The Pocket Watch

by christinefromsherwood

Summary

Frederick Hale was caught by the British Navy not two years after his mutiny.

Just how much would this change the story of his sister, Margaret Hale?

Notes

The title of the story may change if my Muse (in case of this story, shaped quite curiously very much like Richard Armitage for some unfathomable reason) decided that there is a better name...
Margaret had always liked to sit by the window on a train and watch as the landscape changed before her eyes. Sometimes, there were lush, green fields with flocks of white sheep, sometimes the view showed well-dressed ladies and gentlemen hurrying up and down the station the train stopped in.

The gentle rocking of the train, the distant roar of the engine as it let out puffs of smoke and ash as if it were a living, breathing being, often lulled her to sleep and were her seat a little more comfortable and she less excited about the new sights that unravelled themselves in front of her eyes, she believed she would have fallen asleep long time before now. As it were she only just now felt her eyelids weigh down from the many excitements and labours of the day. It was no easy task, packing all one's worldly possessions into a couple of trunks.

A soft groan coming from the seat opposite her, however, had her springing her eyes open and shaking of all thought of sleep immediately.

"Papa?"

Mr Hale sat with his eyes closed, his face pale in the dim light of the train carriage. Margaret bit her lip to distract herself from the terrible thought of how very frail her father looked just then. His face lined with wrinkles, he sideburns and tufts of hair as white as fallen snow.

No, she forbid herself to even consider it. Her father's health had improved markedly in the last year and half and as the doctor assured her, there was no danger. And now that they were going North, away from all the painful memories, he would improve ever more.

Her father would be happy. There was no alternative.

"Papa, are you well?" she said as the train gave a lurch and her father's face turned even more ashen.

At this, he opened his eyes and attempted a smile.

"I fear I shall never be able to enjoy the pleasures of train travel as you do, my dear," he said, then glanced at the sleeping form next to Margaret. "Or Dixon."

That was true. Her father never could bear long journeys well. Though Margaret could not recall him ever suffering greatly before, after that day when he came to bring her home from Harley Street, he could never travel without experiencing great discomfort and feeling maudlin.

"I am sure we are almost there, Papa," she said and in her attempt to comfort him pulled her pocket watch out of her pouch and upon checking the dial, nodded. "We have passed London near to three hours ago, I do not believe it will take much longer."

When she looked up, she found her father grinning at her.

"What is it?"

"A young lady with a pocket watch!" he said in mock horror, his voice reminded her of one particular London relative of theirs. "Why, it is positively indecent!"
She blushed at his teasing, but she was glad to see him in a better humour.

"I fear it is too late for your objections, Papa, as it was you who had insisted I keep it," she replied, clutching her at the dearest of her possessions.

"Too true, my dear," he smiled sadly before closing his eyes again. "Too true."

In a short while Margaret observed that his breaths deepened and felt the anxiousness in her heart ease a little as a small smile played on her father's lips in his slumber. With Dixon and father asleep she felt she could finally allow herself to examine her own feelings about the journey.


How unusual the name tasted on her lips. Papa said it was a most modern industrial town when he described it, with opportunities for livelihoods for men of all stations in life. That's where they were headed upon the recommendation of her godfather, Mr Bell. Margaret tried to picture how it might look in her head and found that she simply could not as she didn't have much experience with traveling beyond her visits to Aunt Shaw in London.

But Margaret supposed there was very little chance that it would be anything at all like Helstone and she couldn't decide if that was a good or a bad thing. Helstone, the colourful paradise of her childhood memories, had lost much of its brightness when she returned there with Papa after the loss of both her mother and brother.

Poor Frederick! If only he had not sailed on board the Russell! If only Captain Reid had been more honourable and her poor brother less! Her mother might still be alive…

Margaret quickly shook herself from such idle speculation. Even if it still plagued her from time to time, she had learnt over the years that wishful thinking did no good, changed nothing. For poor Frederick had sailed aboard the Russell under the command of the cruel Captain Reid and being honourable, mutinied against him and after running from the law for near to two years was caught and court marshalled.

She remembered being a little older than thirteen and living with her Aunt Shaw in Harley Street when it happened. She had often thought perhaps if her mother had sent for her then, much could have been different…

Again, she wrestled her thoughts away from that path.

The hard truth was that the loss of her firstborn and beloved son weighed on her mother so that she became very ill and not having the strength of will to fight her illness, passed away a mere month after her son.

Margaret could still remember her father's face, all drawn in pain as he stood on the threshold of Harley Street before rushing to envelope her in his arms, clutching at her weak shoulders for comfort as he hoarsely voiced her worst nightmares.

They had weathered the storm together since then, keeping each other strong and if that meant that Margaret was a little brusquer and less refined than her London cousin for leaving London for Helstone, she found that she did not care so much.

Who would have looked after Papa when he became ill, if she had stayed in Harley Street? It did not bear thinking about!

Her only wish was that the move to Milton wouldn't prove detrimental to her father's health. It had
been a matter of conscience, her father said, and so they went. She so wanted to believe that life in the new town, far from painful memories of Helstone, would help ease Papa's conscience, heart and mind.

"I have spent two days surveying what houses Milton has to offer, I assure you my father and I are sharing the task and both of us have a fairly good idea of a price, sir," Margaret stated firmly with her head held high. It took all her might not to show just how very furious the two men who stood before her made her.

How dare they speak about her father like that? She had come to expect the reticence men here expressed when stood before the fact that they should treat her as her father's equal, but slander against Papa?

"Mr Thornton thinks this will do very well for your father," said the man who introduced himself as Williams. If his frown has anything to go by, Margaret would not learn what she wanted from him.

Why everyone insisted on being so difficult today, she didn't know. First, Dixon spent the whole morning complaining of the dirty air and how it shall make her young mistress look quite unbecoming before long and then where will she be, and now it was nearing late afternoon and she had yet to see a house that would be suitable to their needs as well as at an affordable price. Her task was made all the more difficult when everyone seemed to make it their purpose to protect her maidenly ears from the horror of hearing exact figures.

Though, she supposed that this Mr Williams might simply not know the rent.

She only hoped that Papa had more luck.

Indeed, it was half past four already! She realised with a quick look at the dial of her pocket watch before putting it back into her pouch. There was nothing for it, then.

"Very well, Mr Williams," she said with a sigh. "You said, you are this Mr Thornton's overseer. Please, be so good as to take me to him."

When he made no move to suggest that he was inclined to do as she asked, she continued:

"I'm sure you can appreciate that my father and I wish to find a suitable house as soon as possible and if you are unable to tell me how much the rent is for this property, I need to meet with the landlord, Mr Thornton."

It was then that the other man spoke.

"That will not be necessary, ma'am, as I'm the landlord."

No, they would not get the better of her, she decided at that moment as a part of her was sorely tempted to shout abuse at the man for not speaking up sooner and almost making her travel what she expected would be at least half across the town to see this Mr Thornton for no reason at all.

"Indeed, that is fortunate," she said instead. "Pray, tell me then: How much is the rent for the year?"

There was a long and uncomfortable silence. She supposed that her tone could have done with a little more politeness, but at that moment could not make herself care. Then the landlord opened his mouth to speak and Margaret let out a sigh in relief, finally.
"Perhaps… a meeting with your father, ma’am, or Mr Thornton-"

At this point Margaret didn't disguise the flexing of her jaw as she clenched her teeth in anger. She was tired, she was hungry and she found herself quite sick of hearing the name - Mr Thornton.

"I am sure I am grateful to Mr Thornton for the interest he takes in helping father and I secure property, it is most certainly very kind of him," Margaret interrupted him, her voice shrill. "However, as I do not know him I would not wish to trouble him any more than necessary as he is undoubtedly a very busy man. Now, please, Mr. –" She stopped and looked at the landlord expectantly.

"Denby."

"Mr Denby, I would be most grateful if you would answer my question."

As Margaret walked the street back towards their hotel, she regretted her losing temper. The house was smaller than her childhood home in Helstone, but she knew it would suit them perfectly and moreover, the rent at twenty-five pounds a year seemed quite reasonable. She only hoped she didn't make such a bad impression on Mr Denby that he would refuse to rent the house to them.

But she could hardly be faulted for that! Especially after catching the two men speculate about her father's honour! How they knew that was an ex-clergyman, she did not know, she could only guess that this Mr Thornton was their source of information.

Mr Thornton! She huffed angrily.

An image rose unbidden in her mind of a pudgy white-haired man, with a cigar between his lips and a monocle on one eye. A rich, interfering mill-owner from the North who thought himself above them, no doubt!

Mr Thornton! Bah!

Chapter End Notes

This will probably be based more on the series than the book, though I may borrow ideas from both.

I must admit I never quite understood why Margaret felt she had to meet Thornton to ask about the house when in the series the landlord was right in front of her along with Thornton's overseer...
Dearest cousin Edith Mrs Lennox

Dearest Mrs Captain Lennox

Dear cousin,

I am writing to tell you that papa and I have been successful in finding a
five days ago papa and I

Milton is a

Margaret huffed in annoyance at herself as she furiously crossed out most of what little she had written of the letter to her London cousin and found that only the greeting remained. She crumpled the paper into a small ball and flung it away from her forcefully.

The ball of paper, however, being light, flew only an entirely unsatisfying distance before falling to the carpet.

"Miss Margaret!" came an indignant remonstrative from Dixon who had just at that moment entered the room that was to be her father's study with a pile of books pressed to her large bosom.

Margaret pressed her lips together in chagrin before setting down her pen and standing up to help Dixon with her heavy cargo. She knew she should have rather taken her correspondence to her room.

"Oh, it is only that I'm tired," she said to lessen the disapproving stare her mother's old maid gave her as she bent to pick up her failed attempt at a message to her cousin.

That, of course, wasn't entirely true. But Margaret had long realised that with Dixon pleading fatigue as the reason for her sporadic outbursts of temper seemed more reasonable than truthfully naming frustration as the source of her vexation. Dixon (and indeed, her Aunt Shaw) seemed to believe that a lady was allowed to be tired, but not angry.

Margaret remembered that it didn't use to be so difficult, writing to Edith. After moving back to Helstone with papa, she was impatient to receive Edith's correspondence. The little inconsequential details of her and her Aunt Shaw's life in London told in her cousin's charming and humorous way lifted her spirits.

She had been glad to hear of the new lace Aunt Shaw ordered for Edith's first ball, of the ghastly wallpaper Aunt Shaw insisted on having the drawing room repapered with (why! it makes me shudder to look at the violets and carnations! they stare straight back at me!) but as years drew on, the pleasure she derived from Edith's letters grew less and less. Where before she searched for an escape from the loneliness of their empty house and a distraction in her grief, as time went by and she assumed her duties as the mistress of her father's house, she found herself having little sympathy with the many plights Edith liked to imagine were befalling her.
It had taken her a while before she finally chose to put a name to and examine the turbulent feelings that always arose after reading the latest of her cousin's news. Margaret had been ashamed to admit to herself that what she was feeling was a mixture of bitterness and resentment towards her beautiful, carefree cousin.

Margaret smiled as she placed her father's *Magna Moralia* on the bookshelf by the window next to his *Eudemian Ethics*. She remembered being fifteen and standing in her father's study in sullen silence after he had demanded an explanation for her tearing the latest Edith's letter into pieces during afternoon tea and calling her *hare-brained* and *empty-headed* before storming out.

She remembered later breaking down and sobbing into his waistcoat about not liking Edith and not liking this not-liking of her previously favourite childhood companion.

"But she doesn't know anything about anything, papa!" she remembered she had wailed this as a sort of self-justification while blowing her nose into her father's monogrammed handkerchief loudly. "All she does day-in day-out is receive callers and gossip with Aunt and eat cake!"

"Now, now, dear child," her father had said, seeing to the root of the problem as he was so often wont to do. "Edith can hardly help having her own mama to gossip with, can she?"

She had shaken her head at that and felt both ashamed of herself and relieved that her father understood what she could not bring herself to put into words.

"Oh my poor little Maggie, having to grow up so fast!" papa had sighed as he petted her hair. "One old father is a poor replacement for a mother such as yours was!"

Margaret remembered sitting snuggled in her father's arms and resolving herself to be nicer to Edith. And indeed, after she heeded her papa's advice and tried to find a common interest with her estranged cousin, she found their correspondence not such a heavy chore after all and even began to enjoy them a little.

Naturally, there were many repetitions of this scene in her father's study in the years that followed, but slowly, as time went by, they morphed into mutual exchanges of confidences and opinions as her papa learnt how to play the role of a mother as well as a father and she strived to be both a daughter and a son.

"Miss Margaret!" call from beside her interrupted her in her quiet reminiscences and Margaret realised that she had been standing by the window, unseeingly staring down at the street outside and blocking Dixon's way to the bookshelves.

"Now, go rest and finish your letter, miss! These books are the last of it!" Dixon asserted when Margaret made to relieve her of the several heavy volumes she was carrying. Instead she set them carefully in their rightful place on the bookshelf.

At last the two women stepped back and surveyed the room.

It was done, they were moved into the small, but cozy house in Crampton, Milton, at last prepared to begin their new lives in the unfamiliar town.

Margaret wasn't entirely sure whether the realisation that now there was no going back to Helstone, lifted or added a weight to her shoulders. However, in that moment she felt an inspiration strike her, she sat down at her father's desk and taking a new sheet of paper began to pen what she thought to be a very cheerful letter to her cousin.

*Dear Edith,*
Finally father and I are settled in our new home and Dixon has allowed me a moment of respite to pen you this brief message to inform you of the particulars of our journey that I am sure you will find most entertaining.

(Now I must protect my letter from Dixon’s eyes, I am sure you know that I was merely jesting and in truth had to almost wrestle with our dear old Dragon for every little bit of work)

Now, to the amusement I promised; the train journey itself was uneventful, but after receiving very chaotic directions at the train station in Milton, we made the cabby drive us half-way around the town one way and then the other in the attempt to get us to the hotel papa had booked. I fear the situation wasn't helped by the cabby being a most unpleasant fellow with a Darkshire accent as thick as your Captain's favourite porridge!

I suppose there is no need to assure you that eventually we have managed to explain ourselves and arrived at the hotel with no harm done to us and a little story to entertain our friends with for our troubles.

The search for our property was another matter entirely! Naturally, it was more convenient for father and I to split up and visit the advertised houses separately and I think I alone must have seen at least fifteen houses in two days! I was so grateful when I finally alighted on The One for I fear I have seen enough of mouldy wallpapers for a lifetime!

Our new house is much smaller than our old home in Helstone, but as you well know, with only papa and I, we don’t need much room. We have only just moved the last of papa's books in and already I am almost certain that before long I shall be able to call this house my home.

Oh, how I would like to tell you more about Milton, dear cousin! But I fear I could not do it justice in the brief time I have to finish this letter before the last post of the day as I am determined that you should get the news as soon as possible. And so I shall leave a proper description for my next letter and instead enquire how you have enjoyed your time traveling Greece with your husband.

Was Corfu every bit as you had imagined it?

Your cousin,

Margaret

P.S. Papa seems quite enthralled with Milton already, just now I can hear him returning from the Lyceum. He's to teach there and as well as privately tutor several pupils. I believe we shall be very happy here.

Margaret found she was quite satisfied with the finished product. She felt it sufficiently cheery and optimistic. She had learnt that those were the sort of letters Edith preferred to receive and after all, she had only just returned from her honeymoon.

Margaret doubted Edith wanted to hear about the ache in Margaret's lower back from the week’s moving of armchairs and heavy crates, or how she worried when papa came back from the Lyceum, trying to look confident at the prospects of his future occupation but instead looking forlorn.

Moreover, she had long ago decided that it simply would not do to have her cousin and aunt give each other doleful looks and then tut-tutting over her letters. One visit from her Aunt Shaw to Helstone demanding that Margaret come live with her to civil society away from the vulgarity of the country folk was quite enough.

Hollering at papa, not to wait for her with the tea, she hurried out of the door to the post office.
When the next morning dawned and sometime later when Margaret found herself being awoken from her restful sleep by Dixon rummaging around in the kitchen downstairs, she was quite decided that their first day living in their new house would be just perfect.

The notion survived even the mildly unpleasant sensation of being laced into her corset by Dixon and there was not one doubt about enjoying the day in Margaret's mind as she some time later sat down to breakfast in their small kitchen with her father.

But of course, she could not have possibly anticipated the obstruction that one particular man in Milton presented.

"Mr Thornton?!" Margaret cried out incredulously, her half-eaten toast half on the way to her mouth. "The tradesman?! Why would he be coming here so soon?"

Why, that was just plain rude! First the man had taken it upon himself to interfere with their rent negotiations and now he wanted to invade their home the day after they themselves relocated there! What could he possibly mean by such an imposition!

The image of an old, fat man with a monocle appeared in her mind once again, this time he was sneering at their dusty curtains while flicking the ash of his smoking cigar onto their carpet.

What an odious man, that Mr Thornton!

"The nerve of him!" Margaret fumed into her tea cup before realising the unexpected silence from her right where her father had been enjoying his crispy bacon a few moments before.

She looked up and saw him study her, his eyebrows raised high on his forehead.

"Margaret, I'm surprised at you," her father announced, shaking his head in disapproval. She blushed. "If you had let me finished you would know that Mr Thornton is coming here because I myself invited him!"

"You invited him?" Margaret attempted to say in a calmer voice. Surely, her father saw that although they had moved in, there was still much to be done before they could receive visitors!

"He is a friend and a tenant of Mr Bell and expressed the wish to become my very first proper pupil."

This news had Margaret furrow her eyebrows in confusion. What could an old, wealthy mill-owner want with philosophy lectures from her father?

"Mr Thornton is to be your pupil?"

"Yes, I thought we had already established that," her father replied as if perplexed by her question and attitude. He truly didn't seem to realise the awkward position he put them in. "And before I forget, Margaret, don't call the Milton manufacturers tradesmen. It has been brought to my attention that they dislike that."

"Oh papa!" she laughed as she observed the faint blush that appeared on his cheeks.

Now Margaret understood perfectly. Undoubtedly her father felt that he had offended Mr Thornton with the term and in an effort not to antagonize his first pupil, invited him into their new home, not realising how ill-prepared they were to receive visitors.
"I only wish you had told me yesterday, now I've sent Dixon to begin the search for a servant to assist her with the rough works around the house and...." she trailed off as she caught sight of the guilty look on her father's face. She sighed then, resolving herself to make the best of the situation.

"Oh there's no need to fret, it won't be too much trouble!" she assured him in as buoyant a voice as she could muster as the prospect of her day turned from that filled with measured employment of rearranging their new home to their comfort to that of a frantic rush.

She didn't feel overly guilty about this untruth to her father, just as she was quite unashamed of denying having the time to describe Milton in her letter to Edith. It wouldn't do any good to have papa distress himself over the load of work that awaited his daughter if she was to make his study and at least one of the sitting rooms upstairs presentable to visitors. After all, what was done was done and he could hardly rescind his invitation to the trades- the manufacturer.

As for the description of Milton in her letter... Margaret hadn't lied when she said that her first letter to Edith simply could not do the town justice as she sincerely hoped that her first impression of it would prove false over time.

For at first glance, Milton seemed a most unhappy place. There was a dark lead-coloured cloud hanging over the entirety of the town that at first made Margaret fear for an approaching storm. For that is what its deep, stormy colour would signal were they still in Hampshire, a most violent storm.

Soon, however, she realised that her fears were unfounded. There was no storm the first day, or the next day, or the day after that. The cloud was the product of the heavy black smoke the chimneys of Milton's many factories produced. And indeed, it was the same smoke which gave the air of the town its taste and smell, that hung heavily both outdoors and, once Margaret imprudently decided to air her bedroom, indoors.

As she began to gather all the necessary instruments for washing the first pair of curtains after her father had gone, and then later watched the water turn almost black with dirt Margaret knew for certain that she had a full day's harsh work ahead of her. She found it hard not to resent the dirty industrial town or the one who surely had to be its most unpleasant inhabitant for it.

In the course of the day, Milton continued not to win any favours with her. She had a sinking feeling that life there would be very different from the one she knew in Helstone.

Dixon was most displeased when she returned in the early afternoon from her unsuccessful quest of finding a maid for rough work and found her young mistress performing that same work herself. Convincing Dixon not to communicate her displeasure to her father, undoubtedly along with many familiar lamentations of how the late Mrs Hale, Miss Beresford, was surely turning in her grave seeing her daughter was doing servant's work proved a very exhausting exercise. Margaret supposed that was why she, try as she might, found herself not having enough strength to persuade Dixon to leave the rest of the ironing of the now surprisingly bright curtains to her and instead go to the market to buy some fruit for the afternoon tea.

But after walking to and from the marketplace, steadily feeling her arms grow heavier and start to ache from the strenuous activity, Margaret admitted that her dear old Dragon had the truth of it.

She was also most grateful when she returned home with her purchase and found that Dixon had taken it upon herself to bake fresh scones and tea cake after she was done with the curtains.

"Oh, you are a godsend, Dixon!" she exclaimed the moment she stepped over the threshold of the kitchen and the delicious smell of the baked goods invaded her senses.
"Now, now, miss," the old servant replied with one of her rare bashful smiles on her face. "Don't want to be shouting and disturbing the master and the gentleman!"

That was enough to curtail Margaret's loud enthusiasm.

"Mr Thornton is here already?"

"That he is," Dixon confirmed. "Arrived a few minutes before yourself, miss. You must have seen him in the street."

Margaret frowned.

No, she could not remember seeing anyone who had matched her mental picture of the wealthy mill-owner. Then again, she was rather distracted by the rather unpleasant sensation a basket laden with apples and pears induced in the strained muscles of her arms. She hadn't been paying much attention to the people around her and she wagered that short of the man actually knocking her over, she wouldn't have noticed him.

"I'm sure I'd only just put up the curtains in the sitting room when he knocked on the door!" Dixon grumbled. "What was master thinking, inviting him into the house so soon! A young lady having to work like that, tut tut!"

Not particularly wishing to hear the litany of Dixon's grievances twice in the same afternoon, Margaret turned to leave the kitchen.

"The cake smells truly delicious, Dixon," she said in the doorway. "Please, be sure to wash the fruit carefully. The streets are very dirty."

As she passed the closed door of the study, Margaret found herself stopping almost involuntarily. As she strained her ears to hear something of the conversation that was going on inside she was forced to conclude that the wooden panelling of the door was a very fine work indeed as only an indiscernible hum of two male voices could be heard.

There was her father's familiar baritone, Margaret smiled. It sounded as if he was amused by something. She took hold of the railing, stepped onto the stairs and then stopped as the second voice rang more clearly.

That had to be Mr Thornton.

He- he sounded-

But before Margaret could decide on her opinion about Mr Thornton's voice, she heard Dixon step out of the kitchen and a well-learnt instinct had her shoot up the stairs in a flash.

Once she was in her room, she let out a guilty giggle and then shook her head in disbelief at her breathless and panting self in the mirror on her vanity table. The day's work had to have more effect on her than she had previously thought, Margaret decided. She hadn't thought to act so childishly in years!

After all, she chided herself unconvincingly for her mad flight, there wasn't anything to be ashamed of, as she wasn't really eavesdropping!

Margaret took her time changing her dress and washing her face from the dust of the street. She told herself that it was because she wanted to give her father and Mr Thornton time to speak alone, but she also felt she herself needed a little time to compose herself and steady the strange giddiness in her stomach.
That was most unusual, she mused and frowned as she felt her insides flutter and a wave of heat go through her body from her toes to the tips of her ears. But then again, she had taken a rather light lunch and exerted herself much more than she was used to, trying to get the house ready for Mr Thornton's visit.

Mr Thornton.

For some reason, Margaret couldn't quite match the voice of the man with how she imagined him to be and she had to admit to a certain level of curiosity about him. From the moment they’d arrived into the town she heard the name Thornton repeated more times than she would care to count.

Mr Thornton, manufacturer and magistrate.

Mr Thornton, her father's first pupil.

Mr Thornton, the deep, disembodied voice behind the door of papa's study.

It seemed to Margaret as though there might be three men of the same name instead of one and as she gave her reflection a quick assessing look she found herself quite desirous of making the acquaintance of the man who was supposed to be the embodiment of all three.

"Ah, there she is! Margaret, how fortunate!" her father's voice greeted her merrily as she stood at the top of the stairs. "I was just about to send Dixon for you, my dear!"

Strangely, her papa's words only washed over her, not truly registering in her mind as she stared at the stranger standing next to him.

Surely, that couldn't be Mr Thornton! He was too- too young! Why, he couldn't be a day over thirty!

Margaret almost found herself shaking her head in dissatisfaction. There was no rounded belly, or a monocle or a cigar, the man in front of her was of a tall, powerful build.

His hair wasn't a mess of thin, white curls plastered onto a sweaty skull, but short, thick and jet black, arranged in a way that Margaret had to admit, wasn't unbecoming. Indeed, as she allowed her gaze to study his face, his stern eyebrows positioned above a pair of most piercing blue eyes, she couldn't help but think him very handsome.

Perhaps it only served her right that Mr Thornton seemed to be just as shameless in his study of her person as she was of him. As Margaret remembered herself and started to slowly walk down the stairs towards the two men, she felt as if those eyes would bore a hole through her, so keenly she felt Mr Thornton's scrutiny. She was glad of the dim light in the hallway, as she wasn't entirely sure she had managed to battle the rising blush in her cheeks.

"Margaret, I would like you to meet my new friend and pupil, Mr Thornton," her father said when she finally stood in front of them. "This is my daughter, Margaret."

Chapter End Notes

Hi there! I hope you liked this update, dear readers.
Sadly, next update probably won't be for the next few weeks as I have quite a bit of workload coming up. But I'll be glad to hear your opinions and whether you think this story of a bit different Margaret is worth looking into.
I'm really, really sorry about the delay. Things kinda got away from me and well, you might as well know it, I'm not the most dedicated of updaters.

I usually start out with every intention of updating regularly and then am not really able to follow through. However, I'll try to do better. The story is all thought out, "all" that remains is for me to put it to words :D

(Yeah, I know this doesn't really take us forward into the plot much, but well... character establishment is important, right?)

Oh and Happy Independence Day, my dear American friends. ;)

John Thornton was a busy man.

After all, one didn’t get as far in life as he had before the age of thirty without a strict work ethic.

He rose early and took his breakfast in the company of his mother while Fanny was still abed and fast asleep. Then he hurried off to his office where he then spent the majority of the day pouring over his account ledgers, or overseeing the efficiency of the empire he had built from ground up.

He was John Thornton of Marlborough Mill, master to some two hundred workers and the magistrate of the town of Milton. He had no time for frivolous or leisurely activities and, indeed, he had no need of them either.

Every day when he returned from his office to share his evening meal with his mother and sister and in the doorway turned around to see the towering structure of his mill behind him, he felt deep satisfaction and not a little pride at what he had accomplished.

And yet, when he received a letter from his landlord, Mr Bell, requesting that he enquire after willing pupils for his old college friend who was searching to begin a new life in the north of England, something rose inside of him and prompted him to name himself as the first and most willing candidate.

“Philosophy and classics, John?! What use is that in a mill?” his mother had said then, the look of complete bewilderment quite out of place on her face.

She was certainly never shy when voicing her own misgivings and doubts to his conduct, however scarce they were. And as was usual, John was well aware that she had the right of it.

Indeed, what use had he, a grown man of thirty, of Greek and Latin? Correspondence with his investors and buyers certainly didn’t require those skills and keeping his accounting ledgers straight needed less philosophical attitude and more precise, practical thinking.

John Thornton, the manufacturer and magistrate, had no need of tutoring by a Mr Hale, an ex-clergyman of the Church of England.
And still he thirsted for that knowledge. The more he told himself he was being nonsensical, the more secure he felt in the knowledge that this was something he wanted to do.

There wasn’t much time during his days that would allow him to inspect the feeling thoroughly and the practice of introspection certainly wasn’t something he was in the habit of indulging in often. However, during one evening in late August, when the air of his office was hot and stifling and the smell of gooseberry pie from the kitchen brought back memories of times long past, he finally recognised his wish to learn for what it was – the yearning to steal back a little of the youth that was taken from him.

If Mr Bell was surprised at the fact that John’s name headed the list of potential pupils for his friend, he contained it well and showed no sign of it. Instead upon an entirely unexpected visit to the mill, the purpose of which John remembered to wonder at only long time after his landlord had gone, Mr Bell took time to thank John for the kindness he showed his friend and, with cordiality that was most unusual, volunteered information about this Mr Hale.

And so John learned that Mr Hale was an old college friend of Mr Bell, a widower and a father to a young daughter. He found himself most grateful that neither Fanny, nor his mother were present for this conversation. He could well imagine his mother’s forthright and Fanny’s inquisitive stares at the news that a man with a young child in his care should decide to abandon the security of his livelihood in such a way.

John, however, had decided to keep his thoughts to himself and once the Hales arrived in town he was very glad that he had done so. He had no wish to make a fool of himself in front of his landlord.

His overseer Williams wasn’t a man of few words and yet when he arrived from his errand at Crampton, John found him in quite a state. Much of what the man had said was merely sputtering and indignant cries of “I say!”, however, there was one sentence that made sense and had John amend his imagine of the Hales.

“…a lady with a man’s pocket watch! Never saw such a sight! And shrill as a shrew, she demanded to know the rent and be taken to you, master! Bah! A man’s pocket watch it was too!”

With this news, Miss Hale grew considerably older in his mind, the image of a sad child was pushed aside by a tall, thin, severe looking harridan of a woman. His feelings towards the ex-clergyman turned quite charitable then.

John was certain that Mr Hale’s reasons for leaving the church and relocating far from his home were many, yet now he felt he had some inkling as to at least one of them. No doubt Mr Hale hoped that the men of Milton might be more willing to marry his spinster of a daughter, than the men of the South had been. He only hoped that in his eagerness to begin his lessons, he hadn’t made himself the object of these ambitions.

John Thornton, master and magistrate, had no wish to marry. Indeed, he would have to sit down and think really hard before discovering something he desired less.

However, the day of his first visit to Hale’s, John had time to sit down and remember his nonsensical musings. He now didn’t have to think very hard at all before plenty other things, much less desirable than marriage, popped into his mind.

He’d had another letter from his man in Liverpool and apparently the prices of American cotton were on the rise. The grumbling in the mills had started again.
The hands were unhappy with their wages not yet having returned to the figure before their last strike. And yet John could hardly raise the wages with the price of cotton so high, still laying down payments for the last wheel and his buyers late!

Yes, John Thornton, master and magistrate, was well reminded that there were worse things lurking on the horizon than the notion of marriage.

That, however, didn’t mean that, as he picked up his hat and gloves and headed out the door for his first lesson, John did so desirous of Mr Hale’s daughter’s hand. He rather hoped she’d be out.

And John thanked Providence for being kind to him when an elderly gentleman who opened the door for him, introduced himself enthusiastically as Mr Hale and announced sheepishly that the house was still in a bit of an uproar and that his daughter was out.

“John Thornton, sir,” he stated as he shook Mr Hale’s hand warmly. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Mr Hale was exactly as John had imagined him; middle-aged and frail-looking with a set of piercingly perceptive eyes.

“The pleasure is all mine, Mr Thornton- John. May I call you John?” The piercing eyes looked at him expectantly.

“But of course,” John got out with only a short pause on his way to sitting down on the settee. He felt a sudden need to tug at his tie. No body but his mother and Fanny called him by his Christian name.

“Excellent, most excellent!” Mr Hale responded with a merry smile on his face. “Then you must call me Richard.”

John hoped his smile didn’t seem too strained as he nodded his head in acquiescence.

“I presume the mill is –er– running well?” Mr Hale intoned and John felt a little calmer at hearing slight uneasiness creep into his voice. It was reassuring to know that he wasn’t the only one who found making new acquaintances most unnerving.

“Quite well, thank you.” His smile came a little easier now. “I shall have to return to it soon, today in particular it’s kept me occupied and I regret that I cannot stay very long.”

“Oh that is a pity! But I understand, I quite understand,” called Mr Hale cordially. “Well, we shouldn’t waste time with small talk then, let us stop beating around the bush. What day would you find most convenient for our lessons?”

The conversation flowed a lot more easily after that.

John really appreciated Mr Hale’s – Richard’s – practical approach towards their lessons. He had had dealing with only a few men from the South, but most of them showed to prefer a more lengthy and flippant conversations before touching upon the subject of business. As though the real purpose of their conversation was distasteful to them and needed to be got at seemingly by accident.

John had no patience for such men and no wish to conduct business with them either. That was one of the reasons why he preferred getting his cotton through Liverpool and not Le Havre. It was a good thing that Richard seemed to understand the good business sense of not wasting time with pointless chit-chat. And for that John was prepared to tolerate the strange familiarity he had insisted on as another peculiar custom from the South.
“I must confess, Richard, I’m unsure how much I still recall from my studies,” John admitted when the conversation turned towards the topic of their next lesson.

Richard waved his worries aside.

“That is what I am here for, after all. You must only decide whether you’d prefer to begin with Aristotle or Plato.”

John smiled. His tutor was in for quite a surprise if he imagined that John had recalled and had preference for either.

“Will it make much difference either way?” he asked and Richard laughed softly.

“No, I suppose not,” he admitted. “Perhaps we might start with something else altogether? The Iliad, perhaps?”

“Very well. I shall follow your instructions,” John said with a smile and an air of finality. He suddenly realised that he’d already spent a much longer time at the Hale’s than he had originally planned.

“You’re going already?”

“Yes, I fear I’m already needed at the mill.”

“Well, I cannot detain you then.”

They got up, John picked up his hat and gloves and they headed for the door.

After meeting and talking with Richard, John felt reassured in his decision to begin taking lessons from the man, that he would quite enjoy them. Indeed, perhaps he might not mind terribly suffering through a couple of meetings with the spinster daughter of his new friend.

“Ah, there she is! Margaret, how fortunate! I was just about to send Dixon for you,” Richard cried.

John realised that he’d spoken too soon, for all things indicated that behind his back at the top of the stairs there stood the woman who made his level-headed overseer shake with indignation.

There was nothing for it now, he could not escape the introduction.

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