Things Unsaid

by TheLittleMuse

Summary

A/U. Fred was captured when visiting his dying mother. Mr Thornton promises to help and begins to get closer to one Miss Hale in the process...

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

The news, when it did, came tumbling thick and fast. Margaret Hale had a brother, Mr and Mrs Hale had a son. And that brother, son, was a mutineer, and had successfully evaded capture all these years, but was caught now because he had visited his sick and dying mother.

Mr Thornton’s thought were similarly jumbled and confused. His first thought, to his shame, was, Was this why I could not be let in for my lesson with Mr Hale? He dismissed that thought from his mind, it was not relevant now.

The workers of Milton were certainly on the side of Frederick Hale, the fire ignited by those workers Margaret had helped and befriended. Unfortunately, the fate of Frederick Hale couldn’t be decided by the workers of Milton.

Was this how you saw the strikers? He thought, All shadows of your brother, risking all to fight an unjust and brutal Master. Before he truly realised what he was doing, Mr Thornton stood and began walking, resolved to help the Hales in any way he could, Your father too, he realised, a
dissenter from the Church of England, leaving your beloved idyll because of what he believed to be right.

He knocked and the door was opened, to his surprise, by Margaret, “Miss Hale,” he said, before realising he had no words to follow.

“Mr Thornton,” she replied, looking more nervous and unsure of herself than he had ever seen her. He noted with distress that her eyes were red, as if she had recently pushed down tears. Of course she has been crying, he scolded himself and squashed the impulse to tell her that he understood her, better than he ever had before.

“I wished to let you know that … I will do all I can to help your brother.”

She looked at him, puzzled. He tried to ignore how much he loved that look, this curious creature, forever trying to discover and understand the life around her, “But you are a magistrate. Why would you help a … a …” she couldn’t finish the sentence, not wanting to name what the world thought her brother to be.

Because I love you, he wanted to say, Because I would do anything for you. Because if I saved your brother you might smile at me. You might even no longer think me evil. But he didn’t. Now was not the time for him to profess again that he loved her, instead he said, “Do you think your brother guilty?”

“In the eyes of the law, yes. In the eyes of any good man, he was doing what was right.”

What he planned to say was, ‘Then that is why I shall help you,’ he swore those words were on the tip of his tongue, but what actually came out was, “Is that how you see me? In the same light as the Captain your brother mutinied against?”

Margaret looked momentarily flustered and he cursed himself, but she said, “No,” and looked as if her answer surprised her, “The Captain was cruel for the sake of being cruel. You are sometimes, I think … overly cruel, but not sadistic.”

He couldn’t help but give a small smile, “That is an improvement,” Margaret looked embarrassed and so he thought it best to retreat. He tipped his hat and said, “Good day, Miss Hale,” You make me feel like a desperate, flustered schoolboy.
He turned to walk away, but Margaret said “No,” and reached out. He could not choose but to obey and turned back. Margaret looked as if she was berating herself fiercely but took a deep breath and said, “That is, my father has taken ill and I think it would be very good for him if you went to see him. If you do not mind, that is.”

“I don’t. Mr Hale has always been a good friend to me. Please lead on, Miss Hale.” She smiled at him, small and tight and sad, but he took it and treasured it, for a starving man lived on crumbs.

The very air in the house was heavy and Margaret seemed to crumple slightly under it. His conversation with Mr Hale was short, and though it seemed, as Margaret had predicted, that Mr Hale was pleased to see him, there was a hopelessness around him, as if some part of him was forever reaching for a world where his wife wasn’t dead and his son wasn’t in prison, likely to be executed. He repeated his promise to do all he could for Frederick Hale and Mr Hale smiled and said, “I shall tell Maria, she’ll be so relieved,” before disappearing inwards as he once again remembered that his wife was dead. Uncomfortable, Mr Thornton excused himself and found Margaret in the kitchen.

“How did you find my father?” she asked, a little shakily.

“I think Mr Hale—” is confused? Absent? Going completely mad? “What is his illness?” he asked instead.

“The doctor cannot say, only that his body is failing him.” She took a shuddering breath, “I think that he so longs to be with my mother that his body is answering his prayer,” she admitted, then sighed a little, the burden of thinking that terrible thought eased a little with sharing it.

How dare he? He thought, How dare Mr Hale even think of abandoning his daughter when she needs him most? Look at how it weighs on her and yet she is still so strong! How dare he be so weak?

He said none of that, knowing Margaret would defend her father to the last, as he had once defended his own father. Instead he said (resisting the urge to step forward, to hold her, to promise to look after her, to take her out of this failing home, to somehow make her happy again) “Miss Hale, if there is anything I can do …” he didn’t know what else to say.

“If you have the time,” she said cautiously, “and I shall understand if you do not, can you continue your lessons with my father? I think the … sense of purpose may help him. And he values you greatly as a friend.”
He hesitated. She had brought up the question of time and, in truth, if he was to dedicate as much time as would be needed to Frederick Hale’s case, between that and the Mill, he would have very little of it, and so he said, “I cannot promise anything, but if I find the time, I will.”

“You need to relax as well. I don’t wish for you to give your health to this,” she would not say hopeless, but it hung in the air, “case.”

“I am not accustomed to relaxing,” he admitted, “but if you insist, I will.”

“I do. Insist.”

“Then I shall take my leave of you. Good day, Miss Hale.”

“Good day, Mr Thornton.”

He felt as if he was flying.

…

He felt as if he was crashing.

Most had assumed this to be an open and shut case, to be gotten over with quickly and forgotten even quicker. Mr Thornton’s lone voice of dissent had therefore not gone down well. He had hired Frederick Hale a lawyer and together they were arguing that there was no evidence against him and that Frederick Hale had been framed. It was, of course, untrue. Frederick Hale had mutinied, but the moral high ground would not win them the case.

What was worse was that he found he couldn’t help but like Frederick Hale and he knew he would be crushed should they lose. Frederick had a kind of irrepressible hope that even as cynical as he was, Mr Thornton couldn’t help but admire. That hope would fail for one moment each day when Frederick would ask after his father and his sister, and Mr Thornton would have to tell him of his father’s ailing health and Margaret’s struggle to look after him, along with her continued quest to change the world. Frederick would at least smile at that, in turn recounting stories of Margaret in her childhood.
He never told Frederick how much he craved those stories, how much he wished to know every little thing about Margaret, hear every story, large and small. He still loved her with a ferocity that burned him and kept him alive. Sometimes he wished he could cool his love to friendship, but it seemed to him that loving Margaret opened him up in a way he would not take back. It caused him pain, yes, he had never known pain like the day she rejected him, but, though he was no poet, it seemed to him that loving her had caused him to see the world anew, and he was better for it.

And she certainly seems to consider you a friend. Thornton smiled as he thought of it. In their joint quest to save Frederick they had become friends – close friends – even, like two soldiers on a battlefield. They had even talked about the Mill and Margaret had encouraged him to take on Higgins, which turned out to be a surprisingly shrewd choice for somebody with no experience in business. Or perhaps, more likely, it was her inexperience and natural intelligence that allowed her to see through the cold numbers and see Higgins for the man he was.

He studiously ignored his mother’s pointed comments about how much time he was dedicating to Frederick Hale’s case.

…

What had long seemed inevitable came to pass and Mr Hale died. Thornton found Margaret sitting on the steps, fiddling with a pebble, and he moved to sit down beside her, “I knew it was coming,” she mumbled, “I was prepared. Its just…” she gestured hopelessly.

“Your father has just died,” he said with all his customary tact, but it seemed his brutal honesty was what she needed and she nodded.

“I don’t want to leave.” me. Say you don’t want to leave me, just this once, at least hint at it. “I’m on my own now, so I’ll be shipped off somewhere else. I suspect I’ll go stay with Aunt Shaw, but I can’t leave. Not whilst Frederick is still in prison.”

“Keep hope, we’re nearly there. Besides,” he said, gathering all his courage, “you’re not completely alone.” You have me. You shall always have me. She gave him a watery smile.

True to his word, Frederick was released not long after. It seemed a hollow victory, as he was released in time to go to his father’s funeral, the joy of Frederick’s freedom dampened by the thought that their parents hadn’t lived to see it. Still, it didn’t stop Frederick’s eagerness when he wrote to his wife, and one week after the funeral Mr Thornton visited to find Frederick and Margaret giggling like naughty schoolchildren. Margaret looked up at him, surprised, and Mr Thornton silently cursed himself; he had gotten so used to having freedom of this house, rushing in and out with new ideas and new plans to free Fred, sitting side by side with Margaret and
talking, often late into the night. Obviously, now that Frederick was freed he was once more a
guest.

Margaret stood, and Mr Thornton allowed himself a small amount of hope for there was a smile
on her face, “Mr Thornton,” she said, her face smoothing, which seemed to cause Frederick to
disappear into a fresh wave of giggles, “I’m sorry, we’ve just received a letter our Aunt Shaw,”

“And that is a cause for hilarity?”

Margaret looked embarrassed, then said in a conspiratorial tone, “I promise you, when we are
alone we are both sensible adults, but when we get together we seem to revert to childhood.”

“And Aunt Shaw is frequently hilarious,” Frederick said, before sobering, “Aunt Shaw wishes us
to return to London, and Aunt Shaw’s wishes are generally obeyed.”

“So.” Mr Thornton said, keeping his entire manner composed through the strength of will that
kept him going his entire life, “You are leaving then?” his eyes strayed to Margaret before he
could stop them.

“No. At least, we don’t mean to. It’s more difficult for Margaret, being a young unattached
woman,” Frederick said, then smiled at Margaret’s muffled look of annoyance.

_We don’t mean to._ The words kept jumbling around Mr Thornton’s head. _We._ Surely that meant
Margaret didn’t wish to leave Milton? Of course, there were many reasons why Margaret
wouldn’t want to leave Milton; she had made friends here, and surely she wouldn’t want to be
uprooted again. Still, his poor heart couldn’t help but hope that perhaps _he_ was one of those
reasons she found Milton appealing.

“At any rate, Thornton, I was meaning to talk to you, on business. I have money in a business in
Spain, but obviously since I’m now in England that won’t be feasible to maintain. I was thinking
of investing in your mill.”

“How much is it?”

“Once I took all my money out, and sold all my shares, in a lump sum, I’d say around five
thousand.”
“I have to admit, Mr Hale, that at the moment there are better investments you could make,” said Mr Thornton, wondering why, for once, he couldn’t be as unscrupulous as his colleagues, but he couldn’t let his friend invest all his money out of gratitude and see that money disappear.

“Is the mill in trouble?” asked Margaret, alarmed.

“It is in the beginnings of trouble. Lots of little things add up over time, or rather, detract over time. The strikes, the bad season, etc. Although,” he said, turning back to Frederick, “I’m sure I won’t have any more trouble with strikes, now that Miss Hale is working on making me the kindest mill master in Milton.”

Margaret blushed and Mr Thornton felt a small kind of forbidden delight in seeing it. Margaret mustered up all her imperiousness to ask, only slightly teasing, “And how is Higgins doing?”

“Very well. The kitchens have just come into full operation. You should see them sometime.”

“I’d love to.”

There was a pause, a moment in which all that existed was the two of them, teasing each other about the mill. A single utopia in which the painful past and uncertain future didn’t exist. He loved her entirely and in that moment he could swear that she loved him.

“Will my money get you out of this slump?” Damn you. He couldn’t hate Frederick for interrupting though: a moment could only ever last for a moment after all. He could, however, hate him for the slightly knowing smile that now occupied his face.

Margaret, the world can see I love you, except you, who will not allow any man to worship you.

“It should,” said Mr Thornton, gathering himself, “I cannot guarantee that our misfortune will cease, however, or that you will get any immediate returns.”

Frederick looked at him with complete sincerity, “Even if you didn’t have a reliable business history and good reputation, you saved my life. I will invest.”
Mr Thornton nodded in thanks, and thought that Margaret might have seen something when she told him he didn’t know what a gentleman truly was. In the business world there were few men who could truly be called honourable, it was much too cutthroat for such notions. But here was Frederick Hale, a man who was truly honourable.

…

For the following few weeks Mr Thornton worked solidly at the mill, until the mill slowly, but surely, began to recover. As promised Margaret visited the mill to see the new kitchen and Mr Thornton managed to time his visit so it coincided with hers. They had sat together eating their stew and he had asked, “Do you approve, Miss Hale?”

“Very much so,” she had replied with that smile that seemed not so much on her lips as in the warmth of her eyes.

“I am glad,” he managed to grind out. Higgins smiled that damn smile of his which meant he was being far too obvious.

Mr Thornton returned home to meet his mother’s twitch of disapproval (Mrs Thornton had never openly shown her emotions and so from a young age he had learnt to read her tiniest muscle movements.)

“Please Mother, not now,” Mrs Thornton sniffed and leant just so, which meant she was open to be persuaded. Mr Thornton sat heavily in his chair, “Do you know, when I was a child I could never understand why you still loved Father. Why you still mourn him,” he looked her straight in the eyes, “I understand now. I love Miss Hale. I cannot stop loving Miss Hale. I know you only wish to save me pain, but please understand me in return.” Mrs Thornton nodded and threaded her hand through her son’s hair. For the first time she prayed that Miss Hale’s friendship with her son might grow into the love her son so dearly wished for.

…

Frederick had left to greet his wife at the docks and Mr Thornton found himself spending more and more time with Margaret. Far too much time, if his mother’s pursed lips were anything to go by, but true to her word, she didn’t say a thing.

Ask her.
The voice which had tormented him since the day he had first proposed, which was forever telling him to simply fall on his knees and beg, now seemed to be the loudest voice in his head.

*I can’t*, he would always reply, *she will not have me, and I will not risk this new friendship.*

*I cannot ask her again.*

*I cannot beg.*

*Damn my pride, I cannot beg.*

One such day he was captivated by one curl of her hair which had escaped the seemingly invisible multitude of pins that held up her hair. He longed to remove each pin one by one and run his hands through her hair. How long would her hair be? He’d never seen a lady with her hair down.

“John!” he snapped back to attention, her face full of playful indignation, before he realised, they both realised, what she’d done.

“You said my name,” she looked down, face burning with embarrassment, but all he could feel was cautious joy. Was it possible she thought of him as John, just as he thought of her as Margaret?

*Ask her.*

He had never felt less in control of his limbs and his brain felt like it had absconded to another country, yet he managed to slide his hand across to her lap and cradle her hand in his.

*I don’t have the words. Please understand, I have the heart, but never the right words.*

He lifted her hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles.
Please understand. I love you. I need you. I will be yours for the rest of time. Please understand.

Her other hand cradled his face, then gently pushed it so they were looking at each other, breath intermingling.

I understand.

He wasn’t quite sure who moved first, but they were kissing each other. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, so close that she was almost on his lap. A stray thought wandered through his mind at how scandalous this all was, but, he amended (and if his lips had been free he would have smirked) she didn’t seem to mind. His hands moved down to her waist, his fingers studiously learning every curve of her. Her hands, now in his hair, tugged and he leant back so he could see her face, “Shouldn’t we …” she trailed off and all he could see was the delightfully affected look in her eyes.

“Hmmmmm … Margaret,” he murmured. It was the only word he knew, the only word that mattered. His attention was caught by her neck and was caught wondering where her neck ended and her shoulder began. He kissed down her neck, growing more and more confident and began licking and nipping until she groaned in his arms.

“Good?”

“S’good,” she replied, then blushed fiercely, “down there.”

He smiled, a little shy, and indicated with his eyes, “My down there is rather pleased as well,” Margaret shifted, rather curious at this foreign bulge in Mr Thornton’s trousers, but before she could do anything, Mr Thornton resumed his attack on her neck as determined as always. He wanted her to feel everything.

Mr Thornton swallowed his shame and allowed his fingers to wander everywhere, noting and cataloguing her reactions until he was rewarded with her cry and a shudder in his arms.

“John,” Margaret relaxed against him, “John,” she spied his trousers, straining even more than they did before and his breath quickened, “John … do you want to … I mean should I …” she ducked, blush threatening to overcome her. Feeling that there wasn’t much further into depravity that they could sink, he undid his trousers.
“Someday,” he whispered, “we’ll join together,” he smirked slightly, “your down there and my down there. We’ll join as man and wife, but for now,” he took her hand and guided it to him.

He was going to say something else.

Her hand...

There didn’t seem to be any air in the room.

They leant against each other and John idly did himself back up. “I’m ruined,” said Margaret, as if trying to figure out exactly how she felt about it.

Mr Thornton frowned slightly, and tried not to feel worried, “I am going to marry you.”

“Yes, but. I mean, I didn’t expect, I mean … Mr Th – John.”

He knelt down before her and clasped her hands in his, ignoring the voice that was reminding him that that was what had started the whole thing off in the first place, “You don’t regret what happened, do you?”

“No! Or yes, I mean,” she took a deep breath, “I just don’t think we should do anything like … that again until we are married.” He nodded, he knew he should feel more ashamed than he did, but he couldn’t. Margaret loved him, there could be no downside. That she had forgotten her morals for that glorious moment was proof of that.

He kissed her hand (and how he still longed!) and said, “Then we shall have to get married very soon,” she gave a surprised laugh.

“Very soon,” she agreed and he knew that she longed just as much as he did.

End Notes

Wow, so the first sex(ish) scene I actually manage to finish and am brave enough to put up
happens to be for North and South. That's ... surprising. But yeah, I always kind of imagined it would go further if they hadn't been at the train station - at the time kissing before marriage was an extreme thing to do, especially in such a public place. It's another reason I love the scene - at that point they're throwing away all the social rules they've been taught and just kissing because they're finally together.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!