Next Best Thing

by darthjam tart

Summary

Margaret Hale tries to get along with people better.

Hannah Thornton is nothing like Margaret’s own mother.

She bristles, edges her way into conversations with stabbing words and biting judgments. When she offers Margaret a cup of tea, Margaret half expects the cup to sting her fingers, the tea to burn like poison in her mouth. The wicked step-mother from some long-forgotten fairy tale, Margaret thinks, ungraciously.

John wants them to get along, of course. “It would mean a great deal to me,” he says, quietly. It’s evening, mere days before their wedding, and Margaret has just survived yet another horribly awkward dinner with the Thorntons.

“I’ve never tried to make anyone like me,” Margaret confesses. John’s smile barely tilts the corners his mouth, soft and sweet, and for a moment she can’t think of anything but kissing him, improper as it may be.

She’s a creature of impulse, and she takes one abrupt step toward him before stopping herself, hands tightening in her skirts. John would surely think her a wanton, and his mother -- well, Margaret supposes it hardly matters what his mother would think. Hannah Thornton’s opinion of her could hardly be any worse.

It’s true, though, that Margaret never really set out to make friends. She set out to do good, and happened to find friends along the way. Her stumbling forays into conversation with Mrs. Thornton prove only how unpracticed Margaret is at charming people.
“The mill seems to be prospering,” Margaret tries, over tea.

“As well as can be expected, with the workers still talking of unions,” Mrs. Thornton sneers, and they sit in awkward silence for the rest of the pot.

“Fanny seems to be happy, in her marriage,” Margaret says at breakfast.

“Fanny would be happy with any half-wit who kept her dressed in the latest fashions,” Mrs. Thornton snaps.

John sighs, a bit melodramatically, Margaret thinks, but Mrs. Thornton’s pinched face takes on a faintly guilty expression, and they finish breakfast over a cautious but uneventful discussion on American manufacturing.

The evening before her wedding, Margaret arrives home with a bundle of flowers she’s plucked to weave into her hair the next day, and finds Hannah Thornton waiting for her.

“I am sorry your mother couldn’t be here, for this,” Mrs. Thornton says, rather abruptly, but her eyes are soft, lingering on the flowers Margaret still carries.

Oh. This is to be one of those conversations, then.

“It’s quite all right,” Margaret says hurriedly. “Dixon told me something of what I might expect, and, well, Bessy filled in the rest.” Quite colorfully, in fact, and Margaret feels a flush color her cheeks, remembering the conversation.

Visibly relieved, Mrs. Thornton stands, crisply elegant in her walking gown and far kinder than Margaret had ever expected. “Won’t you stay a bit longer?” Margaret hears herself ask, and offers a tentative smile.

“If it’s not an imposition,” Mrs. Thornton replies, hesitating, and Margaret busies herself setting down the flowers and preparing a fresh pot of tea.

“I’m glad you’re marrying my son,” Mrs. Thornton says, after a moment. It’s the kind of direct speech Margaret has grown to appreciate, and she smiles into her teacup. Perhaps there’s hope for them after all.