Margaret Hale

by Somerville

Summary

Margaret Hale, and what she thinks, feels and does next.

Inspired by, and assumes familiarity with, both Welch's 2004 BBC TV adaptation of Gaskell's novel, and the original book.

Notes

Written for myself. Un-beta-ed.

See the end of the work for more notes
Northbound Train

Margaret Hale closed her eyes and felt the rhythm of the railway in the knot of her stomach as the train dragged her away from Milton once more. Where has he gone? Where has he gone? Where has he gone? Where has he gone?

"We will be brave, little heart. He will see his mother right - he always has."

But as her rush of hopeful courage weakened, as her distance from his place, his rightful place in Milton, expanded, Margaret felt traitorous despair at the edge of her being. Now she had to find another way. Henry Lennox would have to help her write her hopes into legal documents and letters, as persuasively as ever they could. Margaret would have to wait, and wait, and pray that proud, resolute Mr Thornton would write back to accept her ill-gotten funds to right the sad misfortune of the undeserved failure of his mastership of Malborough Mills. Would he even countenance such an business proposition from the Miss Hale who was so completely dishonoured in his eyes by her behaviour that night at Outwood Station, and by her impertinent, intemperate rejection of his quietly honourable heart? Would he graciously allow her to lay her funds at his feet, so he might properly restore the livelihoods of Nicholas Higgins and all his other faithful workers, as well as his own?

Margaret fought to hold back the tear of self-reproach which threatened to betray her bitter regret to Henry Lennox, who could never fully understand nor sympathise - most especially given his casual assumption that one day soon she would humbly accept his renewed offer of marriage.

Margaret's thoughts continued in these unhappy ways as the train slowed its cadences and drew into and stopped at Midland Central Station.

She welcomed the chance for a brief respite from the seemingly airless first class compartment, as she stretched her legs to step onto the breezy platform and rested her eyes on the approaching north-bound train opposite.

She felt her heart leap with wonder as the longed-for vision of his face appeared - with, she briefly noted, his strangely unbuttoned collar - as if in answer to her desires, coasting to a halt resting in a compartment of the train opposite.

John Thornton was almost overcome by the great bubble of pure joy which engulfed him as the mere sight of her ever-beloved face and form arrested his thoughtful, melancholy exit from his train compartment. All other matters, all manners forgotten, he spoke in wonder to learn where she was bound on this marvellous chance crossing of their ways.

He watched as a answering flicker of joy seemed to pass across her beautiful features, replaced by uncertainty and discomfort even as she named her point of departure. Hope flared in his breast: could her business in Milton possibly have something to do with him, with her property at Malborough Mills; could she feel something of the happiness which was washing through him at finally meeting one another once again?

Eager to soothe and encourage her, the yellow Helstone rose which he had treasured up in his breast pocket brought a welcome glow of sunshine to her cheeks and her eyes. His heart ached with protectiveness and love at seeing her determination to overcome her own feelings of unworthiness as she - all unawares - revealed her utterly transformed regard toward him by means of her business proposition for the funds which Bell had so carelessly speculated his money to accumulate.
The feel of her hands and her lips on his hand made all his reserve and his sense of propriety melt like snow in Spring, and his unimagined joy further expanded by untold measure as she gently returned his passionate, unchained kisses.

John felt his world drop away again, as waves of unworthiness at having drawn her into a far more shameless public display than he had ever imagined her to have committed, washed over him as he helplessly watched her walk out of his life into the personal life of her lawyer, Henry Lennox.

Margaret silently thanked Henry from her heart for his gracious concession of any claim on her affections, as he handed over her carpet travelling bag and bade her 'Goodbye' without requiring any word of explanation for her wildly unconventional behaviour. Perhaps he saw she could never be a proper Lennox wife?

Margaret's stomach unknotted as she saw Mr Thornton's countenance mirror her own emotional swing from despair to joy, as she stepped quietly back beside him.

"You're coming home with me?"

She answered his question with her resolute actions, symbolically passing to him her possessions and stepping up to share his compartment. He likewise shared without reserve, giving his personal space to her with his open arms and lips. They each paused a moment to drink at the common well-spring of their joy in one another and their togetherness, before continuing to indulge for many more minutes of delicious silence.

Finally, they clung together in an enfolded embrace and she spoke, "We are going home together. Oh, my beloved John."

"I never thought to speak my love for Margaret out loud ever again. But Higgins saw into my heart - Higgins set me straight about your blameless care for your dear brother."

"Then I shall forever owe a deep debt of gratitude to Nicholas Higgins, for bringing you and I to perfect mutual understanding."

THE BEGINNING
Love and Honour

Chapter Summary

As the northbound train draws closer to Milton, Margaret Hale and John Thornton try to understand what love and honour demand of them.

Though John Thornton's lips on hers were in some strange way making her whole being sing, Margaret Hale eventually drew back and looked with resolute love into his blue eyes. Her voice low, kind and steady, she said,

"John Thornton - what do you think now of wedlock?"

He rested his forehead on hers, and she made a soft sound, and a gentle gesture to hush his deep, heart-sore contrition over their first disastrous conversation on this tender subject. She steadied his face with her hand and looked into his beautiful eyes again, then continued in the same caring tones:

"I love you. Yet, I would waste neither time, nor money, which could better go to quickly re-establish Marlborough Mills and all those who depend upon it."

His voice was a little hoarse as he began, but steadied as he replied,

"Margaret - what you are to me, I have known since you saved my life. I am yours to command."

"Oh, John: no. We are His alone to command, who sees all in our hearts. Shall we then not walk humbly side-by-side in His sight?"

"I would always be here, at your side and as we re-establish the mill together. My thoughts on wedlock - it is a matter of honour, that I will not have it said I marry you to possess you and your property!"

"Your mother reminds me that your life has been for Marlborough Mills. Only through my dear father's devotion to Mr Bell has the mill happened into my possession."

"Margaret, I love my mother dearly, but in this her love for me mis-leads her. Side-by-side you say. All my hope is in your goodness. Marlborough Mills is yours."

Margaret considered him gravely.

"We have yet another matter of honour to consider. I will have your mother comfortable in her own home: I respect her too much, I will not usurp her rightful place."

John returned her grave regard.

"It is our strong wills which have kept us circling back to one another. Would you agree, we shall not settle these weighty matters on this train?"

- a pause to seek and receive her unspoken agreement -

"So, shall we look now to my mother, and what we will say to her this evening?"
"A wise suggestion, my love. Shall you go to her first, tell her you are re-opening Marlborough Mills, and that she remains your partner in the venture, and in her own home? Then you can send for me once she is secure in those facts, and we can tell her of our new mutual understanding - and about dear Frederick, my mis-understood brother? In which hotel do you recommend I stay?"

His immediate feeling was that no mere hotel could ever be adequate to the needs of his angel. But reluctantly, John had to allow that, for his mother to comfortably become familiar with all that had changed on this most wonderful day, Margaret's plan was very reasonable. He struggled with the new sensation of trying to reconcile that which he wished for his beloved Margaret, and what would likely be best for his beloved mother.

"That was Outwood, we are nearly home. Your mother is needing to see you.", Margaret observed.

"I will take you to the hotel, but .."

"I will be quite comfortable. I will send to Aunt Shaw for a trunk of my clothes and personal items. We have our whole lives ahead, we have been patient these many months, let me give your mother the time which she needs with you now. Tomorrow is soon enough for me to start to re-build my relationship with her!"

One more loving kiss, and the train bore the two of them back to Milton, where their faces were not anonymous. Sighing together, Margaret and John drew a respectable distance apart, and stepped out of their own world and into the bustle of the town.

A short cab ride, to see Margaret settled, and then John tore himself away to begin the long process of explaining all to his mother.
Exploration and Explanation

Chapter Summary

Margaret Hale and John Thornton start to explore and explain the consequences of their new mutual understanding.

After John Thornton had left, Margaret Hale gathered her happiness and her determination, and wrote a kind, firm letter to Aunt Shaw and Edith. She renewed her thanks for their kindness, explained that Mr. Thornton had accepted her business proposition, and so asked that Henry Lennox arrange for all the legal documents to follow her to Milton; and could Dixon help send her trunk of day and night clothes and her personal and toilette items? She promised to visit soon.

After a few moments thought, Margaret also penned a list to a certain discreet book-seller, signing her name as M. Hale, and swiftly arranged for the hotel porter to send both letters to London on that night's train.

Now, Margaret moved around her comfortable hotel rooms, tidying and freshening herself after her long, unusual day, and pondering anew all she knew about love.

As a child, Margaret had idolised her parents as some of us can, gathering through her open exploration of the world that Miss Maria Beresford had quietly gone her own way and married a poor clergyman for the love and respect between them.

In the home of her Aunt Shaw, she had sadly and silently noted that the former Miss Beresford's regard for her very well-connected General seemed only to reach full bloom in widowhood.

On her holiday visits back at Helstone, she had slowly realised that, despite their true and fond mutual regard, her parents had drifted further apart the longer Maria Hale was away from the fashionable town environment where she was fully at home.

Margaret's face warmed significantly as she thought back carefully to all she had inadvertently learned of the social, romantic and physical relationships between the adults in the farms, holdings and cottages of Reverend Hale's rural agricultural parishioners.

She cooled but a little as she remembered what Edith had managed to more or less intentionally reveal about her marriage to her dashing dear Captain.

She wondered at how little she knew of Bessie Higgins' and Mary Higgins' mother, yet with a feeling of confidence that Nicholas Higgins must have loved her well in his own gruffly kind and practical way.

She then thought very sadly about what she did know of Hannah Thornton's marriage and widowing, which brought her thoughts back to the shining light of Hannah's widowhood: John Thornton.

All through these trains of thought, Margaret made a newly deliberate and frank exploration of herself and her position regarding matters previously barely spoken of in her presence. She was moved by the significance of the feelings which she was evoking within herself, and discovered that one evening, one night and one morning was not to long to be alone in this new internal
voyage of discovery.

Meanwhile, John Thornton had made his short walk home in an uncharacteristic haze of emotion. His body had never felt so warm, not even on that most momentous day at the mill! He struggled successfully to compose his thoughts for the benefit of Hannah Thornton: their livelihood saved; let her ready herself with him to re-open the mill immediately; remaining secure in their home; and then ... then the declaration of the name of their benefactor.

As he walked across the mill courtyard, his footsteps over-loud, he once again smiled courage up to Hannah Thornton where she stood at the window, with relief at his return palpable on her face. Yet, Hannah Thornton could not help a slight bitterness in her tone as she interrupted John's attempt to calmly set out the new facts of their situation.

"John, you cannot shield me from this: tell me now, is it Miss Hale to whom we are to be beholden?"

"Mother, we are to be partners with Miss Hale, and I beg you to trust me with what I need to explain to you."

"Have foolish passion and your recent undeserved suffering finally undone you, John? Partners with Miss Hale? What could that mean?"

"Miss Hale has tonight taken rooms at the - Hotel, so that you and I may talk openly and frankly about your wishes. She has asked us to re-open the mill with the money which Mr Bell settled upon her. What greater proof of her respect for us, for both you and I, could you possibly wish?"

"Respect! What respect can I have for Miss Hale, who expects you to be at her beck and call because of her ill-gotten wealth, who has never troubled to protect her reputation .. "

"Mother, I have Miss Hale's permission to reveal, it was her brother that night at Outwood Station. I implore you, pause in your criticism of Miss Hale, and allow me to set out the facts which will give you firm grounds for granting her another chance to gain your respect."

"Brother? She doesn't have .."

"So said I, before I knew the truth. Mother, with you, we can make Marlborough Mills better than it has ever been. Higgins has already collected the names of our most loyal workers. We can open our factory gates for business again one week on Monday, if you will but allow it!"

Hannah Thornton felt her heart betray her righteous indignation, as she watched the joy play across John's face. But she willed herself to stay strong, to protect his long-term best interests from this giddiness which was afflicting him.

"I will not be subject to Miss Hale's financial whims!"

"Everything will be done properly, all the legal documents written soundly to give us each security."

"No! You must marry that woman, so you will be Master indeed, and I will retire to a cottage."

"You are crucial to the future success of the mill. I could not be happy if you went away. Please, Mother, will you take three months to see for yourself, before you make any momentous decisions?"

Hannah wrestled with her conflicting impulses.
"Let us at least sleep upon all these questions, please?"

"Very well. For your sake, I will sleep on this news you bring. Now, I am tired."

She rose, walked past John where he sat, then paused behind him and said, with a hint of warmth she could not hide, "Goodnight, John", and retired to her room.

Hannah and John each sat alone for a long time that night, wrestling both with their thoughts and with their emotions.
Margaret Hale explains Frederick Hale's history to Hannah Thornton.

Margaret was outwardly composed and calm when John arrived at the hotel the following morning. They looked silently at one another for a number of moments, quiet joy and concern playing alternately across each of their faces.

"How is Mrs Thornton this morning?", asked Margaret, mindful that they were over-heard.

John sighed, "She is as well as can be expected" in a tired tone, wishing he had better news to impart.

Margaret mirrored his sigh, understanding much of his emotional tension.

"Let us visit Mr Latimer, and see what progress we can make at the bank, at least." she said.

They walked quietly together to the bank, in the mode of business partners, yet they noted a significant number of curious glances from people whom they passed along their way.

Once their initial discussions with the bank manager about how to release Margaret's funds were complete, they turned their faces toward Marlborough Mills. They stopped next at the mill office, so they could both talk frankly for a short while, and somewhat re-assure one another.

"So you will first tell Mrs Thornton that arrangements are underway at the bank, and then I will speak plainly to her of Frederick, and then - we will see?"

John squared his shoulders a little more and nodded.

"My mother will be calmer once she thinks through the truth about Frederick."

With a final embrace, they stepped outside again, and watched Hannah Thornton watching them, as they crossed the courtyard and approached the house.

Clearly, Hannah Thornton was determined to be the very model of good manners as she received Miss Hale's morning call, although she said not one word more than that which formal politeness demanded - even when John explained their progress at the bank.

Hannah Thornton listened tight-lipped as Margaret next swiftly laid out the facts of the impossible choices which had faced Frederick Hale. She sat silently for many minutes after Margaret's history reached the present status quo, with Frederick safely married yet unable to travel home from Spain even for his father's funeral.

The image of Maria Hale's dying face pierced through Hannah Thornton's anger and long-fostered resentment. She could not help but duly acknowledge the steadfastness of Margaret's protection of the beloved child of another.
John's breath started to come more easily as he saw Hannah's body and face relax.

"Miss Hale, thank you for sharing such personal matters with me. I have in the past spoken to you in ways in which I now see I had no business to do: I ask your pardon."

Margaret realised Mrs Thornton was awaiting a reply from her. "With all my heart." she quietly affirmed.

When Hannah Thornton spoke again, it was with a lighter tone which Margaret had never heard before - indeed, with which only John Thornton in the whole world was now even slightly familiar.

"Will you join us for luncheon, Miss Hale?"

"It will be my pleasure to do so, Mrs Thornton."

John felt hope rising within him, as he watch the two most important people he knew make a new beginning between them.

Chapter End Notes

I am working on the next three chapters, which I intend to post on my current schedule - so, on the next three Saturdays. After that, there may be a pause, as I have considerable research to complete to continue this story further.

I would welcome more constructive criticism on how I am continuing Margaret Hale's story, particularly in the context of Gaskell's book canon, or Welch's 2004 mini-series canon, or in the context of 1850s industrial England. Many thanks!
Margaret Hale, Hannah Thornton and John Thornton seek and find common ground: first and foremost, righting the misfortunes which have emptied Marlborough Mills; and secondly, relaxing the strained relationship between the two most important people John knows.

Margaret Hale, Hannah Thornton and John Thornton sat around the luncheon table, their simple meal complete, and the silence was almost comfortable.

"Miss Hale" Hannah began, "John tells me that we could re-open the mill as soon as Monday week, if we put our minds to the task."

Unspoken relief at this statement flowed between John and Margaret.

"Indeed, Mrs Thornton, I believe that we have between us all we need to accomplish this." Margaret gravely stated.

"With the help also of Higgins, and the list of loyal workers he gave me, I believe it can be done." John confirmed.

"Then let us make it so, without further delay." said Hannah Thornton. She paused, and looked directly at John, then at Margaret. "Meanwhile, Miss Hale, what are your intentions toward John?"

Margaret saw out of the corner of her eye that John flinched, but she kept her gaze firmly on Hannah Thornton.

"My intention, Mrs Thornton, is to love John for every day of my life."

Hannah Thornton seemed to receive this statement carefully, and consider it from every angle, before she spoke again. "Why, then, did you not marry him when he asked you?"

John opened his mouth but closed it again as Margaret seemed visibly to rise to this new challenge.

"As you said, Mrs Thornton, I did not know what kind of man I had rejected. I was wrong, and I have begged Mr Thornton's pardon, and he has forgiven me. I did not know my own heart, and I did not know his heart. It is a long time now since I realised my error, and I will treasure every day now that he has granted me a second chance."

"Miss Hale is ... she is too kind. For many months, I harboured craven doubts in my heart because of my jealousy and my quick temper, when I should have trusted what I already knew of her strong character. It is I who has been granted a second chance, and I pledge myself to Miss Hale every day of my life henceforth."
John and Margaret gazed at one another and their speaking eyes told Hannah much about the sincerity of their words. She was surprised to hear Margaret speak again very soon, however.

"I would not have any delay to the re-opening of the mill, and I would not in any way usurp your rightful place in this house and in the running of the mill. Mrs Thornton, Mr Thornton, will you teach me how to make my full contribution to the future success if Marlborough Mills?"

"So you are suggesting either a quiet and quick wedding or a long engagement, are you, Miss Hale?"

"I think Miss Hale will confirm, that she and I have not yet agreed what is for the best."

"Mrs Thornton, I feel that an engagement will allow us time which we all will need, to see to the mill, and to become accustomed to working with one another, and to reach agreement amongst ourselves as to the best course of action on all pertinent matters. I believe that Mr Thornton will agree that there is now no doubt between he and I as to our mutual regard."

"Indeed, I can confirm have perfect trust in Miss Hale's regard for me."

Hannah Thornton looked back and forth between them for a good while longer.

"Very well. This is a practical and sensible arrangement. But you cannot live in a hotel, Miss Hale."

"Indeed, it is too costly. Perhaps I will move into one of the houses which Mr Bell bequeathed to me."

"Running a house will be scarcely less costly."

"My needs are very simple."

"Still, there is another solution, Miss Hale, if you are decided upon an engagement, and that I am to remain here as a full partner in the mills."

John and Margaret look at Hannah in surprise, but neither felt confident to speak.

"You can only learn the true workings of the mill by close and continuous observation, Miss Hale. I am sure than John will agree."

John nodded, still not trusting himself to speak.

"We will need all our resources to quickly re-establish the efficient running of the mill."

Margaret nodded in her turn, also not daring to break Hannah Thornton's train of thought.

"Then it is settled. Miss Hale, you will move into Fanny's old rooms, as John's betrothed, and I shall stand as your chaperone."

Chapter End Notes

I have two more chapters almost ready to post, keeping my schedule of updates each Saturday. Then I may need a hiatus, to research the social details of industrial England in the 1850s. I hope you can bear with me, and I value your feedback.
Thank you!
Where is Margaret Hale going to call home, whilst the mill is being re-opened?

John Thornton stared at Hannah Thornton, then turned to meet Margaret Hale's eyes. Without breaking eye contact with him, Margaret said, "Mrs Thornton, I think that will do very well."

John cleared his throat, and looked at Hannah Thornton, and at Margaret, and asked hesitantly, "You are each easy in your minds that this can be done, that this is a proper course of action?"

For the first time, Hannah Thornton's eyes met Margaret Hale's eyes with a look that spoke of mutual respect and accord.

"Yes", they said.

Doubts flooded John Thornton's mind: the suggestion of such an unconventional living arrangement seemed to go against all propriety, yet it was being suggested by his own most excellent mother. He could feel both respect for Margaret's commitment to swiftly re-opening the mill, and fear at her renewed disregard for her own reputation.

"I cannot be easy in my own mind", he said. "But at the same time, can I in good conscience delay the re-opening of the mill whilst we debate the imponderable subject of what other people, wholly unconnected with our family, might or might not think about matters which are, in the final analysis, our own concern?"

He paused as a new thought came to him, "Fanny will strenuously object, upon the grounds of her own reputation." he added.

"Well. We can make good use of this afternoon in advancing the re-opening the mill, and return to these family matters over dinner, if Miss Hale is agreeable?" proposed Hannah Thornton.

"That seems wise.", agreed Margaret.

John sat back in his chair, and sighed as he looked at each of the others in turn.

"Running a mill is my area of expertise. I am still not sufficiently philosophical to quickly decide as to how to best manage the social expectations of the whole of Milton. I bow to my mother's superior insight for the time being."

Hannah Thornton nodded, "Very well." she said.

"Would a conversation with Nicholas Higgins be our best next action?" asked Margaret.

"The legal and finance papers are in hand, Mother", said John. "We need to quickly achieve new orders, and a supply of raw materials. So we also need to start preparing to take on workers, to ready the machines for those new orders."

"Williams has a new position: we need a new overlooker, son."
"Margaret, would you agree with me that there is one obvious person for the role?" he paused to receive her nod of assent, then continued, "Mother, will you work with Nicholas Higgins?"

Hannah Thornton once again paused to consider, then said in balanced tones, "He has settled into a steady worker, and has done much to improve the attitudes and abilities of the other workers. He was not involved in the riots. I believe that I can work with such a man."

"I must own that I am honoured to count Nicholas Higgins as a friend. Yet I do believe he has many qualities which to my untrained eye are desirable in an overlooker," Margaret offered.

"Higgins has also been a true friend to me, Mother. He gently set me straight about Frederick, thanks to Mary Higgins' care of the Hales when Mrs Hale was fading," with a sad look toward Margaret.

Hannah straightened her shoulders. "Very good, then you will offer overlooker to Higgins, John?"

John looked to Margaret, who nodded once more. So he rose decisively, and asked, "I will go now. Would you both agree that Margaret accompany me, both for the negotiation and for telling Higgins the happy outcome for our personal lives of his shrewd kind words to me?"

"I will draw up a list of house servants, for us to consider re-employing once you return." Hannah replied.

"I think it appropriate that I take my turn in learning a little more about how you run our household, would you agree, Margaret?" John asked the both.

Hannah and Margaret each slightly smiled at one another, and John smiled more broadly. Margaret stood to join him on his mission to Higgins.

"Now, before you leave, you are both an engaged couple as well as my business partners. You know, John, that I do not show affection even where I feel it. But I do feel it, and I do remember the happiness of being newly engaged. So, make your embrace now, and then you will not be tempted to any public displays hereafter."

Margaret and John each blushed slightly as they chastely embraced in front of Hannah, each remembering their quite public kisses just the previous day.

"Shall we re-assemble here for supper at six of the clock?" asked Hannah.

John and Margaret agreed that would do very well, and made their way out into the mill courtyard. As they approached the gates, their eyes sought one another and Margaret murmured, "Let us pause in the office."

Hannah Thornton felt a pang as she watched the couple step through the mill office door and out of her sight from the house window. How much had changed in one day! All she wished for John, both in prosperity and in love, were now at the threshold. So why then did her own mother's voice complain in her head, that Miss Hale should allow herself to be once again in a compromising position, albeit with her intended husband? Hannah Thornton frowned at her dear mother's shade, and the threatened return of her conflicting emotions of hope for John's future and concern for his reputation.

Margaret Hale knew none of Hannah's struggle as she raised her lips again toward John Thornton's, in the seclusion of the office. They each felt the thrill of nearness to one another as their lips met: the shared heat, and each the beloved warm scent of the other, and the promise of so much more to come.
Finally, John gently rested his chin against Margaret's hair, and as their bodies calmed a little, whispered, "Shall we make our way on?"

As they walked side-by-side to see Nicholas Higgins and Mary Higgins, and Tom Boucher and the other children, Margaret felt more contented than she had since she had been settled at Helstone.
The grey, narrow court summoned both happy and sad memories for Margaret Hale, as she walked beside John Thornton to knock at the back-to-back house where Nicholas Higgins and Mary Higgins and the Boucher children put up. The look on Nicholas Higgins' face as he realised Margaret Hale was at his door with Thornton was like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. With one glance he read the affectionate and joyous mood between their two visitors.

"Miss Mar'get!" he said, smiling. "Mary, Tommy, childer, look who is here. Ah, but it's right good to see you back, and so soon. Come in, you too Thornton, come in!"

Mary Higgins moved their sturdy chairs so all four of the adults could just sit around the family table. There was no fire to stoke on such a warm day. The seven other Boucher children peered from the sleeping alcove, but Nicholas Higgins held Tommy Boucher standing before him shyly, a beloved reader clutched in young hands.

"We have good news, Nicholas", began Margaret. "We are re-opening Marlborough Mills - and we would like you to work with us."

"We intend to start preparatory work for new orders at the mill as soon as a week on Monday if we can", continued John. "Margaret is to actively play full part, learning from myself and Mother. We would all like you to be the overlooker, and to help us to take on the workers as we need them. Will you work with us all?"

Mary Higgins looked at Nicholas Higgins, as he smiled, and replied "Aye, I am happy with that. Good news indeed. I thank you for thinking of me. I will come, and roust up the others, and gladly. Thank you!" He paused just a moment, then forged ahead. "Now, tell me your other news." he urged.

"Nothing gets by you, Higgins" laughed John Thornton.

"Yes, we are engaged." confirmed Margaret Hale.

"Thanks to your shrewd comments, I got over my mistakes at last!" John added, hardly conscious that he had taken Margaret's hand as he spoke.

"Aye, 'appen. Any way you look at it, this is a joyful day and no mistake. Long life and happiness to you both. You'll do well, I know it. And yon parson - your father, Miss, and your mother too - would bless you, I'll say." Nicholas Higgins looked carefully at John Thornton, and kept his own council on Hannah Thornton's feelings, and the joy that old man Thornton should also have felt.

Margaret saw that Mary Higgins was smiling very quietly to herself, and - remembering Bessy Higgins entreaty to her, which seemed so very long ago, yet a time just numbered in months to the rest of the world - Margaret resolved to see soon if Mary would like to get to know her better. She felt a pang as she once again thought what good friend Bessy had been to Margaret in the short time that they had known one another.

"We will wait until the mill is re-established for the wedding."she said, for now, and lightly squeezed John’s hand in hers.

Nicholas Higgins leaned back in his chair and studied both their visitors, quickly analysing the
major implications of their proposed course of action.

"Reckon you two can make that work, though most would make a pother."

"Mary", said Margaret, "Will you consider taking charge of re-opening the canteen? And Nicholas, your help to take back on the loyal workers from before, each according to the skills we need at every stage of the re-establishment, will be invaluable."

John met the eyes of each adult as they looked at him, then Mary Higgins and Nicholas Higgins each looked back at Margaret and nodded. "Aye." said he.

In this way, they reached agreement about the active part each would play in attempting to restore the fortunes of Marlborough Mill. Then Tommy's excitement overcame his nerves, and he read to them all and sang his newest song (with some sounds of accompaniment from his siblings in the sleeping alcove) and everyone was smiling.

As Margaret and John finally released one another's hands and made ready to depart, and Nicholas shook John's hand with frank and friendly looks on each side, Margaret passed a few good sized coins to Mary 'for the children' as always, and each felt contentment in their heart in their own way.

Chapter End Notes

I am still working on this piece - but there will be a hiatus of a few weeks whilst I research my next chapters! Thank you for your understanding.
The Conundrums of Marlborough Mills

Chapter Summary

Margaret Hale's mind is far from calm.

After several weeks of intensive preparation, with Margaret Hale working closely with Hannah Thornton, Nicholas Higgins, Mary Higgins and her fiancé John Thornton, Marlborough Mills was steadily heaving back into all its forms of business.

Margaret now lay, pleasantly exhausted yet unable to sleep, in the bed in Fanny Watson's old rooms in the Thornton house. Her mind felt like treacle, turning over all that she was learning in her new life. The training which she had coaxed from Henry Lennox in managing her business affairs, and her experience of running her parents' home alongside Dixon in those awful months of her mother's final illness, as well as the insights from her precious brief friendship with Bessy Higgins after years of visiting her father's rural parishioners, all stood her in good stead at the mill. But there were some complexities for which she felt very ill-prepared.

She, Hannah Thornton and John Thornton were cautiously treading a new path through the needs of the workers of Marlborough Mills and the constraints of the cotton milling business. Thanks to Mr Bell's more - mercenary? - approach, their capital was still substantial even with careful provision made for re-supply of raw materials, readying of machinery, and preparations for rudimentary schooling of the mill children in the re-established common dining room, and work on a new mill infirmary room besides. The present Mrs Thornton seemed almost relieved to negotiate a more simple household practice with Mr Thornton and the putative future Mrs Thornton. Having lost all for a second time, Hannah Thornton had grimly re-assessed her priorities, and had even once been seen taking a light lunch in the common room alongside John and Margaret.

The first new cotton cloth orders were now close to completion, the tale of workers now almost complete, and those workers seemed to be generally in good health and good spirits. The long workers' hours which were needed to parallel the output and prices of their competitors were a source of real vexation and anxiety to Margaret however. The quality of Marlborough Mills cloth used to command higher prices, but time would be needed to re-establish their reputation, and to sell the quantities of fine cloth needed to balance the mill books without exploiting the workers. Margaret frowned deeply, and sighed with frustration.

Knowing that sleep was needed to find a solution to these conundrums, Margaret calmed herself by breathing more slowly and thinking of her personal items, safely arrived from Edith Lennox and Aunt Shaw in London. The precious few letters from Frederick - she had already written to him to share all her wonderful news - her favourite of her mother's Indian shawls, her father's Homer, even Bessy Higgins' tin cup, all safely placed into bureau, closet and bedside cabinet.

Her restless mind turned to her invaluable little personal library, a few books each from her favoured London and Milton book sellers. On the shelf were the more genteel books - small French and Italian dictionaries, a well-thumbed copy of Austen's Persuasion, beside Brontë, Paine, Wollstonecraft and Smith ... Meanwhile, locked in her trunk, the key safely on a chain around her neck, were her most special books - such as the newly arrived "Narrative of the Life of James Watkins" - which even John Thornton had not yet seen in her possession.
Margaret's stomach clenched slightly as she thought of James Watkins' book, and that little she knew thusfar of what he had so lately and so narrowly escaped ... She resolved to read it on the very next Sunday ... so, she owned to herself, that she could put the unpleasant prospect to one side for a just few more days of accomplished ignorance.

Once again, Margaret took refuge in her personal privileges and comforts, to steady her mind disquieted by wrestling with seemingly intractable problems of humanity's oppression of humanity.

She quickly flushed as she turned to contemplating the most secret book in her small collection. Despite co-operating with Hannah Thornton's chaparonage of the betrothed couple, and despite the long hours which all at Marlborough Mills continued to work, still John and Margaret had been able to find a few private moments in which to embrace, indeed to kiss, and to speed one another's heart-beats and to steal one another's breath away.

Here was yet another barely tractable dilemma. Margaret found herself inexorably drawn in by the physical sensations that her love for John was increasingly stirring, and her desire to know everything about where those sensations were leading.

Yet, the more she contemplated the legal implications of becoming a married woman, the more conflicted she became. No matter the depth of her love for and trust of John Thornton, and her respect for Hannah Thornton, as she came to fully comprehend the legal status of married women, she found increasingly that the laws actually sickened her.

Margaret turned rapidly under her sheets and then felt another wave of frustration with herself. Sleep, sleep was what she needed - the new dawn would bring her rested body and mind, new hope and new inspiration: if only she could sleep.

Unbidden, the thought of how comforting it would be now to share an embrace with John Thornton, and in low tones exchange mutual re-assurances of how they would care for, love and support one another through every challenge, rose in Margaret's mind. Craving sleep, Margaret began to boldly indulge and swell this thought into a fantasy of the scent of John's soap-clean skin, the warmth of their lips together, the sound of their roughened breathing, the feeling of excitement and anticipation pooling in her lower abdomen, the idea of their hands pushing aside their sleeping garments, the ecstasy of hot naked skin on skin .. that other special, most secret book was revealing such pleasing secrets that Margaret soon found fulfilment for herself, and thus sleep.

End Notes

Written for my own entertainment and education. I do not own anything.

This is my first piece of fan writing. So feedback - particularly, of course, constructive and gentle feedback - very welcome. I will try to update each Saturday. Note, rating now 'Teen and Up' as this is where I feel we are heading!

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