversation across the room, out of earshot. She spoke quietly, not wanting to risk questions. “Thank you, Henry – truly. I didn’t mean to hurt you in all this. If I did, then I am sorry.”

Henry leaned closer to respond, terribly aware of Margaret's hand wrapped around his. He took a moment to find his words. “I do not like him, personally or politically, but you have made your choice clear, and I am sure it was with a great deal of thought.” He extricated his hand from Margaret’s, although they remained close on the arms of their chairs. “Your... opinion, of him... it certainly seems to have improved since we met at the exhibition.”

“We had... recently quarrelled. I do not wish to speak of it. I don't like to think of it.”

“As you wish.” Henry pulled further away, removing his hand from Margaret’s reach. He was acutely conscious of a need for distance for his own good, and also of an ache for the reverse. “I would also say that I should have paid little attention to talk of a manufacturer before your move to Milton but I have heard his name often since, and it is spoken of with admiration and respect. He seems a capable and honourable man, for what it's worth.”

“It is worth a great deal to me. You have been a good friend to me, Henry, and I am so grateful to you for... for all of this. You are just as clever and honourable, it is just –”

Henry lifted a hand, but fell short of holding it up for subtlety’s sake. “I am glad for you, Margaret. That is all we need say.”

“And we are still friends?”

“Of course.” Henry kissed her hand before standing, and Margaret offered him her warmest smile, feeling that even if he was disappointed, he covered it well with his chivalry. She liked him more for it.
“Goodnight, Margaret. I will send a note tonight and return in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Henry. Thank you.”

Henry left as Edith returned, stern as usual in the face of her gaiety. He excused himself with politeness if not warmth, but Edith forgave him easily. She came to occupy his recently vacated chair beside Margaret.

"You and Henry seem to be such good friends lately," Edith said, with the air of granting a confidence.

“We are,” Margaret agreed, only half-focusing on the conversation. She had many other things to think about tonight. She needed to prepare her words for the morning. “He has been such a help in many things.”

“Indeed. Although I am not sure I could bring myself to understand half of your business matters, even with Henry's patient teaching.”

Margaret laughed, her spirits buoyed by hope. “You could, Edith. You are too hard on yourself and Henry is an excellent teacher. But he is very good, to help so.”

Edith brightened by the moment at hearing Margaret's praise of her brother-in-law. “No, you and Henry must keep your business to yourselves. I am not fond of details, as you know. And I am glad, that you can rely on him so faithfully. And perhaps… well, I hope your business tomorrow will be resolved to your satisfaction, with his help.”

Margaret smiled, standing to excuse herself as well. “I hope so too.”

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Henry did not keep to his appointment the next morning, with no warning. Mr. Thornton kept to his time and was shown to the back-drawing room as Henry had arranged but Edith encouraged Margaret to keep him waiting until Henry joined them. After a quarter of an hour of excruciating inactivity, Margaret extricated herself and joined Mr. Thornton in the back room.

“Mr. Thornton,” she said, shutting the door behind her. “I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I was waiting for Henry, he was supposed to help—”

Turning and catching sight of him for the first time since her abrupt departure two days ago, Margaret felt the ghost of warm hands again, followed by a rush of blood to her cheeks. She held her hands firmly by her side, resisting the temptation to touch her lips. She went to the table and began to diligently search through her case for the required papers, as Henry had shown her before their trip to Milton. “He was to help me explain. The details are here, somewhere.”

“Margaret.”

At the sound of her name, so freely used, Margaret stopped, holding her breath and stilling her hands in their search. She could not bring herself to look at him.

“Margaret, look at me—”

Mr. Thornton stepped towards the table and took her hand again, as he had on the platform. Like then, Margaret found it difficult to meet his gaze for long, instead keeping her eyes on his chest or their hands. Regardless, she was aware again of his intense concentration on her, like standing unshaded beneath a hot sun.
After a moment, she took an unsteady breath and looked up and was caught in the heat of his gaze. She couldn't find words as their faces drew together again, only managing to lay her free hand over his on hers. Her eyes drifted shut.

There was a brisk knock as the door swung open. Margaret snatched her hands back and spun to see Captain Lennox entering. He said nothing, but his brow was furrowed at her sudden movement.

“Maxwell,” Margaret said, finding no more adequate words. She was still frightfully aware of Mr. Thornton behind her, stepping away.

“Edith asked me to take Henry's place, to see how I could assist you.”

“Oh,” said Margaret. “That's... thank you, Maxwell, but it's not necessary. I... I am sure of what... what needs to be said.” She looked between Mr. Thornton and Captain Lennox. “Henry is a good teacher and Mr. Thornton knows something of the proposition already. Please, don't let us keep you from your own business.”

“I have none that cannot be delayed,” Maxwell said, pulling out a chair for Margaret to sit at the table. “And Edith wishes me to help, as I am sure my brother would too if he had forewarned us of his absence.”

Margaret looked between the two men again, with Mr. Thornton now closely examining a landscape hung between the two tall windows. She straightened, drawing on the polite armour of a lady anticipating a silent battle.

“Mr. Thornton,” Margaret said, waiting for him to turn. “This is Captain Lennox, my cousin Edith's husband. Captain Lennox, my tenant, Mr. Thornton.” She wondered whether or not to introduce him as her friend too, or if that would be presuming too far.

She took her seat and composed herself as Captain Lennox sat beside her and Mr. Thornton opposite. Finding the papers quickly now that she was thinking more clearly, Margaret spread them before Mr. Thornton and explained the proposition again in greater detail than the day before. To Margaret's relief, Captain Lennox said very little, leaving Margaret to do the explaining. Likewise, Mr. Thornton said little, making only the most necessary responses and asking very few questions. When Margaret could think of nothing more to add, she took the papers back and tidied them again.

“We will need Henry for the final arrangements, of course.”

“Yes. I will call at his office again in a day or two.” Mr. Thornton stood, holding his hand out for Margaret to shake. “Thank you, Miss Hale.”

Margaret stood without hesitation and took his hand, holding it firm. “This is merely a business matter, Mr. Thornton, and one in which I suspect I have the greater bargain.”

The captain cleared his throat, and Margaret released Mr. Thornton's hand.

Thornton hesitated before leaving to say, “Higgins asked after you, after his last shift.”

“Nicholas! Oh, how is he, and Mary? Has he found other work?”

“He hasn't yet, although it seems his daughter has.”

Margaret could feel the captain’s confusion at their topic and their previous intimacy in handshaking, unthinkable to a London gentleman, and a petty sense of mischief encouraged her to
draw out the subject of her Milton friends, equally unimaginable to her London relations. “And the children, do you know, are they all well?”

“Yes, they are quite well.” Thornton seemed to share her intention of drawing out the conversation, although Margaret flattered herself it wasn't for precisely the same reason. “Higgins' daughter has been teaching them to read.”

“I'm pleased. Please give them my regards, when you return to Milton. I have missed them.”

“When I return, I shall, once our business is concluded. My mother is also in town, Miss Hale, although as you know she has little enough acquaintance here.”

“Yes, it is her first trip to London, is it not?” Margaret wondered briefly what could possibly draw her to a place she so despised before she realised: Mrs. Thornton would follow her son anywhere, even to London, and more easily with no occupation at home. Margaret suddenly pitied the proud woman, rendered idle when the idea was anathema to her, although Margaret knew better than to express the sentiment, either to Mrs. Thornton or to her son. “I should like to call on her, if I would be welcome.”

“Certainly.”

“I will call this week, then. Please give her my best wishes as well.”

“I shall tell her to expect you. Good day, Miss Hale, Captain Lennox.” With a slight bow and no further fuss, not waiting for the servants, Mr. Thornton let himself out.

Margaret returned to her papers, tidying them into the case she used to keep them organised as the captain remained silent behind her. Taking pity on his discomfort at last, Margaret faced him with the case in her hands, echoing her father's words to her, so long ago. “A handshake is used in all forms of society in Milton. The rules of civility are different there.”

"Yes, I should say so," said the captain. "Positively wild I hear, yet remarkably prosperous. It is a strange place, compared to the south, isn't it, Margaret? I think you have the best of it now, managing property in the north but living in the south."

“I am not so sure,” Margaret said. “I miss the energy of the north, the constancy of the activity, everyone always useful and productive. Once, I thought I should be afraid of hard work, but now I miss it sometimes, in these endless hours of leisure. Excuse me, Maxwell.”

Margaret left the captain bewildered in the drawing room as she went to return the case to its home in her closet, underneath the drying Helstone rose.

The next morning, an hour after breakfast, Margaret knocked at the front door of the Thorntons' lodgings. She was admitted by the landlady with, to Margaret's surprise, not a single question, and led down a drab hallway. It was lined with faded carpet, once rich but now threadbare in places, patches strategically covered by sideboards and an umbrella stand. The walls too were covered with ill-applied wallpaper, once fashionable. Up a flight of stairs, the landlady knocked swiftly and without ceremony at a solid oak door. She did not wait for leave from within before showing Margaret into a small sitting room and hurrying back downstairs.

It was a small room, decorated with questionable taste. It reminded Margaret painfully of the parlour in the Hales' house in Crampton with its garish wallpaper and impractical furnishings. There were too many pieces crowded into the room and too many ornaments on display for easy cleaning. Margaret had come to appreciate the practicality of these things in Milton. She heard
Fanny Thornton's condescending laughter in her head as she recalled the young woman's comparison between the Hales' Crampton rooms and the Thorntons' staircases and stamped down the rising sense of unworthiness that had shadowed her in past months. She had means now, she was nobody's dependent, she made her own choices, and she thought she may have been forgiven.

Margaret wondered at the contrast between the well-founded pride Mrs. Thornton took in her own housekeeping and these rooms. Had their circumstances been so reduced by Mr. Thornton’s misfortunes, or was it simply well-ingrained economy in the absence of a regular income? Economy might also explain Mrs. Thornton’s accompanying her son to London, closing the Milton house until matters were settled. Having surveyed the small room fully, Margaret noticed Mrs. Thornton was absent and only her son had entered from an adjoining room to greet her.

After a moment's hesitation, Margaret stepped forward and held out her hand for him to shake. She reached for formalities and pleasantries, finding the truths of her heart impossible to speak unprompted. Was this how he had felt, discussing the colour of fruit?

“Mr. Thornton, I am sorry to have missed your mother.”

Mr. Thornton blinked at Margaret's hand, his folded behind his back, but did not reach for it. Instead, he watched her carefully. “We did not expect you so soon.”

Margaret felt a small stab of hurt in her breast as she slowly lowered her hand. Again, she was reminded sharply of how poorly she had treated him in the past. They had both been more hurtful than the other knew. Her next words were more hesitant than her first; she had been confident of his forgiveness a moment ago. “I… I hope I am still welcome.”

“Indeed.”

Neither made a move to sit and Margaret could discern little from his stern expression. Mr. Thornton's lips were pressed together, his eyes sober, his hands restrained, and his bearing perfectly still. Margaret was struck, fleetingly, by the image of a soldier steadying himself for battle, sizing up an opponent. The only thing Margaret was confident of in that moment was that Mr. Thornton showed no sign of speaking. She began to dig for words with none of her usual grace, discomfited by this unexpected coldness.

“I am glad… I am glad that we have this opportunity to speak alone, of other matters. Not business matters.” Margaret found it difficult to keep her eyes on his, to be the object of such complete scrutiny. “Mr. Thornton, please, don't think… Don't imagine that I… At the station… Contrary to how it may seem to you, I know, I…” Margaret paused for a moment, the truth of it all crystallising in her thoughts. “I hope you don't think badly of me.” She thought back to another station platform, in Milton, and wrapping her arms around her brother, not knowing when she would see him again. How must that have looked, she wondered again, and Mr. Thornton still didn't know. "I know you must. I'm sorry."

Margaret was beginning to fret, the scales tipping resolutely towards insecurity in a way she had prevented with all her will since she first held that rose. The silence grew between them until Margaret could hardly stand it.

“Whatever for?” he asked at last, quietly.

“For… For being so free,” Margaret said, finding the words insufficient. “And utterly thoughtless of the circumstance.” Again, she thought, but dared not say. She met his gaze though, until this time he looked away.
"You have nothing to apologise for, or at least nothing for which the blame is not shared." There was another long pause. "Do you regret it?" he asked quietly.

"No," she said. "Not at all."

There was another long moment of silence and Margaret was conscious of how still they had been since she entered the room. It had been a long time since they met with so much restraint; words and actions had rarely failed both of them before. She watched intently as Mr. Thornton released his hands from their clasping behind his back and brought them in front of him to adjust a cuff.

Her eyes were still examining the detail of his cufflinks when he spoke, and Margaret looked up to see him step towards her.

"Margaret, I must ask…"

Standing directly before her, Mr. Thornton took Margaret's arms and arranged them around his neck, pressing against her chest-to-chest. Margaret could hardly draw breath as she remembered a previous embrace like this one, facing down rioters, advocating for both sides at once. She almost flinched, anticipating a sharp blow to the head, but one of Thornton's hands was on her face, fingertips stroking that temple, the other hand resting on her waist. That wonderful sense of warmth that had lingered for days washed away any ghost of pain.

"Do you remember?" Thornton murmured, softer than Margaret had ever heard him. "That was the first time…" He smiled, gasping out a brief laugh. "It is just as hard to find the words, again, as it was…"

Margaret returned his smile with empathy, trying to conceal how strange she felt, butterflies roaring in her belly and air sticking in her throat.

"That was the first time I entertained the notion that you might return… That you might love me. I saw your bravery, and your kindness, and your fire, and although I mistook their target – I was mistaken in everything, then – but… Tell me, once and for all, Margaret, am I mistaken again? Can my wish this time be more than just hope?"

Margaret nodded, watery-eyed, laughing herself with relief. She slid one of her hands into his hair, fingertips finding it softer than she might have imagined, and so different, so artless, in privacy, especially compared to the other gentlemen she knew. She nodded again, her confidence rising.

"Dearest Margaret," he said, smiling. "I love you and wish to marry you. Will you consent to be my wife?"

Margaret kissed him, briefly, wanting to find words to match his eloquence, but the impression of him stole away all but the most elementary.

"Yes," she gasped when she rediscovered that word. She kissed him again, fingers raking through his hair as she was swept away in the taste and the scent of him, still cotton and wood and smoke, even so far away from Milton. She relished the feel of waistcoat buttons against her dress, of strong hands on her waist, indulging all her less-used senses.

Gasping for breath, Margaret pulled away and smiled widely at her new fiancé. She would try to find her own words now. "Mr. Thornton, John, I–"

Margaret got no further as the door to the rooms opened, again with no warning. She released Thornton as quickly as he did her, stepping away and pressing a hand instinctively to her lips.

It was not enough. Margaret was certain from the look Mrs. Thornton gave them both – and only
a degree or two warmer for her son than Margaret – that she had seen more than was appropriate.

“Mother,” said Thornton, remembering himself more quickly than Margaret. “Miss Hale came to call on you, as expected.”

“So I see,” said Mrs. Thornton, stern and straight-backed as ever in her stiff black dress.

“How are you enjoying your first visit to London, Mrs. Thornton?” Margaret asked.

“It is everything I expected.”

“And how is Mrs. Watson?” asked Margaret. “I haven't heard any news of Fanny since our parting months ago. Is she well?”

"Yes, she's well enough, thank you. And your… family?”

“All in good health, thank you.” She looked between the two Thorntons. “I would like to invite you both to dinner, on Saturday, at my cousin Mrs. Lennox's house.”

“Thank you, Miss Hale,” said Mr. Thornton, quickly. “We should be delighted.”

“Good.”

Mrs. Thornton huffed, so quietly Margaret could not be certain she had done it at all, and turned to inspect some gaudy bauble on the oversize sideboard.

Margaret, keenly aware that she had outstayed her welcome with one of her hosts, spoke quickly and quietly to Mr. Thornton in return. “Will you come tomorrow and speak with my Aunt Shaw? I do not need her blessing, but I should like us to have it. I have no closer relatives in all of England, after all, and she has cared for me like her own daughter for many years.”

“Certainly,” he said, taking Margaret's hand and no heed of his mother. “I will call tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” said Margaret, squeezing his. She let go and turned to Mrs. Thornton.

“Good day, Mrs. Thornton,” she said, leaving no room for criticism of her manners. “We look forward to receiving you on Saturday.”

Mrs. Thornton pursed her lips but made no response, so Margaret took one final look at Mr. Thornton and his rare smile, and left their lodgings to make arrangements for a dinner.

That evening, as the family prepared for dinner, Margaret intruded upon her Aunt Shaw with a sharp knock at her bedroom door.

“Aunt Shaw, may I speak to you?”

Aunt Shaw glanced up to see Margaret's small smile reflected in her looking glass. She dismissed her maid and invited her niece in.

“Are you well, Margaret? You seem rather anxious. Is there something amiss?”

“No, all is well. I just wished to speak with you.” Margaret fortified herself with a deep, steady breath. “Mr. Thornton is going to call tomorrow, to speak with you about something of importance.”

Margaret saw the moment that her aunt, a shrewd woman for all her pretence otherwise, put the
pieces together. She stopped her ablutions to turn on the stool and face Margaret directly. “No… Margaret, that man!”

“He asked me to marry him, and I said yes.”

“My dear…” Aunt Shaw fumbled with her hand lotion. ”Are you certain – truly certain – that he loves you, and not your… good fortune?”

“Aunt!” said Margaret. “Yes! Please, trust me to know my own mind, as you know I always have, and to make my own choices.”

“But Henry said he was penniless, that he had lost your mill! Surely, you’re too sensible to tie yourself to a man like that.”

“He did not 'lose' my mill, Aunt,” said Margaret. She had anticipated this issue and her words came readily. “He ran his mill well, with honour and intelligence, but he suffered ill-fortune due to a strike not of his making. And you know I had offered him an arrangement to keep the mill before he suggested his own.”

“And you trust him, and his motives?”

“I have trusted him far longer than I have even liked him.” Margaret fidgeted, trying to find appropriate answers to assuage her aunt's fears while maintaining the correct degree of truth. She had not known before life in Milton that there could be too much of truth among family. “My father was very fond of him. He was a frequent visitor, kind and attentive, and both my parents… He brought Mama the most lovely gifts, wonderful fruit, when she was unwell. And…” Margaret had few stories she was willing to share: she could not tell her aunt about the riot, his first proposal, about Fred and Leonards; her compassion and shame alternately mortified her into silence. “Will you trust my word, that he has given me every reason to trust him, and never any indication of the reverse? Even when we were not friends.”

“You speak highly of him. When Edith shared details of your correspondence with me, she gave me a much less favourable opinion. She said she did not think he could possibly be a gentleman - that you had said so yourself.”

“I know. I judged him harshly at first, as I judged all of Milton. It was only later that I saw its value – his value. I could be happy there, Aunt. And he is a gentleman, albeit one made of a different mould to Henry and Maxwell.”

“If you say so, I will endeavour to believe you, my dear. But are you sure you wish to live in such a dirty, smoky place? You must think of your health too, my dear, for there's nothing more important. And what about your children! To be raised in such a town!”

Margaret said nothing; she had little to argue on the subject of health and she had not thought of children.

“And, one more thing – forgive me, Margaret – but what about Henry? He… I am sure he had high hopes of you, at one time.”

“He did,” Margaret admitted. “But he is my fast friend, and he knows of this already. He has known Mr. Thornton for many months, and been my confidante in more than business.”

To her credit, and Margaret’s relief, Aunt Shaw did not pry into her niece’s confidences. “And he is not disappointed?”

“I don’t know. But he understands, I think, that my heart wants what it wants.”
Aunt Shaw smiled, nodding. “I am sure. You are both of sound, sensible judgement and not usually given to rashness or folly, and you know far more of this Mr. Thornton than do I.” Aunt Shaw folded her hands in her lap. “I would like to tell you something, Margaret, from when I was your age – a little younger, even. It was so long ago now that none in this household would remember it, not even Dixon, it being before she was engaged to your mama and I.”

Margaret nodded in encouragement.

“When I was eighteen or so, we met a young man, Dr. Thomas Foxton, at a ball. And your mama and I were so young and merry, and happy to enjoy the company of any bright young man at a ball or a party. And Dr. Foxton – Thomas – was… I’ve never known anyone like him, to vex me so; such intensity in his conversation, and such a dancer. After two or three months of meeting at parties and luncheons and on walks, he asked me to marry him.

“I’d scarcely thought of anything else for many weeks; I was sure I loved him. But in that moment, on a cold patio, on a cloudy night, I knew… I realised what was more important to me. I loved him, but he was not secure. He probably should not even have proposed; he had no medical practice to speak of, no way of keeping a wife and all that marriage entails. And do you know, I have always wondered… I’ve not been unhappy with the general, despite our differences. I have been comfortable and content, respectable and respected, I have had the luxury to travel extensively and I had Edith. But I’ve always wondered, what if I had married for love? What if my heart had chosen instead of my head?”

“You don’t know what became of him?” asked Margaret, curious herself after this strange glimpse into the past of a woman who had seemed immutable to her niece for two decades.

“No, dear. It was a strange thing that pushed him into our path at all and he disappeared thereafter. None but your dear mother knew anything of it for certain, that he made me an offer and I did consider it, however briefly. I have wondered many times since if my melancholy in the following months was what encouraged her to accept your father, in spite of Sir John and Lady Beresford’s uneasiness. Your father was respectable and your parents adored one another, but it was not the brilliant match our guardians had anticipated. I’m afraid they didn’t live long enough to see her happiness, although I thank God they did not live to see her sadness towards the end.”

Margaret crossed the room to take her aunt's hands, softened by her aunt's honesty against another subtle betrayal of her parents’ – particularly her father’s – memory. “I heed your warnings, Aunt, but I am sure. He is a good man. I think I may have loved him for a long time. When you meet him tomorrow, I am sure you will find him to be clever and capable, and in time you will come to know as I do that he is also kind and honourable. I am certain, truly.”

“Then I will meet him, but I will not make it easy for him. If he is worthy of you, he must rise to the challenge.”


“Good. You’re a good girl, Margaret.”

Margaret kissed her aunt’s cheek and left her to finish her toilette.

Margaret did not see Mr. Thornton before his appointment with Aunt Shaw the following morning. Their conference was held in isolation, without the knowledge of any unnecessary member of the household, but Aunt Shaw had Margaret summoned at its conclusion.

“Margaret,” said Aunt Shaw, taking her niece's hands. “I have given Mr. Thornton here my
blessing, for what it may be worth, and offer you my best wishes.”

“As I said to Henry, it is worth a great deal. Thank you, aunt.”

“Henry knows of your engagement?”

“I suspect he attempted to arrange it,” said Mr. Thornton. “By not keeping his appointment two
days ago.”

Aunt Shaw nodded. “I thought so myself, after Margaret spoke to me last night. Many things
became clear then, although I confess I don’t quite understand why Henry is being so obliging,
given his own attachment to our Margaret.”

“I do,” said Mr. Thornton. “He is a man of honour.” He looked very deliberately at Margaret, and
memories of their exhibition at the train station flooded back. “And of pride,” Thornton added,
although Margaret did not know how to interpret that.

Aunt Shaw caught the exchange, but did not imagine for an instant that her enquiries would be
satisfied if she gave voice to them. “But you should be warned,” she said, feigning ignorance.
“You may not have Edith’s support at first; I’m afraid she has very different ambitions for
Margaret’s heart and won’t easily be dissuaded.”

“I will speak to her as well, Aunt. We will tell her at dinner tomorrow.”

Aunt Shaw left them alone, stepping into the hallway and closing the door behind her. Edith came
out to join her, curious about what was happening in the other room.

“What is going on, Mama? Who is here?”

“It is Mr. Thornton, Margaret’s tenant from Milton.”

“That man!” said Edith. “I wonder how Margaret can bear him. She wrote such horrible things
about him when she first arrived in Milton, of how he was a brute and a tradesman to the core, and
now she’s brought him here! Twice!”

“They have had much to discuss this week,” said Aunt Shaw, neutrally. It was not her news to
share.

“Whatever are they doing in there?” pondered Edith. “They are so quiet, I think they can hardly
be talking at all.”

“There is much to be communicated between them, my dear.” Aunt Shaw pulled a face trying to
restrain her smile. “I’m sure they will manage much better in privacy.”

“Yes, but Mr. Thornton is not soft-spoken, Margaret said. It sounds as though they are near silent.
They cannot be friends, if they do not talk. Margaret has always been so talkative amongst her
friends.”

A brief murmur of voices and a quiet laugh from Margaret cut off Aunt Shaw’s reply before she
could contradict her daughter.

“Poor Henry,” sighed Edith. “I will have to make more of an effort with him and Margaret.
Everything was going so well before, when Margaret so needed his advice.”

“Really, Edith, you must lower your expectations of Margaret and Henry, or at least keep them to
yourself before someone gets hurt.”
“I think you are mistaken, Mama. They are just so sensible that they need help. I will manage things subtly, I promise.”

“I wish you wouldn’t,” said Aunt Shaw. “Truly, dear, trust that they both know their own hearts and both are bold enough to make their wishes known. You do not need to interfere.”

“Perhaps I do not need to,” Edith said. “But I wish to, and I shall start with this dinner tomorrow.”

When Mr. Thornton and his mother were shown into the drawing room before dinner the following evening, Margaret kept her place as Aunt Shaw went to greet them.

Mr. Thornton refrained from offering his hand, instead bowing slightly. “Mrs. Shaw, you remember my mother, Mrs. Thornton.”

Margaret listened with her eyes averted as the two matriarchs exchanged pleasantries, relieved to find less bite than she had expected in the exchange. That was not to say there was none, but Margaret had anticipated worse. As Aunt Shaw introduced Mrs. Thornton to Captain Lennox on the far side of the room, Mr. Thornton caught Margaret’s eye and approached her with a sly, fleeting smile.

Margaret returned it, without reserve, unsure whether the heat in her face was her blush or the candelabra burning nearby. There was no available seat near to Margaret, with Edith on the other end of the sofa and Henry in the adjacent armchair, but Thornton approached to greet them.

“Miss Hale, thank you for the invitation.”

Margaret smiled. “It is our pleasure. Mr. Thornton, this is my cousin, Mrs. Lennox. You already know Mr. Lennox, of course.”

“How do you do, Mrs. Lennox?”

“How do you do, Mr. Thornton. How is your business?”

Margaret looked askance at her cousin; for all that Edith expressed a total lack of interest in business, Margaret did not believe her to be as ignorant as all that.

“Business is a continuous cycle of highs and lows, Mrs. Lennox. My mill will prosper again, in time.”

When Edith didn't respond beyond a vague smile, instead standing with a flick of her fan and moving to join her husband, Margaret was certain of Edith’s intent. However, she could not apologise for her cousin’s behaviour. She was too conscious of the vulnerable pride of all concerned.

As Mr. Thornton took Edith’s vacant seat, Henry excused himself as well.

“You look very well tonight,” said Mr. Thornton when they were alone. Margaret noticed how he held himself back a little; he did not lean towards her, his hands were restrained, he was very still. She caught herself admiring his neckwear as she had before at past dinners. Once again, she was avoiding the risk of meeting his eyes.

“Thank you,” she said. “As do you.”

“Mother was not keen on accepting your invitation. I am sure you can imagine what she envisioned for the evening.”
Margaret laughed. "Yes, I daresay I can, but she may not be far wrong. Truthfully, I am not so sure of how much success we will meet with tonight. I should have taken more heed of Aunt Shaw's warnings about Edith, I fear. I hope you won't take too serious offence at the things they may say."

“I can hold my own, Miss Hale, even among gentlemen,” he teased.

Margaret sighed, not so light-hearted herself. “I have no doubt, for you are every inch as much a gentleman as the others, but London society can be cruel, and callous, and narrow-minded.”

“And Milton society cannot? It is strange to hear you speak so happily of the north, even circuitously.”

“I confess, I have been converted a little – just enough to not quite feel at home in either town.”

“You miss having a home of your own, then? Instead of being a stranger in another’s establishment?”

“Oh! Not at all. Well, yes, I miss my home, but I’m no stranger here.” She glanced over the room with its rich fabrics and delicate lace and conspicuous lack of books, and felt Thornton do the same. “But you are right, it is not my home; it is very much Edith’s.”

Margaret’s melancholy was interrupted by the announcement of dinner and Mr. Thornton offered his arm to escort her to the dining room. Aunt Shaw had arranged it well, to be grand yet tasteful, and more intimate than Margaret would have expected.

Edith had arranged the seating and sat Margaret between Henry and Maxwell while Mr. Thornton was sat between his mother and Aunt Shaw on the far corner of the table.

Dinner was awkward at first with none of the guests adept at finding an agreeable subject of conversation. Pleasantries were quickly exhausted and the subject of Mrs. Thornton's first visit to London was cut short by Edith's incredulity and Mrs. Thornton's mortified pride at being found wanting by such a creature. Likewise, the subject of Milton could not be discussed agreeably given the Londoners' disdain and lack of understanding and the Milton party's complete disagreement. Margaret found herself too exhausted to mediate, letting the conversation stagger forwards with no guidance from her.

A great deal of time passed before dessert was cleared and Edith rose, the gentlemen following her lead, and she prepared to lead the ladies out of the dining room.

“Before we withdraw,” Aunt Shaw said, interrupting her daughter, “perhaps now is the moment, Mr. Thornton?”

“Mama?” asked Edith, but Aunt Shaw hushed her and gestured Edith back into her seat. Henry and Maxwell followed, but Mr. Thornton remained standing.

Edith looked between her mama and her guest, perplexed. Margaret felt herself redden again, heart throbbing, and she wrung her napkin in her lap out of view of the others.

She looked around the table, attempting to gauge the reaction of her family, as Mr. Thornton spoken with his customary frankness.

“Miss Hale and I are engaged to be married.”

As Edith gasped and turned the colour of cotton, fanning herself frantically, Mr. Thornton
resumed his seat.

“Again, I congratulate you both,” said Mrs. Shaw.

“As do I, John,” said Mrs. Thornton, although her face and tone did not match the words. “And Miss Hale.”

A smile flickered over Henry’s face for just an instant before it resumed its typical flatness of expression, but Edith caught it.

"What does your brother have to say, Margaret, about such a match?” demanded Captain Lennox. Margaret stared aghast; she had expected her family, as they always had, to keep her confidences, even if they did not respect her choices. She had not had the opportunity yet to tell Mr. Thornton of Frederick herself and now Maxwell was forcing her hand. "Do you know Miss Hale's brother, Mr. Thornton?"

Mr. Thornton rose to the bait, almost snarling behind the thin mask of politeness. "The brother who visited when Mrs. Hale died? We've never spoken, but our paths have crossed, yes."

Margaret’s head exploded with questions but she bit her tongue, not wanting to expose how she had not known that Mr. Thornton knew of Fred. She feared her confusion had been spotted anyway by the sharper-eyed at the table – Henry and Mrs. Thornton at least, she was certain.

“No, you’re mistaken! Frederick hasn't been in England since the year before the mutiny!” protested Edith. “You're not family, what can you know of this?"

"He's not mistaken, Edith," said Margaret. "I wrote to Fred when Mother was ill and he came."

“No, that can’t be!” she said. “You would have told me, Margaret, surely?"

Margaret looked imploringly to Henry for help and he nodded.

“Frederick was here, Edith. He was here for his mother's death, coming at Miss Hale's request, but then I understand there was some trouble with a young man from Helstone recognising him and he left before the funeral.”

“It's true,” said Margaret. “He called on Henry on his way back through London, too. Henry saw him.”

“As did I,” said Mr. Thornton. “Although I did not know him as Miss Hale’s brother at the time.” His eyes narrowed as he turned on Edith. “I am surprised you knew nothing of it, being as good a friend to Miss Hale as you claim to be.”

Edith looked shocked, pressing a hand to her chest. With a sob, she fled from the dining room, leaving the dining room door swinging on its hinges behind her. Margaret barely caught the rapid dull thump of slippered feet on the staircase over the sound of Captain Lennox’s chair legs screeching against the wooden floor as he shoved himself to his feet, hands planted on the dining table.

“Sir, you have insulted my wife with such disrespect.”

“Mrs. Lennox has been showing my son precious little respect herself,” argued Mrs. Thornton, halting her son's own rise to his feet. “I had no idea these London ladies were so emotionally frail.”

“Mrs. Thornton, please,” said Aunt Shaw. “Please, gentlemen, if we can all be a little more civil.
Despite our disagreement, this is good news, surely?"

"Yes, brother," said Henry. "This is for the best. I wish Miss Hale and Mr. Thornton well."

"Henry—"

"No, Maxwell, you know little of this." He repeated his earlier words emphatically, for his brother's benefit: "This is for the best."

"Thank you, Henry," said Margaret, her own wounded pride pushing her back into the fray. "Please excuse me, I must speak to Edith."

Margaret knocked at the nursery door. "Edith?" She had previously tried Edith's bedroom but found it empty. Sholto was asleep in the adjacent room with his nanny so Margaret was quiet as she stepped in. She found Edith sat on an ottoman, clutching at one of Sholto's toys and sobbing.

"I'm sorry, Edith," said Margaret, sitting beside her cousin. "I did not mean to upset you. If I'd known..." What would Margaret have done differently, if she had known? She resorted to words she had spoken too many times in recent weeks. "I hate to think that you think badly of me."

Edith's sobs subsided and Margaret offered her a handkerchief. This was a scene they had played out often as girls, Margaret comforting her more easily affected cousin; although Edith was usually the wronged party, Margaret had never before been to blame.

"I rather hoped you'd be pleased for me," said Margaret, smiling at Edith as she dabbed her eyes. "That I... that I could marry for love too, as you did."

Edith blew her nose noisily. "Love?" she croaked.

"Yes, I love him. And he loves me. Please, Edith, tell me what's wrong? Why are you so upset?"

"Oh! What's wrong? You once told me Milton was hell – snow white hell. That Mr. Thornton was a brute, that he beat his workers – you were horrified! How can you possibly want to live there? You said that you could never even like him, nor that place, and now!"

"I... I know. I was perhaps too hasty in my judgement of Milton, and of Mr. Thornton. I confided in you things I perhaps shouldn't have, purely for the need to speak them to someone and I couldn't to Mother or Father. But in time I came to see its value, of the town and the people who live in it."

"Be sensible, Margaret! If you choose this Mr. Thornton, if you choose Milton... Think of the lives your children could expect, how horrid and smoky and dusty it is! Henry could–"

"There is our problem I think, Edith. You must understand: Henry is a good man and I am fond of him. He is my steadfast friend. But I cannot and will not marry him. I do not love him."

"Whichever not? He is sensible and clever and you get on so well. He cares for you, I am sure, and you could stay here, with us, and be comfortable and happy always."

"That – this – is not the life I want. We want different things. A useful life, one full of energy and activity... that is what I want. Long ago, I was afraid of hard work, but I've found there is joy in it, in being busy, in being truly tired at the end of the day. I have been so bored here, so idle, that I have occasionally missed Milton – no, don’t misunderstand me, I am grateful to you and some of my happiest memories are of life with you and Aunt Shaw. But I came of age in Milton. It has shaped me as much as London or Helstone have, and I wish to return to my life there, to my
friends, to a place where I can do so much good, and where there is a man who loves me.”

"But we're your family, Margaret – Mama and Sholto, Maxwell, Henry and I. How can you forsake us, go to that horrid place?"

“Then I shall have family in three places: in Milton, in London, and in Cadiz. If your worry is for Sholto, then please… he is young and he is fond of me, as I am of him, but I will just have to spoil him from afar with great gifts on my frequent visits. Nanny Cooper is very good; you shall have all the help you need. And I shall visit you regularly, and perhaps visit Fred as well, and we will always be writing, as when you were first married.”

"Fred! Oh, how could you not tell us that he was here? We were sorry enough to be away, but to miss Fred too…"

“It was done with the utmost secrecy. When I wrote to him, I did not tell my father until it was too late to recover the letter, and Mama guessed before we could tell her. There were only two others taken into our confidence before Fred went to Henry.”

“Dixon and your Mr. Thornton?”

“No, not Mr. Thornton. Truly, Edith, I don’t know how he knows – I never told him. It was only Dixon and… oh, of course.”

“What, Margaret? What is it?”

“I had a friend in Milton, Bessy Higgins, a girl about our age. She died. Her younger sister ran some errands for us while Fred was with us, and Mary must have told her father. Higgins worked at Marlborough Mills after the strike. It must have been him, somehow.” Margaret took Edith's hands. "I do not think I can convince you of the worth of Mr. Thornton and Milton, not tonight. I trust that time will manage that. But can I at least persuade you that my choices are my own, made by head and heart together, and I believe I will be happy?"

“Apart from the last, you already have,” admitted Edith. “Oh, Margaret, please be sure. But also know that you can always come home.”

Margaret hugged her cousin, who sniffed into Margaret’s shoulder. “I know,” Margaret said. “I will miss you all, but this is what I want.”

Edith pulled away and nodded, returning Margaret’s watery smile. She stood up and brushed down her dress. “Then we must go back downstairs.”

Dinner had not followed a traditional routine that evening. The remaining ladies had stayed in the dining room with the gentlemen, enjoying a glass of brandy and waiting for the young ladies to return, talking of more serious subjects than during dinner. Edith steadily returned them to normal, stepping into the dining room to retrieve the ladies, only her red eyes remaining as indication of her tears.

“Mama, Mrs. Thornton, I think we shall go through now.”

As Edith led them to the drawing room, Margaret lingered in the hallway, adjusting the arrangement of roses in a great vase on a table beside the dining room door.

Mr. Thornton stepped into the hallway as well and took Margaret’s arm.

“Are you well?” he asked, stern again.
“A few times this week,” Margaret mused, “I’ve thought I should have changed trains and gone home with you. I came home to do things properly so nobody would be upset and they were anyway. I wanted them not to think badly of me and they do, even if they do not admit it. But I am well, yes, and Edith will be too in time.”

“It was a shock to them, then?”

“Oh yes,” Margaret laughed, feeling herself grow overwhelmed only now the first battles were over. She had yet to argue for the simple wedding she desired. “To Edith most of all. Aunt Shaw took it rather well, I thought. I was actually most worried about her, especially after hearing her talk of my parents and of her niece...”

“And you are sure they will come round? That it will not be too difficult for you?”

Margaret removed his hand from her arm and held it between her own. “I will not change my mind, if that is what you’re afraid of.”

Mr. Thornton smiled, admitting nothing. Margaret hoped that small smile never became familiar; that it never lost its ability to make her heart race, to bring forth an irresistible urge to smile herself. Margaret stretched to kiss his cheek.

“I am certain, of all of this. Moreso, in fact, than I was before. My only regret is that it all cannot come sooner.”

“You do not want a lengthy engagement? A great fete, as Fanny had?”

“No, not at all! My favourite dress and a beautiful morning, that is all I could wish for. And the right man, of course.”

“Then, if you’ll forgive my haste – one month?”

“Yes. Just long enough for the banns to be read, and we shall marry.”

“And you will come home with me.”

Margaret laughed again, feeling happier now than she had ever known before. She kissed him again. “One month, and then home.”

It was late, the quiet part of the night where there was no sound of worker or machine. Margaret sat beside the fire in her new bedroom. A small chest sat atop a small table and Margaret was examining the few treasures of her life before her marriage: a piece of her mother's embroidery, one of her father's treasured books of poetry, the black lace mantilla from her sister-in-law Dolores, Bessy's cup, and several treasured letters from Edith and Frederick.

Four weeks had passed quickly, the banns read in her parish church followed by a quiet wedding on a Monday morning, five weeks after their meeting on the station platform. Mr. Thornton had returned to Milton to resume business at the mill in the intervening weeks and Margaret had consented to a delay of their wedding trip until things were fully established again. She was simply happy to be home.

Margaret looked up as she heard her husband's quick footsteps on the stairs and smiled.

She tucked away the treasures of her new life atop the old – a sketch of her newborn nephew by Frederick’s hand, a blossom from her wedding bouquet, and the dried Helstone rose - and waited
for her husband to join her.

End Notes

With thanks to my wonderful and rather patient beta, Kyrene3. Although this is more closely related to the 2004 adaptation, I borrowed generously from the novel in places; I hope the reader will forgive me and enjoy the parallels. Happy Yuletide, Maidenjedi! Your prompts were a delight to play with.

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