He knew Margaret would not take kindly to being forced into a marriage against her will. If the best that could be said before was that she didn’t like him, he knew she would hate him now.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Richard Hale closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath before lifting his hand and rapping his knuckles lightly against the frosted glass pane of the door before him.

“Come,” a deep voice called from within and pushing the door open, he took two steps into the office beyond.

“Mr. Hale!”

Surprise colored John Thornton’s voice as he looked up to find his friend and mentor hovering in the doorway.

“Come in.” Thornton rose from his seat and gestured toward a chair on the opposite side of his desk. “Please, sit.”

Mr. Hale stood behind the proffered chair and swept the hat from his head, nervously running his fingers over the brim.

“Is ought wrong, Mr. Hale?” Concern darkened the icy blue of his eyes. “Has Mrs. Hale taken a turn?”

“No, no. It is nothing to do with my wife… well, that is to say that she is quite upset. That is…”

Mr. Hale squared his shoulders and drew himself erect.
“John… Mr. Thornton. My wife and I have heard… well, I mean to say that our maid, Dixon, has come to us with a most alarming tale.”

A shuttered look stole over Thornton’s face, for he could well imagine what Mr. Hale was about to say.

“A story about Miss Hale and… me?”

Mr. Hale pressed his lips together and nodded.

“What have you heard?” Thornton listened quietly as the older man haltingly related the events which had unfolded after the strikers had stormed the mill two days prior.

“Is it true?” the former clergymen asked.

“What does Miss Hale say?” Thornton hedged, wondering if father had spoken to daughter on the subject.

“I have not yet spoken with her,” Mr. Hale confessed. “I do not wish to alarm or upset her if it is merely idle gossip and lies.”

“I see.” Stalling, Thornton neatly stacked the papers he had been working on and carefully placed his pen directly in the center of the topmost sheet as though his life depended on the proper organization of his desk. At last he raised his gaze to meet the other man’s.

“It is true.”

Mr. Hale reached out, groping with one hand for the back of the chair, his slight frame drooping under the weight and implication of the younger man’s words.

“Please.” Thornton rose and walked around the desk. “Won’t you sit, Mr. Hale? You look quite ill.”
He guided his teacher into the chair and poured a measure of water from a carafe into a waiting glass, pressing it into the other man’s hand before returning to his own seat.

Mr. Hale raised the glass to his lips with a trembling hand, dazedly wiping his fingers over the damp spot on his coat as water sloshed over the rim of the glass.

“My God,” he finally whispered.

“Miss Hale acted honorably, though misguided, in attempting to protect me from an unruly mob.”

“I see.” Mr. Hale nodded and ran an agitated finger around and around the rim of the glass held in his hand.

“Mr. Thornton… John. I am not the type of man to make demands of another. But surely…” He looked up, met the other man’s gaze squarely with his own. “Surely you understand. My wife and I are concerned about the damage this will wreak on Margaret’s reputation.”

“Of course, Mr. Hale. I do understand, but –”

Mr. Hale closed his eyes and into his head popped the memory of Mr. Bell’s suggestion that there was something more between Margaret and John Thornton than met the eye.

“I do beg your pardon for asking, John, but… am I mistaken in my belief that you hold tender feelings for my daughter?”

Thornton shoved his chair away from his desk and leapt to his feet. Prowling about the room with the suppressed violence of a caged animal, he paced toward the window.

“Mr. Hale, I can only suggest that you speak with your daughter.” He stared sightlessly through the soot covered glass at the activity in the mill yard below.

“Margaret is a lovely young woman. Accomplished and well-educated. She would make any man
Thornton sighed and pressed his forehead against the cool glass in an attempt to alleviate the fever which seemed to burn beneath his skin.

“You do not need to convince me of your daughter’s qualities, Mr. Hale,” he growled thickly. “But if you must continue on in this vein, I urge you to speak with her first.”

“But, John, surely you can understand. I cannot speak with her without first… She is my daughter. My beautiful, kind and sweet girl. I must insist on your assurance –”

“– I have already presented myself to Miss Hale and have been turned away!” The words burst from Thornton’s throat as if ripped out of him by an unseen force. Ashamed by his lack of control, Thornton scrubbed his hands over his face.

“I can only repeat what I have said already, Mr. Hale,” he continued on in a dull voice, “please, speak with Miss Hale.”

“You proposed?” Mr. Hale asked in surprise. “When?”

“Yesterday.” Exhausted, Thornton released the normal grip he held on propriety and sagged against the wooden frame of the window. “I came to see Miss Hale yesterday to offer my hand and was summarily rejected.”

Mr. Hale studied his friend’s dejected posture. “I’m sure Margaret did not wish to impose on what she saw as a proposal made from duty alone,” he began. “If you made her aware of your feelings, then I feel certain –”

Thornton continued to stare through the window.

“And I am certain you are wrong, sir.” He raised a finger and traced idle patterns over the glass. “Though not in all things.” He turned and propped his back against the window, folding his arms defensively across his chest.

“You are correct in that I am in love with your daughter.” A flush stained the skin stretched over

a fine wife.”
his cheekbones. “And I had hoped that her actions of two days ago were evidence that she returned those feelings, even if only in some small manner. But Miss Hale quickly disabused me of any such notion when I pled my case to her. She is aware of my tender feelings and has left me with little doubt that she finds them to be offensive in the extreme.”

“Surely not, John. You must have misunderstood,” Mr. Hale protested.

“I can assure you, sir, there was no room for misinterpretation.” Thornton raised his head and met the older man’s gaze squarely with his own. “I will not repeat our conversation for that is a private matter between your daughter and me, but I can tell you with all confidence… Miss Hale will not have me.”

“I see.” Mr. Hale took a sip of water to ease his dry throat before setting the glass down on the top of Thornton’s desk. He sat back, his spine straight against the wooden chair, his hat neatly resting on his knees. Propping his elbows on the arms of the chair, he steepled his fingers against his mouth.

“I will take your advice and will go home now to speak with Margaret. But, John, I must insist – I cannot leave here without your word that you will do right by her.”

“Sir! I must protest. I did not suggest you speak with her in order to have you plead my case.”

“That is not my intent, John. But you must see – you must both see – Margaret’s reputation risks permanent damage; indeed, her reputation already suffers. As her father, it is my duty to protect her.”

“And will you not protect her from a loveless marriage?” Thornton murmured.

“But it will not be lacking in love, John. You love her and if I had any doubts as to that before, I know now that you do. It is written on your face.”

“Aye. But where I love, she does not.”

“I think you may be wrong, John, but even if you are correct, I believe… I believe that with time and familiarity, her feelings for you will grow to match your own.”
“I fear I do not share your optimism, sir. Do not be surprised to find that Miss Hale rejects your mandate as she did my proposal. For not only does your daughter not return my love, I think you will find that she holds little, if any, respect for me. I believe she finds me coarse and wholly lacking in the virtues she attributes to a gentleman, let alone with regard to a potential husband.”

“And will you forgive me when I suggest that I know my daughter better than you, John?” The older man smiled kindly at his friend and pupil. “I would no more consign you to a life of misery than I would Margaret,” he promised. “My daughter is stubborn but she has a kind nature.”

“Indeed, I know this to be true, but –”

Mr. Hale shook his head and rose to his feet. “You must trust me now, John. Be patient and I am confident that in the end your love for her will win the day.”

Clapping his hat atop his balding head, he summoned up a cheerful smile and departed.

Thornton turned back toward the window and watched the former preacher cross the mill yard below. Pressing his forehead to the glass, John heaved a weary sigh. He did not share the confidence displayed in the older man’s determined stride for he knew Margaret would not take kindly to being forced into a marriage against her will. If the best that could be said before was that she didn’t like him, he knew she would hate him now.

What marriage would not be doomed to failure with so dismal a beginning?
“I will not!” Margaret’s skirts swished and flicked about her as she agitatedly paced the small confines of the family parlor. “How can you even ask such a thing of me, Father?”

“Margaret. My dear, be reasonable,” Richard Hale exhorted his daughter. “What choice do you have? A woman’s reputation is a fragile thing and people are already talking.”

“I do not know!” she exclaimed. “But there has to be some other solution.” She pressed her hands against her flushed cheeks. “I know!” Her eyes lit up as a desperate inspiration struck. “I shall go to Spain and join Fred!”

Maria Hale made a choking noise and buried her face in her hands. “No,” she wept. “Oh, no, please. No.”

Dixon leaned down to whisper softly in her mistress’s ear while shooting a warning glance toward the younger woman.

“Margaret!”

She startled at her father’s sharp tone. She could count on one hand the number of times he had raised his voice to her in her lifetime.

“You are upsetting your mother,” he chided.

Dropping to her knees before him, Margaret raised a pleading face to her father.

“Father. Papa,” she entreated. “You and Mother married for love. Even Fred in his exile speaks
of his love for a woman. Is this truly what you want for me?” She stared beseechingly into her father’s warm, dark eyes. “Am I to be the only one among us to wed where there is no love?”

“Oh, my dear.” Mr. Hale laid his hand on the crown of his daughter’s head and gave her a gentle smile. “But there is love. John loves you very much.”

She made a scoffing noise in her throat and shook her head rapidly back and forth in denial of his words.

“I do not believe a man such as he can understand love,” she gritted. “I believe he wishes to possess me, nothing more.”

“He is a good man, Margaret. Do you think I could entrust you to a man I did not admire?”

“Father. Does it not matter to you that I do not admire him?” she whispered tearfully.

“Is there truly nothing about him which you find to be estimable?” Mr. Hale asked curiously.

She looked away, fixing her gaze on the cabbage rose pattern of the carpet beneath her knees, her shoulders moving in a sulky shrug.

Rising to his feet, Mr. Hale beckoned her to follow him from the room.

“Margaret.” He took her hands in both of his and gave them a gentle squeeze. “I know John to be a good man,” he said again. “I believe he loves you. And I cannot help but notice…” He bent his knees slightly, bringing his face level with hers to give her a knowing look. “I cannot help but notice that he engenders strong feelings in you as well.”

“Strong feelings of dislike,” she retorted reflexively.

“Perhaps,” he mused. “But it is said that love and hate are two sides of the same coin.” He held up a forestalling hand when she opened her mouth to argue.

Margaret wrapped her arms around her middle. “And are you so sure of this that you willing to risk my life’s happiness on a hunch?”
“On a hunch… and the hope that you are intelligent enough not to wallow in self-pity and spite yourself.” He laid two fingers beneath her chin and forced her to look up at him. “It matters not, Margaret. For there is no other choice.”

Tears flooded her eyes again and she allowed him to draw her into his embrace. Wrapping her arms around his middle, she buried her face against his coat, inhaling the familiar scents of peppermint and old parchment which she always associated with her father.

“You and I both know that your mother is failing a little more every day,” he whispered against her temple. “And I was already an older man when the Lord blessed us with you,” he reminded her. “There is no money to settle on you, and with a tarnished reputation…”

His voice trailed off and broke. “I have to know that you will be taken care of when your mother and I are both gone.”

“Oh, Father.” She clutched him close and shook her head against the rough wool of his jacket. “Let us not speak of such things,” she begged.

“But my dear, we must settle this,” he insisted. “Do you really dislike Mr. Thornton so very much?”

“I think him arrogant, pompous and rigid,” she declared with a haughty sniff.

“Indeed,” Mr. Hale said agreeably. “Though I dare say he deliberately cultivated those traits as I imagine they served him well when he pulled his family out of poverty, do you not think?”

“He is a cold man,” she argued. “A harsh taskmaster.”

“Yet his mill is considered by most here to be the best run and the safest for his workers.”

“A fact of which I am quite sure has more to do with profit than pity or concern for those who slave away for starvation wages,” she countered, stubbornly determined to give no quarter.
Mr. Hale made a humming noise in his throat. “I’m sure there is some truth in what you say, Margaret. But right or wrong, I think Mr. Thornton believes that if he could rise from poverty armed with little more than a fierce determination and hard work, then anyone should be able to do the same.”

Margaret tipped her head back and stared into her father’s eyes.

“Not everyone has the same strength of will,” she noted. “It is harder for some than others. And that lacking in another’s character is not something to be sneered at, but rather to be pitied.”

“That is true.” Allowing for a beat or two of silence, Mr. Hale smoothed a gentle hand over his daughter’s back. “I do not say he is a perfect man, but I know him to have an inquisitive mind and not as little care for the plight of the less fortunate as you would ascribe to him.”

Margaret let out a shuddering sigh and closed her eyes. In the distance she could hear her mother’s quiet snifflies and the murmured drone of Dixon’s soft assurances; felt the crushing weight of her father’s silent expectations and, ever the dutiful parson’s daughter, she surrendered her will to her parents’ wishes.

“If you believe it to be the best course, Father,” she whispered in a tear-clogged voice, “I will do as you ask.”

The next evening, she brushed her lips over her mother’s cheek and left her in Dixon’s care with a murmured ‘good night.’ Slowly and quietly she descended one flight of stairs on wooden legs. Standing outside her father’s study, she reached up to tighten the pins holding her hair in a severe coil at the base of her scalp and smoothed her hands over the pale gray of her skirt. Inhaling deeply, she drew her spine erect and tapped her knuckles against the door.

“Is that you, Margaret?” her father called. “Come in, my dear.”

She pushed the door open and entered the room, her gaze falling on and skittering away from the man seated across from her father.
John Thornton rose to his feet and set aside the book in his hand. Plato had failed to hold his interest this evening and he had been on tenterhooks since the moment of his arrival at the Hale household, only pretending to hear half of what Mr. Hale had said throughout the evening.

Margaret cast her eyes wildly about the room before her gaze settled on the tea service on a low table between the two men.

“Shall I pour more tea?” she asked, desperate for some task to occupy her, but both men demurred and she sank into a chair at her father’s urging, staring at her feet and wishing desperately to be any other place in the world at that moment.

The two men returned to their own seats and thumbed through their books as if to resume their prior conversation. Mr. Hale cleared his throat to end the long and excruciating silence which had followed Margaret’s appearance and stood.

“If you will forgive me, I think I shall bid your mother a good evening.” His excuse to leave the couple alone was transparently flimsy.

Thornton leapt to his feet. “Perhaps I should…” He gestured wildly toward the door but Mr. Hale made a tsking noise in his throat and waved the younger man back into his seat.

“Nonsense. I will be gone but a trifling time,” he fibbed. “Please, stay John. Margaret will keep you company.” And slipping from the room, he eased the door closed behind him.

A painfully awkward silence fell over the two remaining occupants of the room. Margaret’s unease grew with each passing second, her fingers nervously twisting the fabric of her skirt as the tension between the two built until she could stand it no more.

“I must commend you on your determination, sir.” Her words spoke of admiration but her tone conveyed only disdain. “By bringing my father into this, you have outflanked me and won my surrender.” She lifted her gaze to his, the serene composure of her face at odds with the wild beating of her heart.

Propping an elbow on the arm of his chair, he rubbed a thumb over his lip and matched her calm gaze with his own.

“I do not believe there are any winners here, Miss Hale.”
Inclining her head regally, she studied his face. The shadows darkening the skin beneath his eyes matched the smudges under her own and attested to a lack of sleep on his part. The deep set lines bracketing his mouth made a mockery of him as a triumphant bridegroom and she felt a reluctant sense of shame at having accused him of underhandedly recruiting her father to his cause.

“You are right.” Her sense of fair play insisted she offer an apology. “I know you to be too prideful to secure my consent in such a deceitful manner.”

“You say that in such a way that I do not know whether you consider pride to be a virtue or a flaw.”

A dimple flickered into view as her lips briefly quirked into a wry smile. “Having more than a just share of pride myself, I can truthfully answer that I find it to be both.”

They shared a rare moment of companionable silence. He heard her swiftly indrawn gasp of surprise when he rose from his perch on the edge of his chair to kneel before her. Noting the white-knuckled grip of her hands in her lap, he rested the tips of his fingers over hers, one part of his brain idly aware of the icy cold of her skin.

“Margaret.” He bent his head over their hands and ran a thumb over each rigidly held knuckle. “I know this is not what you want… that I am not who you want. But I swear I will do my very best to be a good husband to you,” he vowed.

His chest rose and fell as he sucked in a deep breath and lifted his gaze to hers. “Will you do me the honor of agreeing to be my wife?”

Staring into his red-rimmed eyes, she swallowed hard, but no sound could pass the knot in her throat and she settled for a jerky nod of her head. As if in a dream, she watched him reach into his breast pocket.

“I had to guess at your size,” he told her, sliding a ring onto her finger. She lowered her gaze to their joined hands. The ring was a lovely concoction of rose gold and opals shot through with radiant shades of blue and green. She traced a finger over the flowers etched into the shank on either side of the stones and though the ring was beautifully delicate and feminine, she saw it only as a brand of ownership and a symbol of the loss of her freedom.
“I can see that you are tired, Mrs. Hale.” Setting aside her teacup, Hannah Thornton rose to her feet. “I believe we have made an admirable start with our plans,” she continued and wrapped her shawl tightly around her shoulders. “If you feel up to it, perhaps you and Miss Hale will come to our home in two days’ time to continue. If not, I would be happy to attend you here.”

“I am… I am sorry that my health necessitates such a hastily planned wedding.” Maria Hale dabbed a lace-trimmed handkerchief against her lips and bent a sorrowful look first toward Margaret and then toward her daughter’s future mother-in-law.

Though as straight-laced and rigid as ever in her posture, Mrs. Thornton softened enough to press a hand kindly over the frail woman’s. “Tis nothing to apologize for,” she declared gruffly. “The wedding shall be small, but splendid nonetheless.” She straightened to her full height. “Now, I must be going.”

“I will see you out,” Margaret murmured. Stopping to tuck a blanket more securely over her mother’s legs, she followed Mrs. Thornton down the stairs.

The older woman paused near the door to tie the black ribbons of her bonnet beneath her chin. Struggling not to fidget beneath the severity of the other woman’s gaze, Margaret nervously lifted a hand to brush a wisp of hair away from her forehead.

Mrs. Thornton’s gaze was riveted to the younger woman. It was easy to see why her son was so attracted, for the girl was beautiful and spirited. Reaching out, she caught Margaret’s hand in her own, studying the smooth, porcelain skin and the ring adorning it. She absentmindedly traced a finger over the intricate scrollwork of vines and petals etched into the gold.

“Is it a family heirloom?” Margaret ventured quietly.

“No. We sold almost everything of value when my husband passed.” Hannah Thornton gruffly cleared her throat and ran her thumb over the plain gold band encircling her own finger, remembering the pearls and sapphires that had once accompanied it.

“No,” she continued. “My John chose this ring for you. He said the blues and greens reminded him of your eyes,” she muttered distractedly.
“It is a beautiful ring,” Margaret said softly.

“But unwanted by its wearer,” Mrs. Thornton remarked shrewdly. She shook her head as if to clear it and raised her eyes to meet her future daughter’s. The look of quiet reverie fell away from her face and her features hardened once more into a familiar cold mask.

“I will say this once and then, because I know it is what John would want – and I desire my son’s happiness above all else – I will do my best to hold my tongue and not interfere in the future.” She folded her hands demurely before her and bent a stern gaze toward the younger woman. “You do not know my son. You cannot understand what sort of man you once rejected, this Milton manufacturer,” she spat. “Nor of his great and tender heart.”*

Her upper lip curled into a disdainful sneer. “I had not approved of my son’s attachment to you. You do not appear to me worthy of him,” she said with brutal frankness. “But he would not rest until he had laid himself bare before you and God help me, I encouraged him.”

Margaret was stunned to see tears brighten the other woman’s eyes, though she stubbornly refused to allow them to fall.

“I could not bear to see my proud son stripped of confidence and made so vulnerable and I told him not to be afraid, assuring him that your actions that day when the mob broke through the mill gates were proof you returned his feelings.” Mrs. Thornton took savage satisfaction in seeing a wince distort the girl’s delicate features as mortification flushed the pale cheeks a fiery pink.

“I raised his hopes,” she continued, “and you crushed them beneath your heel with no more care than you would in exterminating the life a bug. And still he loves you!” She wilted suddenly as if all her anger fled in a rush and the normally harsh lines of her faced shifted, allowing a mother’s love to shine through.

“I beg you to have a care for my son, Miss Hale. My poor boy whom life has treated as harshly as any of the rabble you see fit to champion.” She pressed two fingers against her lips, fighting to regain her composure and once again adopted the habitual regal manner in which she carried herself.

Wrapping her fingers around the knob, she yanked the door open and stepped out into the cool afternoon air. Pausing on the second step, she gripped the railing tightly. “You do not love him,” she tossed over her shoulder, “but I ask that you remember the love he bears for you and treat him kindly.”
Margaret closed the door, pressing her forehead against the smooth wood and released a shaky breath as tears sprang to her eyes. She could not help that Mr. Thornton loved where she did not. Could not force herself to feel something she did not. She chafed against the heaping dose of guilt doled out by Mrs. Thornton. She felt her heart break – for Mrs. Thornton whose pride would yield only to spare a beloved son; for Mr. Thornton who loved in vain; and for herself, trapped in this melodrama from which there was to be no escape.

Chapter End Notes

* Some dialogue lifted from the book and/or movie.

I realize after my third go-round in proofing this chapter that I've given John and Margaret very little interaction; I imagine that will change in the next chapter and beyond.

I have a very (very) loose outline for the rest of the story; quite a bit of scribbled notes but no cohesive next chapter. And I'm leaving for a week's vacation this weekend. While I may start organizing those notes, I have no expectation of posting anything until after my return.

Thanks to everyone for the kind reception this story has received thus far.
Chapter 3

The day of the wedding brought rain.

Edith Lennox flitted about the room, chattering with forced gaiety about rain being a sign of good luck on a wedding day, while the ever practical Margaret simply saw it as a day in the life of the North.

That the gloom of the day was altogether too befitting a match to her mood went unspoken.

Due to the weather, Margaret and Edith, along with Mrs. Hale and Dixon, had been settled into a spare bedroom of the parsonage so the bride and her attendant could dress for the ceremony without risk to their wedding day finery.

As there had been no time to have a dress properly made in Milton, Edith had been tasked with choosing a gown in London for the bride. Though she had been startled – and privately dismayed – by the news of Margaret’s impending nuptials to the Milton manufacturer whom Edith had never met, she had undertaken her duties seriously and taking into account all that she knew of her beloved cousin, had chosen an understated, but elegant gown.

Knowing Margaret’s acceptance of the marriage had been given with unhappy reluctance, Maria Hale had risen from her bed this day determined not to add to her daughter’s burden. Calling upon all the patience and grace she had once regularly displayed as a minister’s wife, she exerted an iron control over the weakness which seemed to grow daily and forced it back, summoning instead a ready smile and a close approximation of her once gentle and serene nature.

“Margaret, my dear, how lovely you are. Edith!” she exclaimed cheerfully. “You have exquisite taste, does she not, Dixon?”

Resplendent in her very best dress, the long-time family servant gave a decisive nod of her plump chin. “Oh, my. Yes, she does. Our girl is a lovely bride – though I always knew she would be!” Dixon bent a fond and proud gaze on the young woman she had helped to raise.
“You’re a beauty, Miss Margaret.”

“Thank you, Mother. Thank you, Dixon.” Margaret graced the two women with a wistful smile before turning away to cast a disinterested glance at her reflection in the cheval mirror tucked into one corner of the room.

The gown was lovely, she reluctantly admitted to herself. The ivory satin – made fashionable by the Queen for her own wedding more than a decade earlier – glowed in the warmth of the lamplight. The wide scooped neck and short puffed sleeves left the pale skin of her slender throat and arms bare. In keeping with Margaret’s reserved nature, the gown was devoid of any ornamentation excepting a silk rose stitched to the bodice and a three inch panel of exquisitely detailed lace bordering the hem and brushing the tops of her elbows.

Margaret gathered the wide skirts in her hands and raised the hem as Edith knelt and looped the ribbons of the matching ivory slippers around her ankles. A veil made of the same delicate lace tumbled to the floor from a circlet of flowers which Edith fastened to Margaret’s dark hair.

Turning to a side table, Edith lifted the lid from a florist’s box and as she brushed aside the tissue paper, the heady scent of spring perfumed the air. She handed a small white envelope bearing Margaret’s name to the bride.

Edith carefully studied her cousin’s face as her gaze skimmed over the words boldly slanting across the small card and noted the slight softening of the lines around Margaret’s mouth.

“They are from Mr. Thornton,” Margaret noted. “Only look, Mother.” She lifted two small nosegays from the box and handed one each to her mother and to Dixon. “Flowers for us all.”

Margaret felt something flutter deep within her as she watched her mother and Dixon bury their noses in the fragrant blooms and her hands trembled as she accepted the bouquet carefully extracted from the box by Edith. Orange blossoms, white freesia and tea roses in the palest shade of yellow were crowded together to form a lush nosegay. Sprigs of lilies-of-the-valley were tied to the trailing ends of the cascading lace ribbons and the fluttering in her stomach grew stronger with the knowledge that Mr. Thornton had personally chosen the flowers which made up her bridal bouquet, for what other explanation could there be for the inclusion of her beloved yellow roses?

Margaret closed her eyes and buried her nose in the blossoms, inhaling their heady perfume and took a moment to hide her face. Composure once again in place, she chanced a final, critical look at herself.
“Well, Mother?” Catching the veil on her fingertips, Margaret turned from the mirror and spread her arms wide. “Do you think I will pass muster with Mrs. Thornton?” A tiny smirk raised one corner of her mouth and mother and daughter shared a conspiratorial laugh.

“I do not pretend to know what Mrs. Thornton will think, but I believe her son will be well pleased.” Maria Hale smiled through her tears. “Come here, my dear.” Crooking her fingers, she beckoned her daughter closer.

Margaret shook out her voluminous skirts and sank to her knees, careful to keep from crushing the delicate fabric of her gown, and met her mother’s damp gaze with her own.

“My mother gave this to me on my wedding day.” Maria Hale drew a necklace from the silk purse resting on her lap and pressed it into her daughter’s hand. A solitary diamond winked from the center of a simple cross fashioned of polished gold. Mrs. Hale took the necklace up again and with trembling fingers fastened the delicate chain around Margaret’s slender neck.

“I know this is not what you wanted, my darling,” she whispered in a voice pitched only for her daughter’s ears. “But I wish you much joy.”

Margaret pressed her forehead to her mother’s knees. She felt the caress of maternal fingers over a tendril of hair not covered by her veil and allowed a tear or two to fall and be absorbed by her mother’s skirts.

Ever watchful, Edith stood back, her fingertips pressed against her lips to stifle the sob building in her throat. She had arrived from London the previous day along with her husband, her mother, the baby and his nanny. She had immediately barricaded herself behind closed doors with Margaret and had listened with mounting concern as her cousin had spilled forth the details of how she had come to be engaged. She had stroked the other girl’s hair as she had sobbed out her fears and sorrow into her lap until finally Margaret had fallen into an exhausted sleep. Edith had allowed Margaret an hour to nap before rousing her cousin to prepare for their arriving guests. Due to the small constraints of the Hale house and Mrs. Hale’s delicate health, it had been decided that the wedding breakfast would be held in the Thornton’s home. Determined to play some role in her daughter’s wedding, Mrs. Hale had insisted the families meet for dinner on the eve of the wedding at the Hale home and it was there that Edith first observed the bridal couple together.

Now, as she watched her cousin dab under her eyes with a lace-trimmed handkerchief, Edith remembered the look of love and longing and tenderness which had stolen over Mr. Thornton’s face whenever he thought no one was looking and she recalled the manner in which his pale blue gaze had roved hungrily over his intended’s face during those few instances in which she had spoken directly to him.
Edith could admit to herself that she had hoped for a match between Henry and Margaret. Oh! What fun it would have been – how neat and tidy to have her beloved cousin happily wed to her own husband’s brother and living nearby in London. But that was not to be and as she had no doubts now of Mr. Thornton’s tender regard for his bride, she fervently prayed that Margaret would someday – somehow – come to reciprocate her husband’s feelings.

Margaret stood out of sight as the church’s vestibule doors were opened. Music from the organ floated toward her and she knew her mother was being escorted to the front of the church. She smiled woodenly when Edith brushed a kiss over her cheek before lowering the veil over her face and craned her head over her shoulder to watch her cousin artfully drape the cascading lace of the veil behind her.

Resting her hand in the crook of her father’s elbow, she pressed her face into the wool of his suit sleeve and took a steadying breath when he covered her hand with his own. This was not the wedding she had envisioned for herself as a young girl, she thought. She had imagined her father officiating in their tiny Helston parish, sun streaming through the stained glass while a warm spring breeze perfumed the air.

Instead, she was to be married in a still unfamiliar church made cold and damp by the rain slanting over the windows. Clutching her father’s arm, her feet felt frozen to the stone floor as she imagined leaving her parents’ warm and loving home to share her life with a husband she barely knew and little understood, a silly new sister and a mother-in-law who – at best – had promised to tolerate her presence.

Some distant part of her mind registered the change in the music and she saw Edith step behind her to take up the lace hem of the trailing veil. Lethargically, she allowed her father to guide her into place and as they paused dramatically in the doorway of the church, she was dimly aware of the congregants rising to their feet and dozens of pairs of eyes trained on her. She saw her mother waiting in the first pew. Dixon. Her Aunt Shaw and Captain Lennox. Mr. Bell.

A surprised smile trembled on her lips as she saw Bessy in one of the back pews. Her friend was leaning heavily on Higgins’ arm, Mary standing close with one supportive hand on her sister’s elbow. All three of them were pink-cheeked from a thorough scrubbing, adorned in their best Sunday clothes; Higgins’ hair slicked down, the girls’ hair woven in neatly braided coronets.

And then her gaze shifted and she ignored every other thing and every other person, compelled
instead to stare at the man who awaited her at the altar. This man who was such a mystery to her. This man who could be sharp and hot-tempered – sometimes to the point of cruelty – but who thought to present flowers not only to her mother, but also in recognition of the role of the housekeeper who had been a part of her life since the day she was born.

Pressing the bouquet of flowers chosen for her by her husband-to-be against her midsection in an effort to still the fluttering sensation once again quaking deep within her, Margaret took the first step on the long march down the aisle toward her new life.

John Thornton was skilled at masking his thoughts. Standing at the altar, none who saw him were aware of the maelstrom of emotions roiling beneath the placid exterior he presented.

As tradition dictated, he had escorted Mrs. Hale to her seat, adjusting his long stride to hers, his arm a strong and steadying support for the frail woman. Yet, even having personally escorted her mother down the aisle, he harbored the nerve-wracking fear that Margaret would rather run than go through with the wedding.

He swept a cool and dispassionate gaze over the collected assembly, taking note of the small group gathered on the bride’s side of the church. The crowd on the opposite side of the aisle was slightly larger, though with the exception of his mother and sister, his guests consisted mostly of business associates and two or three cousins whom he had not seen since the last family funeral.

It was, he thought, a solemn and cheerless gathering of people befitting the somber and somewhat oppressive mood of the day.

And then she appeared on her father’s arm and everything else fell away. He knew his was a reluctant bride and yet her gaze was locked firmly on his as she made her way down the aisle toward him. Her voice was calm and clear and measured as she spoke her vows and only he was aware of the trembling of her hand in his, belying her serene exterior.

Instead, it was he who stumbled over the ancient words. His voice that cracked under the weight of his concerns that he was possibly shackling them both to a lifetime of misery – for he knew well that she cared for him not. And yet, he could not deny the thrill that rippled along his spine as he pushed his ring over her knuckle, nor could he prevent himself from sweeping a possessive thumb rhythmically over the thin gold band as the minister’s voice softly droned through the blessing.
He felt his heart slam against his breastbone as he bent toward her, felt his breath catch in his throat as she stretched up on her toes and for a moment a sense of utter joy stole over him as he caught her startled gasp with his lips when their mouths met for the first time.

And then all was a blur as the minister raised his hands over them in a final blessing. Still dazedly holding her hand, they stepped into the vestry to sign the parish registry and he watched Margaret sign her maiden name one final time. Taking her hand in his once again, he tucked it into the crook of his arm. Bending a shaky but hopeful smile on her, he led her back into church and down the aisle.

He escorted her from the church and into the waiting carriage for the short ride to the house. The rain had stopped but the cobblestoned ground was slick with puddling water. Margaret hesitated in the open door of the carriage, searching for the best way to descend amidst her gown’s billowing yards of fabric and John instinctively reached up to offer assistance.

Long, strong fingers spanned her narrow waist. “Are you ready?”

He arched a questioning brow and she cautiously laid her hands on his shoulders, stifling a gasp as he easily swung her to the ground. She immediately grasped her skirt in her hands, raising the hem above the damp ground. John scooped up the lace veil trailing behind her, carefully looping the gossamer fabric over one arm and lifted her bouquet from the carriage seat. Thus burdened, he rested his free hand at the small of her back and guided her up the short flight of stairs where the small household staff had gathered to greet the Master and his new bride.

John and Margaret stood in one corner of the formal parlor to greet their guests and accept hugs, handshakes and offers of good wishes and congratulations. He could feel the faint trembling of her arm where it brushed his but though he was aware of the anxiety simmering just below the surface, he admired the calm façade she outwardly presented.

They and the wedding guests feasted on steamed oysters, scallops, cold salads of chicken and lobster along with slices of cold roast beef and a variety of cheeses. Glasses of golden, bubbling champagne and, of course, cups of tea, were passed around to wash down the rich meal.

The cook proudly carried the wedding cake from the kitchen and a silver knife was handed to Margaret. She cut a small piece of the cake, transferring it to a china plate discreetly emblazoned with the letter “T” entwined amidst a decidedly masculine scrollwork decorating the rim. Taking up a fork, her shoulders rose and fell on a bracing breath before she bravely raised her eyes to meet his. Cutting off a small piece of cake with the fork, she offered it to him. Keeping his eyes locked on hers, John leaned forward. His lips closed over the morsel of cake and flavors exploded to life in his mouth – exotic spices mingled with the warmth of brandy and the sweetness of candied fruit. Swallowing the bite, he took his turn, forking up a piece of cake and offering it to Margaret. He watched her pretty pink lips close over the proffered bite and his hand trembled, smearing a tiny bit of the thick frosting at the corner of her mouth.

He automatically raised a hand to wipe the white dollop away, his tongue instinctively darting out to swipe the frosting from his thumb, sucking all traces of the sugary treat into his mouth. He felt the heat of the blood which raced to his face and heard her swiftly indrawn breath at the unthinking audacity of his action.

John saw her eyes open wide and then close on a long, slow blink before once again meeting his. Confusion clouded the normally clear depths of her gaze and then she resolutely turned away. He watched with brooding, hooded eyes as she concentrated on precisely cutting the rest of the cake, offering a slice to each of their guests with a tremulous smile.
The cutting of the cake signaled an end to the wedding breakfast and most guests bid the bridal couple a farewell shortly thereafter. John, recognizing that Margaret’s extended family would be returning for London the following day on the early train, invited them to linger and the group retreated from the formal parlor to settle more comfortably in the family living space. The men enjoyed small glasses of brandy while the women sipped tea from delicate cups.

Margaret and Edith settled on a settee tucked into one corner of the room and fell into a softly whispered conversation. John watched Margaret gently bounce little Sholto on her knee, saw the silly smiles and loving kisses peppered over the child’s face and for a moment was lost imagining the day when she would lovingly tend to their own chubby-cheeked babe.

He was startled from his reverie when Mr. Hale rose to his feet.

“I believe Maria is tired.” He helped his wife to her feet and offered his hand to his new son. “We should be going.”

“Oh, but Father –” Margaret leapt to her feet, the protest dying on her lips as she took in her mother’s wan face. “Of course.” She crossed the room and took her mother’s hands in her own. “It has been a long day and you must be weary, Mother.”

The others rose as well and the entire party made its way to the foyer. Goodbyes were said as coats and capes were donned against the evening chill. John saw Margaret’s eyes close as her parents drew her into their shared embrace and he felt a choking sensation at the spasm of grief which crossed his wife’s face. He had allowed himself at times that day to fall into the fantasy that his was a willing bride but the tears shining in her eyes and the downturned pull of her lips forcibly reminded him otherwise.

Edith passed the baby to her mother and pulled Margaret into a tight embrace, fiercely whispering something into her cousin’s ear. Drawing back, she aimed a meaningful look at the other girl and gave their joined hands an emphatic shake and John wondered at the blush that suffused Margaret’s pale cheeks.

John and Margaret stood on the top step and watched the carriage leave the mill yard. Turning his head, he saw his wife’s lips tremble and with a gentle hand on her shoulder, he drew her back inside. Seeing her standing with his mother and sister, he once again felt that possessive thrill course through him. She was his now – his family – and even the circumstances under which that had been brought about could not completely extinguish his joy.

“It has been a long day.” Hannah Thornton echoed Margaret’s earlier words. “Perhaps you should show Margaret to her room.” At those words, a furious blush suffused the younger woman’s face and at least in that moment, Hannah was hard-pressed to hold onto her anger in the face of the girl’s anxiety. She laid a weathered hand on the girl’s smooth one in a gentle squeeze. The normally stern lines fell away from her face as she raised a hand to her son’s cheek and gave it a loving stroke.

“Good night, my boy.”

“Good night, Mother.”

Hannah Thornton touched a hand to her daughter’s shoulder and she and Fanny disappeared into another room.

“Come.” John held out a hand to his wife and after a moment’s hesitation, she laid the tips of her fingers against his and allowed him to lead her from the room. Up the wide staircase they climbed,
bearing right at the top of the steps. He came to a halt at the third door and twisted the knob.

“This is yours.” He ushered her into the room. “No one has ever used it until now. Mother had the servants air it out and I arranged to have some decoration added – though, of course, if it does not suit, you must feel free to make any changes you wish.

He glanced about trying to see the room through her eyes. A fire crackled cheerfully in the hearth and he had chosen items he thought would suit her tastes. Floral silk paper covered the walls, lace curtains hung at the windows and a thick duvet of pale green was spread over the mattress. A dressing table and low stool were tucked into an alcove near a window, her silver brush set already laid out. A low table stood between a pair of embroidered slipper chairs near the fireplace, a soft, warm throw carelessly tossed over the back of one. Unlike the heavy furnishings and décor of the rest of the house, this room was feminine and cheerful.

“It is a lovely room,” she assured him. “I am sure I shall be quite comfortable.”

He caught her fingers in his again and led her across the carpeted floor laying his hand on the wood panel of another door.

“This leads to my room.” He curled his fingers around the knob to push the door open and he heard Margaret’s breath catch in her throat as she looked about. A four poster bed dominated the space. The blue silken coverlet spread over the wide mattress shimmered in the firelight like a lake under the sun. For all the size of the mammoth bed, the room was otherwise spartan in its décor. A desk and chair, an armoire, a small bookcase and another high backed chair near the fireplace were the only other items in the room and he realized for the first time how devoid of charm and character it was.

Gathering his courage, he drew in a deep breath.

“Should you ever have need of me, you are welcome through this door any time,” he said in a low, rumbling voice.

A furious blush stained her cheeks and her eyes cast wildly about the room.

“Oh! I… I am sure that I will not…” Her gaze finally settled on the intricately knotted folds of the cravat beneath his chin. “That is… I do not think I am… that I…” Hideously embarrassed, she pressed her lips tightly together to halt the nonsensical stream of words.

John laid a hand on her shoulder and shook his head. Her anxiety was palpable; the room was thick with the shallow sounds of her breaths and she was as jumpy as a hare caught in a trap.

“You must be tired.” He urged her through the door and back into her room cognizant of the relief which flooded through her tense frame. “I will bid you good night.”

He lifted her hand to his mouth and pressed his lips against her knuckles; gazed at her through the thick fringe of his lashes.

“Sleep well.”

He disappeared back into his own room and sank onto the edge of the bed. Scrubbing his hands over his face, he let out a shaky sigh. Though he had not expected this evening to end in any other manner, he could not pretend that he did not feel a keen sense of disappointment.

He wondered how long she would make him wait.

He loosened the cravat at his throat and flopped back against the coverlet, throwing an arm over
his eyes. There had been no time to woo her before. He could admit to himself that he had badly bungled things by proposing to her before he had ever taken a moment to court her. And now they were married and though her room was but a few feet from his, it felt as though miles separated them.

How did a man go about courting a woman who was already his wife?

Margaret startled at the soft tapping knock on the door which separated her room from Mr. Thornton’s. Glancing down at her night rail, she set aside her brush and clutched the edges of her robe tightly against her breasts.

She closed her eyes and drew in a bracing breath.

“Come in,” she called out softly.

“Do you have everything you need?” Her husband stepped into the room and glanced around. He had sent a maid to help her prepare for bed and saw the sumptuous wedding gown and veil carefully hanging on the back of the closet door and a steaming cup of tea on the dressing table where she sat.

“Yes. Thank you.” She fiddled with her hairbrush, nervously tapping the bristles against the palm of her other hand. “Will you not sit?” She waved a hand toward the pair of chairs near the hearth.

“Shall I ring for another cup?”

“I thank you, no.” He sat down and waited until she joined him, nervously perched on the very edge of her seat. Margaret stared at the delicate white-on-white embroidery of her gown and tightened the grip of her fingers around the edges of the robe. She had allowed Edith to pack a bag for her and had been startled by her cousin’s selection of nightwear. Margaret was intensely aware of the gossamer-like cotton beneath the robe, the thin straps and low neckline which exposed most of her shoulders and décolletage.

She could only imagine that Mr. Thornton would think her attire an open invitation should her grip on her robe falter.

An awkward silence filled the room and she cast about desperately in her mind for something to say to break the hideous tension.

“I never realized how long your hair was.”

The rumbling sound of his voice startled her from her own miserable musings.

“I…” She touched a hand to her hair, nervously twisting one thick lock around and around her forefinger. “Yes,” she said inanely. “It is quite… long.” Mortified, she closed her eyes, convinced he would think he had married a dullard.

She thought of the marital advice and counsel which Edith had whispered to her as she helped Margaret prepare for bed the prior evening and flushed at the memory. She was aware of the restraint Mr. Thornton was exercising; knew her duty as his wife.

And was terrified he had come to exert his rights over her.

His head was turned, his eyes fixed on the flames dancing in the hearth and she took the moment to study him. He was, she admitted, quite a handsome man. The open collar of his shirt allowed her a glimpse of the strong column of his throat and the dusting of dark hair at its base. He had a
regal profile with a straight nose and defined jaw and as he stared into the glowing flames, she privately acknowledged that she had long been intrigued by the brooding quality that clung to him. Heathcliff come down from the moors to run a cotton mill, she mused fancifully.

She thought now that perhaps it would not be such a hardship to be with a man such as he.

But… she barely knew him and she was not ready. Though she knew in the eyes of the church and the law – and in all probability – in the eyes of her husband – her state of readiness was unimportant.

He slowly dragged his gaze away from the flames to look directly at her. His lips quirked up in a brief smile and she noticed a tiny dimple flirt with the corner of his mouth.

“I have a gift for you. A wedding gift.” He drew a small jewelers’ box from his pocket and slid to the floor to kneel before her.

“I have nothing for you,” she whispered.

“It matters not. Go ahead,” he urged as he set the box in her lap. “Open it.”

Her fingers fumbled with the tiny catch on the box and finally flipped the lid back to reveal a pair of earrings. A match for her engagement ring, the fiery blue opals were beautifully set in an open scrollwork of vines and petals wrought in rose gold.

She swallowed, her mouth dry as paper. Her tongue darted out to lick her lips and she felt her heart clutch and then begin to race uncontrollably when she realized his gaze was locked on her mouth. She was suddenly aware of his close proximity; could feel the heat of his body where it pressed against her knees; the warmth of his breath on her face. When he tentatively reached out to touch a tendril of her hair, she bolted to her feet.

“It is too much!” she cried, shoving the box toward him.

“No!” Her robe fell open as she held out a forestalling hand and she saw his gaze drop hungrily to the exposed flesh of her breasts as they swelled above the low neckline of her nightgown with each frenzied and shallow breath. She flushed scarlet and clutched the robe closed with one hand, again thrusting the jewelry box toward him with the other.

“I do not want them!” Tears clogged her throat, making her words nearly unintelligible.

“Margaret!” Concerned, he rose to move to her side and she yanked her hand away when he tried to take it in his own.

All of the anxiety which had been building for weeks as the wedding drew near spilled forth now, fear driving her to cruelty. She backed away from him until she crashed into her dressing table, toppling the teacup and cracking the fragile porcelain into tiny shards.

“Do you think I can be bought with pretty trinkets?” she spat and flung the small box at him. He caught it in one hand. The distress and confusion evident on his face pricked at her conscience and served only to fan the flames of her own misery and resentment.

“Margaret, I do not understand? Please…” He reached for her again, stopping abruptly when she shied away from him.

“Please,” she hissed. “Do not play coy. I cannot stop you from taking what you have come here to
claim, but do not think my willingness can be bought with shiny baubles!” She swiped the heels of her hands over her face, wiping away panicked tears.

A thundercloud came over his face, the warmth of his expression fading to an icy coldness. She watched him change before her eyes as an indifferent mask settled over his features. Gone was the shyly hopeful bridegroom and in his place stood the aloof and proud visage of the master of Marlborough Mills.

“You are mistaken, madam,” he said in the haughty tone she had come to know – and hate – so well. “I realize you were an unwilling bride. Do you think I need or want an unwilling wife in my bed?” Though his voice was low and controlled, Margaret flinched as if he had shouted the words.

“I know you care not for me, but do you think so little of me that you believe I would come here tonight to forcibly assert my husbandly rights over you?” His savage tone lashed out at her like a whip and her face flamed as she realized how badly she had misjudged his intentions.

“I thought you would… it is your right and I…” Her words trailed off lamely and she covered her face with her hands. “Oh, please sir. Ignore me. I am making such a mess of this.” Margaret peeked through her fingers to see him draw in a deep breath and rake his long fingers through his hair.

“You are unhappy. His voice was rough and thick with barely leashed emotions. “And with good reason, for I know you never wanted this marriage - know that you do not want me. But what you do not seem to realize is that I too am trapped in an unhappy marriage.”

His shoulders sagged momentarily as the last remnants of hope and elation from the day were drained from him. Drawing himself erect, he tugged his vest into place and moved woodenly away from her. She flinched as the misery evident on his face warred with his innate sense of pride.

“I would have had you love me as I do you. I had hoped we could spend these first days and weeks coming to know each other.” He stared blindly at his hand wrapped around the knob of the door separating his room from hers.

“Perhaps if we could have done so, you would learn not to always think so unkindly of me… or of my intentions towards you,” he said bleakly.

Her breath caught in her throat when he raised a face wholly devoid of expression to her.

“But rest assured, madam. You shall sleep here unmolested.” He shoved at the door and disappeared through it, closing it behind him with a click so controlled it contained all the fury of a gunshot.

Margaret stared dumbly at the oaken barrier between them and sank to the floor on legs gone watery. Burying her face against her upraised knees, she wept.

Chapter End Notes

I have spent a fair amount of time researching Victorian era weddings online. Unfortunately, a great deal of the hits I found were for modern day couples planning a Victorian-themed wedding rather than actual details about customs and etiquette in
19th century Victorian ceremonies. Thus, the wedding I’ve written is a combination of facts learned through my research along with more familiar modern customs. One site suggested that a Victorian bride’s mother was escorted to her seat by the groom himself; another that it was for many years (and sometimes still is) custom in the U.K. for the bride to precede her maids down the aisle so that they may carry her veil and train; Victorian weddings most often took place before noon, thus the reception was called a “breakfast” and so forth.

I don’t know if Victorian couples kissed during the ceremony (but there was absolutely no way I wasn’t going to include a ‘you may now kiss the bride’ scene); I do know that it was tradition for the bride to cut the cake alone and serve pieces to her guests. However I do not know if Victorian couples fed a piece of cake to each other at the wedding breakfast. Some variation of this has occurred in one form or another for hundreds of years and again, there was no way I wasn’t including something along those lines in this story whether it be considered too modern a thing or not.

As a status update – I have a fair chunk of the beginning of the next chapter, the “morning after” as it were, roughly written but unedited. After that I have a lot of notes in my outline, a lot of scribbled partial scenes both on paper and in my head, but no real structure. I’m fairly fixated on the story right now but cannot say how long it will take to transcribe those scribbles and ideas into something coherent. I can say that it now looks like it will exceed my original guess of five chapters, which is kind of the norm for my writing as I never seem to know when to shut up.
Despite the soft mattress and luxurious bedding, Margaret slept poorly.

Early the next morning, she heard the sounds of her husband moving about on the other side of the door that connected his room to hers. Heard the deep rumble of his voice as he spoke to someone.

Gathering her courage, she belted her robe about her slender waist and tapped on the door, timidly pushing it open at his muffled response. She stood in the doorway between the two rooms – saw that a small table had been set up near the hearth complete with porcelain place settings, a silver domed platter and a pot of tea.

“The kitchen apparently believed we would prefer to break our fast here,” he said without turning. “Of course, you should take what you would like to your room…” He braced a hand on the mantle and leaned down to stir the hot coals in the hearth. “I would ask only that you keep our disagreements private.” He tossed a log onto the burning embers, staring blindly at the small flames licking the edges of the wood. “I know you are already well-acquainted with the fact that the staff likes to gossip as it was by their tittle-tattle that you have found yourself dragged into this mess.”

“Mr. Thornton,” she interrupted. “I wish to apologize.” Margaret folded her hands demurely before her and took one step into his room. “I had no right to speak to you as I did last evening. I had no cause to accuse you as I did.”

He set the brass poker aside and waved a tired hand. “Do not worry on it another moment, madam,” he said wearily.

“But I do,” she protested. “I wish I could say that I did not mean to cause you injury, but that would be a lie.” Her innate sense of honesty and fair play pushed her to speak candidly. “I was anxious. Miserable, to be utterly truthful, and I wanted you to be as well.” She swallowed hard and closed her eyes, embarrassed by her behavior.

“I was frightened –”

His head whipped up and around, incredulity painted on his features. “Frightened?” he asked. “Of me?”

“Yes… n…no,” she stammered. “Of the unknown,” she confessed. “You are right, Mr. Thornton. We do not know each other well and I presumed… Well, I let my anxieties take over and allowed my imagination to run wild.”

“Not for all the world would I wish to cause you unhappiness, Margaret.” Hurt was still evident on his face and he ducked his head, unwilling to meet her eyes.

“I know.” Hideously ashamed of the accusations she had flung at him the previous evening, dismayed by the hurt she had caused, she crossed to his side and laid a tentative hand on his arm.
“I would have your forgiveness, sir.”

He drew in a long, shuddering breath, bobbing his head in a short, jerky nod. “And so you have it, madam.”

“Thank you,” she whispered and knuckled a stray tear from the corner of her eye.

“Will you not sit?” He swept a hand toward one of the chairs positioned near the breakfast table and Margaret sank gratefully onto the offered seat.

“I… I also wished to thank you.” She folded her hands in her lap and gifted him with a tentative smile.

Genuine curiosity showed on his face as he took the seat opposite her. “For what?”

“For your kindness yesterday – to my mother and… and to Dixon.”

His brow furrowed in confusion. “I – I do not think I know…”

“The flowers,” she reminded him softly. “You arranged to have nosegays sent for both of them. It was a wonderful gesture and much appreciated by them… and by me.”

He flushed and rubbed a finger over the bridge of his nose in a nervous gesture. “I am pleased they liked them.”

“And my bouquet.” She thought of the still lush nosegay, the stems of which rested in a crystal vase on her dressing table. “It was you who chose the flowers was it not? The yellow roses?”

“You spoke nostalgically of them on one occasion when you joined your father and me after a tutoring session. I wanted you to have something to remind you of your home,” he admitted with a shrug.

“They are beautiful,” she said quietly. “A lovely and thoughtful gift. I thank you.” She played with the ribbon securing her hair in a thick braid, rolling the scrap of fabric nervously between her thumb and forefinger. “And the earbobs… I –” Mortified by the memory of her churlish behavior the prior evening, she covered her face with her hands.

“Margaret.” He reached out to tug her hands away from her face. “We are young and, God willing, have many years ahead of us. I would have us learn to live in peace and friendship – if not in love.”

Her mouth trembled and she nodded. “That is my wish as well,” she whispered in a choked voice.

“Will you not shake my hand on our pledge, Mrs. Thornton?” He stretched his hand across the table, dropping it slowly in consternation when she wrinkled her nose and grimaced comically. “What is it?”

“Oh, nothing. It is just… Mrs. Thornton. That is your mother!” Startled by the giggle which had escaped, she clapped a hand over her mouth.

“So it is,” he grinned. “And perhaps someday a moniker you will proudly bear yourself. But until then, it may be best if we call each other by our given names.” He held out his hand again. “Is that not something we can shake on, Margaret?”

She took his hard, callused hand between both of hers pumping it once with a decisive nod of her chin. “It is… John.”
He squeezed her hand gently in return, running a thumb over the bright shimmer of his rings on her finger and she could not shake the feeling that the exchange had been more binding than the vows they had taken in church. Settling more comfortably in her seat, she wrapped her fingers around the handle of the teapot and lifted it.

“Tea?”

At times painfully awkward, at others cautiously comfortable, they shared a breakfast of fluffy scrambled eggs, crispy bacon and toast with jam. And slowly, haltingly, they began to talk. At first of the mundane – debating opposing preferences for marmalade versus strawberry jam and a mutual longing for summer and the return of fresh grilled tomatoes on the breakfast plate.

He learned that she liked her tea sweet and milky; she remembered from his visits with her father that he preferred his black with only a hint of sugar.

Quickly exhausting the dubious merits of breakfast as a source of stimulating discussion, their conversation branched out further. By silent agreement, they stayed on the path of safe and neutral topics and quickly found a mutual love of literature.

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“Reading was a particular passion of mine as a child,” John confessed. “But all too soon life became too... busy,” he said with an oblique reference to his father’s death. “I have tried lately to carve out time once again to devote to books, though business at the mill often makes it difficult.”

“You have enjoyed your lessons with Father.” She stared at him over the rim of her teacup.

“Immensely,” he agreed. “But I fear I will need to work more diligently on my Latin and Greek if I am to continue on with him.”

She smiled with genuine pleasure at his enthusiastic praise for her father and the manner in which the elder gentleman made Plato come alive during their study sessions, and in his obvious eagerness to move onto a promised study of Homer.

He spoke of the appeal of the adventurous Ivanhoe to his youthful self. They admitted to a mutual fascination with Shelley’s Frankenstein and he smiled at her dramatic shiver as they touched on some of the more grotesque elements of the novel. He confessed to not having a taste for romantic poetry; she mentioned the recent pleasure she found in reading Wuthering Heights and her love of Pride and Prejudice.

“My mother enjoys Austen,” he said, surprising her so that she choked on her tea. He arched a brow at her reaction and she hastily apologized.

“I am sorry.” She used her napkin to mop of a small puddle of spilled tea. “But I find your mother to be so...” She searched helplessly for a less offensive word to replace the ‘severe’ immediately supplied by her brain when she thought of her husband’s mother. “…so controlled,” she finished with a meekly apologetic look. “I did not think Austen would appeal.”

He dipped his head in acknowledgment of what, in truth, was a fair assessment of his mother’s character. “Once upon a time,” he said in his rumbling baritone, “my mother was young and very much in love.” He stared past her shoulder into the flames dancing in the hearth. “I have distant memories – little more than wisps of dreams really, of our house filled with laughter.” He sighed,
shifting his gaze back to hers. “But life is often harsh. If you go to the cemetery, you will find two small gravestones next to my father’s.”

Margaret gasped sorrowfully and pressed her fingertips to her lips, waiting for him to continue.

“An older sister,” he confirmed, “and a younger brother.” He ran a finger pensively around and around the rim of his teacup. “My sister fell gravely ill just before her sixth birthday – I was but four years old at the time and have only the vaguest memory of her.” His lips curved in a sad smile. “My brother was stillborn.”

Forcefully reminded once again, that her husband’s family had, at times, been cruelly treated by fate, tears brimmed in Margaret’s eyes, one spilling over her lashes and she laid a comforting hand on his.

“Fanny was born years later – a surprise to us all - and with her arrival, for a short time, it seemed a spark of life had come back into the house.” There was a fondness to his tone when he spoke of Fanny at odds with the exasperation Margaret so often saw on his face when dealing with his sister.

“When I look back, I believe it was grief over my father’s passing…” The words seemed to stick in his throat for a moment and he coughed once to clear it before continuing. “…and the hardships which followed – the ugly talk of the manner of his passing, the loss of our home and way of life which caused my mother to develop such a defensive shell about her,” he mused. “In any regard –” he visibly shook off the melancholy pall which had fallen over him “– my mother has a romantic heart buried beneath that hard exterior. Miss Austen’s works,” he smiled, “are something you have in common.”

They passed the rest of the morning moving from topic to topic and eschewing the call to join the rest of the family for lunch. He admitted to never having the time or means to travel beyond London and she regaled him with memories of a trip to Paris with her cousin and aunt.

“I find that I am fascinated by America,” he confessed.

“Now that I find surprising,” she told him. “With your loyalty to and love of Milton.”

“I do not see why you express such surprise. Have we not spoken once already of how we in the North value our independence?” he reminded her. “I find I am drawn to the idea of America with its pioneers and wide open spaces spanning two oceans.”

“Truly?” she asked in wonderment. “I must admit those would be the last attributes which I would see appealing to a man such as you,” she said, thinking of the rigid outlook he seemed to hold on any manner of topics.

He wrinkled his nose in a self-deprecating grimace. “I will concede your point that I am too much an Englishman ever to permanently leave Milton, and yet there is a part of me that longs to see new places and experience different cultures,” he said with a faraway look in his eyes.

“The Great Exhibition promises to bring all the world to our doorstep,” Margaret ventured, and the two eagerly latched onto the topic of the Prince’s pet project set to open in the spring, the news reports of the finishing touches being done to the Crystal Palace and rumors of the many exotic and technological marvels reported to be part of the show.

And so much of the day passed until such time as Margaret, fatigued from the anxieties and excitements of the previous day as well as a lack of sleep, was unable to conceal her growing weariness.
“You must be exhausted.” John rose and held out a hand to her. Laying her fingers against his, she allowed him to pull her to her feet. “I think a nap would be in order, he said kindly and, looking forward to resting her eyes, Margaret eagerly complied.

She paused near the door between their rooms, conscious of his gaze following her movements. Resting a hand on the doorway, she drew on her courage with a deep breath.

“Perhaps… if you would like, we could talk some more over tea later.” Biting her lip nervously, she turned and glanced at him over her shoulder.

“I would. That is, I would like that very much,” he stammered, meeting her bashful look with his own. “I will speak to the staff and have it served here if that suits.”

Her chin dipped in acknowledgment and she slipped into her own room. Closing the door behind her, she pressed her back to the wood and laid a hand over her quivering stomach. Crossing the room, she slid beneath the covers and closed her eyes. Relief to have eased the animosity of the previous evening and intrigue of the things she had learned of her husband danced about in her head and it was a long time before she drifted into a peaceful slumber.

Chapter End Notes

A huge thank you to all who have acknowledged this story in one way or another. I confess I did not expect such enthusiasm for a story based on a book written over a 150 years ago and a miniseries which aired more than ten years ago. Thank you, one and all.

This is a shorter chapter than others but this scene seemed to cry out for a standalone chapter. Moving on to the next days, weeks and months of their marriage did not seem to fit here.

I’ve refined my outline and have actually handwritten (loosely) the better part of what will likely be the penultimate chapter. That will need tightening and editing and, of course, I actually have to write what comes between now and then.
For a variety of reasons they did not take a wedding trip. The mill, struggling to regain its footing after the strike, required John’s close attention and Maria Hale’s fragile health required Margaret’s. And, in truth, neither of them had yet felt comfortable enough to spend several weeks away with only the other for company.

“I have enjoyed our breakfasts together, Margaret.” John gazed earnestly at her from across the small table set up in his room on the third morning after their wedding.

“As have I.” Sensing an unspoken ‘but’ in his tone, Margaret spread a thin layer of jam over a piece of toast and waited.

“I usually rise much earlier and take breakfast with my mother.”

“Oh? And what time would that be?” She lifted her teacup to her mouth and took a sip.

“We eat at six and I am at the mill at half past.”

Margaret blinked slowly. She was not a lay-about but the thought of rising in time to be properly washed, corseted, dressed and coiffed for a breakfast which took place just past dawn was unappealing.

“There is no need for you to join us, Margaret.” Amusement lurked in his voice though his eyes were sympathetic. “It is a ghastly hour of the morning but Mother and I fell into the habit when I was a lad working at the drapers.” He popped a last bite of sausage into his mouth and chewed slowly, savoring the spiced meat. “Part of my duties were to light the fires in the stoves and accept deliveries, which required I be the first to arrive. Mother rose with me to be sure I at least had some toast and porridge in my stomach before I rushed off for the day.”

“But what will your mother think if I –”
“I am sure Mother will understand.” Sated, he leaned back in his chair comfortably, his features expressing confidence in his mother’s consideration.

Margaret nibbled at a piece of toast and thought privately that the older woman would prefer the morning ritual she had established with her son not be intruded on by anyone – most especially not by his new wife. She was pulled from her reverie when John set his napkin on the table and rose.

“I must check in at the mill today.” His eyes expressed his disappointment at the end of their brief respite from the ordinariness of their every day and searched hers for understanding. Margaret nodded her approval of his plans.

“And I would like to visit my parents.”

He inclined his head in agreement. “Then I shall see you later.” He shrugged into his frock coat and checked the time on his watch before tucking it into his pocket.

Margaret closed her eyes and drew in a long breath. She had enjoyed the last two days of quiet time spent getting to know him better and was loathe to give it up entirely. “Perhaps…” She laid her hands quietly in her lap and licked her lips nervously. “Perhaps we could take tea together some days… here…” Her gaze skittered over the small, intimately set table before rising to bravely meet his.

Surprised pleasure lit his face, warming the normally icy blue of his eyes to a color more reminiscent of a summer sky. “I would like that very much.” He opened the door. “Have a good day… Mrs. Thornton,” he tossed slyly over his shoulder as he stepped from the room.

An unfamiliar tingling sensation arrowed through her at the sound of her new title spoken in her husband’s low rumble. Margaret flushed and stared down at her tightly clasped hands, struggling to regain her composure before rising to prepare for her own day.

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As one of the maids helped to lace her into her corset and coiled her hair into a thick chignon at the nape of her neck, Margaret gnawed on her bottom lip and worried about the conversation which still lay before her. Dressed in a white blouse and blue-striped skirt, she made her way downstairs in search of Mrs. Thornton.

Tradition would dictate that it was now Margaret’s duty to assume the role of lady of the house. But she knew also that her mother-in-law took great pride in managing her son’s household. Margaret was reluctant to usurp Mrs. Thornton’s position, but was also unwilling to be treated merely as a guest in what was now her home.

She found her mother-in-law seated in the parlor, stitching a hem around the edges of a cotton napkin. Hannah Thornton glanced up briefly. “We’ll be needing new table linens.” She angled her chin toward the empty chair beside hers. “Will you sit?”

Margaret sank into the proffered chair and reached into the basket of linens on the floor to draw out another square of cotton and threaded a needle. The women worked in strained silence, and Hannah noted the neat and even stitches her daughter-in-law took with grudging approval.

“Mrs. Thornton.” Margaret pushed her needle through the snowy-white fabric and pulled the thread taut.

Hannah glanced up and coolly studied Margaret’s face, shrewdly interpreting the determined glint in the younger woman’s eyes. “You’ll be wanting t’discuss the running of the house,” she said flatly.

Surprise at being so easily read by the other woman showed briefly on Margaret’s face before she composed her expression again.

“Yes.”

And for the next thirty minutes, the two women spoke frankly. Margaret expressed her desire to spend time with her ailing mother; Mrs. Thornton spoke with pride of the household she likened to a tightly run ship. In the end they arrived at an agreement with which they could both live.
And so it was that the Thorntons slowly began to settle into some kind of routine to their days. Six days a week John rose early and disappeared to the mill before Margaret awoke an hour later, and on the seventh day they took breakfast together in his room before joining his mother and sister for church services.

Margaret spent her mornings shadowing her mother-in-law as she went about giving instructions to the staff regarding the weekly menu and the rotation of chores; went over the household finances and learned Mrs. Thornton’s accounting method detailed in the neatly printed entries of the household ledger.

Young married ladies of Margaret’s acquaintance in London and in Helston spent the latter parts of their mornings receiving or paying calls. But Margaret had been raised the daughter of a minister’s wife and had spent her childhood years watching and learning from her own mother. She gave sway to Mrs. Thornton’s opinions on most matters, but in this one thing she would not be budged and with John’s consent, a modest portion of the household budget now included funds set aside to allow her lend aid to those in need.

The small kitchen staff grew to love their new mistress for she spent several mornings a week in their company, kneading and baking extra loaves of bread and packing up modest baskets of food to take with her on her morning rounds. When Mrs. Thornton learned that one of Margaret’s regular visits was to the family of the man who had instigated the riot in the mill yard and another to the house of the principal architect of the strike, the tight leash she held on her temper slipped. But all the low-voiced growling threats and shouted demands could not sway Margaret from her determined path.

And though he privately agreed with his mother when she proudly declared that they had not relied on charity while dragging themselves out of poverty all those years ago, he easily recognized that Margaret’s opinion would not be changed on the matter and it was with his quiet, though somewhat grudging, consent that she carried on.

Most afternoons were devoted to visiting her parents and tending to her mother’s needs. Twice a week she stayed late and was joined by John when he arrived to share dinner with the Hales or to take his weekly lesson with her father.

“I want to thank you for your kindness to Mother. Ice cream is such a rare treat!” she raved of the dessert he had brought one evening as a surprise.

John laid a hand over hers resting in the crook of his arm as they made their way home from Crampton.
“It was but a small kindness.” He waved off her praise.

“Indeed it was not,” Margaret argued stubbornly. “For I know Mother enjoyed it immensely.”

“Then I am glad.” He sighed and looked toward the night sky. “She has few enjoyments of late, I think.”

Margaret stared at the cobbled streets beneath their feet and nodded jerkily as a knot of emotion welled in her throat, preventing her from speaking.

“A basket of fruit. A dish of strawberry ice… it seems a little enough thing to do if it brings her a momentary pleasure,” he murmured.

Her other hand crept up to join its mate at the bend of his elbow and she briefly leaned into him, leaned on him, as grief welled up within her, before straightening her back and continuing along beside him toward home.

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“I am considering going to London in the next week or two.”

Surprised, Margaret looked up to find her husband casually leaning against the open door between their rooms.

“London?” she queried. “Whatever for?” She shifted away from the mirror of her dressing table, fingers deftly continuing to tame the unruly mass of her hair into a braid before bed.

“Latimer thinks I may be able to drum up some financing for the mill.” His fingers reached up to tiredly loosen the knot of his cravat as he spoke.

“Are things so bad?” She tied the thick braid off with a scrap of lace and rested her hands in her lap, giving him all her attention.
John flushed, shamed to have to admit to his wife the precarious position in which he found himself and stared over her head to some distant point. “I thought perhaps you would wish to accompany me,” he said, ignoring her query. “You could explore the Exhibition while we are there. Enjoy a visit with your family.”

Recognizing his discomfort, she allowed him to change the subject. “I will write to Aunt Shaw immediately to let her know we will be coming to stay with them.”

“No.” John shook his head. “If you are in agreement, I had thought to bring Fanny with us and I would not wish to presume upon your aunt…”

If she was surprised by John’s willingness to include his silly sister on what was, for him, an important business trip, she hid it well. “Fanny!” she exclaimed instead. “She will be so excited. I know how much she has longed to visit London.” She smiled brilliantly and reached into a drawer for a piece of stationary. “Aunt Shaw and Edith will be insulted if we do not stay with them,” she insisted. “I will write to them this evening.”

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Margaret wandered through the Crystal Palace in awe. The building itself was an absolute marvel – an enormous conservatory made entirely of plate glass and iron. The vaulted ceiling arched high overhead, encompassing a handful of live trees around which the building itself had been constructed so as not to fell the towering elms.

Sparrows flitted above, their chirping all but drowned out by the chatter of the crowds, the rumble of the machinery, the tinkling of the fountains and cheerful music of the many organs scattered throughout the building.

A central fountain – twenty-seven feet in height constructed of four tons of pink glass – was one of the main attractions. A popular meeting place, its glass and spraying jets of water sparkled under the sunlight gleaming through the glass-paneled building.

Upon their arrival on the Exhibition grounds, John had immediately sought out Mr. Latimer who had also traveled from Milton with his daughter, Ann. Ann and Fanny soon wandered off together with the promise to meet everyone near the fountain later and Margaret wished John good luck when he took his own leave of her.
“I suppose it’s only right that we’ve invited people from all over the Empire, even if some of the exhibits are a little exotic,” Aunt Shaw said with a pinched look about her mouth.

“I think it is wonderful.” Margaret wound her way around a carved ivory throne on exhibit from India. “It seems all the world is here for us to see,” she breathed. Excitement thrummed through her veins and she glanced down at the listing of exhibits on display. Why, there was no end to the marvels spread out before them. Everything from the one hundred and eighty-six carat Koh-i-Noor diamond from India to kitchen appliances to a reaping machine sent by the Americans to tapestries, Sevres porcelain and silks from Lyon on display from France to the British made industrial machinery more familiar to her from Milton and beyond. Why, it would take at least two days to see everything, she thought in wonder.

Distracted by all there was to see and do, she only half-listened to Edith’s husband banter with his brother, Henry, who had joined up with their party after their arrival at the Exhibition, only tuning back in at the mention of her own name.

“…no need for heavy machinery to make money in London,” she heard Henry say. “Nor do we need to suffer the Northern climate, do we, Miss Hale?”

“Mrs. Thornton,” Edith reminded him in a murmured aside.

“Of course,” Henry replied with a dismissive flick of his fingers. “I ask the expert amongst us.”

“It is true,” Margaret demurred, confused by his manner. “The air is not so clean in Milton.” Unwilling to give him whatever it was he was fishing for, she wandered a short distance away. Drawn by the familiar rumble of a low baritone, she rounded a corner to find her husband. She paused, captivated by the sight of him, the power in his voice holding the rapt attention of his audience, his strong arms folded across his chest as he spoke with barely leashed passion.

“You are all here to see this fine machinery. Technologically, we are the envy of the world. If only there was a mechanism to enable us all to live together. To take advantage of the great benefits that come with industry.” He shook his head sadly. “But that will be for future generations. We can bring back marmosets from Mozambique but we cannot stop man from behaving as he always has.”

She saw the bleakness of his expression and felt the weight of the weariness of the burden he carried in a way in which she had never before understood.
“Do you think we can bring about an end to strikes?” she heard a man ask.

“Not in my lifetime.” John shook his head, his shoulders rising and falling on a long sigh. “But with time and patience, we might try to bleed them of their bitterness.”

John looked up, saw Margaret hovering in the background. Standing in a ray of sunlight streaming through the glass above, her quiet beauty was breathtaking to him. Just beyond her, he could see her family approaching, Henry Lennox in tow. He had met Lennox at dinner the prior evening and had felt the other man’s contempt in every look and biting word. Had seen and sensed his interest in Margaret and had silently seethed at the other man’s overt familiarity toward his wife.

He felt a quiet rage building within him – that this man, with his pampered hands and inherited wealth, should look down upon him with derision and hold his livelihood in contempt. And the rage battled with shame for he had lowered himself to coming to London in the hopes of finding financing to prop up his faltering business – and knew he would be leaving empty-handed. His failure to secure financial assistance ate at him and his anger bubbled over.

“There are those here who know of the depths we men in Milton have fallen to,” he said with a caustic glance toward his wife. “How we masters only strive to drive our workers into the ground.”

Stricken, Margaret’s fingers flew to her mouth to stifle a gasp and she spun away. Instantly ashamed, John covered the ground between them with a few long strides and wrapped his fingers around her arm to stop her hurried flight.

“I am sorry,” he murmured. “Margaret…”

“I most certainly do not think that,” she whispered. “Do you not know me at all?”

“I do. I do know. Please. Margaret,” he entreated, a pleading look on his face. “It is this town,” he said, bitterly aware of Londoners’ derision towards those who came from the Northern industrial cities. “It has been an exhausting day.” He threw a glance over his shoulder toward the gaggle of would-be investors who were drifting away and turned back toward her. “I am not myself. Forgive me.”

She saw the weariness in his gaze, the worry, and softened. “I –”
“There you are!” Fanny’s lilting voice interrupted them as she approached with Ann Latimer and the rest of their company followed suit.

“Mr. Thornton,” Henry Lennox greeted him, deviltry dancing in his eyes as John merely inclined his head in response.

“My brother is interested in dabbling in cotton,” Henry arched a challenging brow toward the taller man.

“I am not sure I am the one to speak to,” John replied, voice dripping with disdain. “I am not sure I would know how to… *dabble.*”

Confused by the barely leased hostility radiating from her husband and Henry’s smirking pomposity, Margaret shifted uneasily between the two men.

“I must go,” John said abruptly. “You may enjoy the machinery like an exhibit in the zoo. I have to go and live with it,” he bit out. “I must get back to Milton today.” He turned away.

“Give our regards to the Hales. You must tell them how the London break is suiting Miss Hale. Don’t you think, Thornton?” Henry called after him tauntingly. “Doesn’t Miss Hale look well?” he asked with a barely concealed grin.

John stiffened and turned back with a glare. Looming over the other man, he leaned slightly forward. “Of course, Mr. Lennox. I think my wife always beautiful.” His gaze flicked over her confused face, his expression softening slightly before reforming itself into harsh lines as he continued to address his would-be rival. “And she will be accompanying *me* back to our home.”

A beat of time passed as he awaited a returning challenge from the other man and when none was forthcoming, he swept Lennox with a dismissive glance and strode away.

An awkward silence descended over their group, broken only by Fanny’s low wail.

“Oh! John is such a stick in the mud,” she cried forlornly at the thought of her London adventure being cut short.
“Poor Thornton,” Mr. Latimer sighed. “It was I who tempted him to try to raise financing here for Marlborough Mills.” He glanced kindly at Margaret to explain. “He’s had to face all kinds of inquiries from starry-eyed Londoners who think they only have to snap their fingers to make a fortune in cotton.” He aimed a contemptuous glance towards Henry who had the grace to look embarrassed only to ruin it seconds later when he opened his mouth to speak again.

“I would hardly have thought a manufacturer would have appreciation for a show like this,” he scoffed.

Margaret swept him with a quelling glance. “You are wrong, Mr. Lennox. My husband is very interested in the world. Really, I know him to be for we’ve spoken of it often.”

Henry flushed at her reprimand and looked away. Satisfied that she had put him into his place, she turned her attention to her distraught sister-in-law.

“Fanny, there is no need for such a display.” She pulled a handkerchief from her reticule and gave it to the younger woman. “Hush now and stop your crying. I shall speak with John.”

Henry glanced at the hiccupping girl beside him, mopping her tears with a white cotton square bearing Margaret’s newly monogrammed initials before his gaze tracked a short distance away to find Margaret standing close to her husband. The mill owner was bent at the waist, his head lowered toward his wife’s to hear her quietly spoken entreaty and her hand rested lightly on the sleeve of his frock coat as she looked up at him pleadingly. Their hushed words and close proximity spoke of a quiet intimacy and Henry finally looked away in defeat.

“Come Fanny.” Margaret approached and took the younger girl’s hand in hers. “Your brother and I going to find some light refreshment and a place to sit and rest for a few minutes and would have you join us.”

“Are we staying then?” Fanny asked.

“For another day,” Margaret promised. “Then John must get back to the mill.” She lifted a finger to cut off Fanny’s protest. “We will have a lovely dinner out in London with my family this evening and spend all of tomorrow here at the Exhibition before taking the evening train back to Milton,” she said as she led the other girl toward John and away from Henry’s forlorn scowl.
John returned to a quiet house one evening after a dinner meeting with the other mill owners ran long. Climbing the stairs, he carried a lamp in one hand to light his way while tugging at the stubborn knot of his cravat with the other. Entering his room, he set the lamp down on a table and sat on the edge of the mattress with a weary sigh.

Tossing the cravat onto the bedspread, he flipped open the first two buttons of his shirt, rubbing his neck in relief as the starched collar gave way. Propping his elbows on his knees, he leaned forward and scrubbed his face with the palms of his hands, kneading away the tension headache throbbing behind his temples.

If business did not pick up soon…

He bent down to unlace his shoes and begin preparing for bed when a sound from Margaret’s room caught his attention. Craning his head over his shoulder, he held his breath, waiting and listening until he heard it again.

A muffled sob.

Concerned, he rose and crossed the room to stand quietly near the door separating him from her and there he could plainly hear the sound of her quiet sobs.

Her mother, he wondered fearfully? Surely someone would have gotten word to him if anything had happened to Mrs. Hale. Unable to bear listening to the heartbroken sounds his wife was making, he lightly rapped his knuckles against the wood, pushing it open without waiting for a response.

“Margaret?”
He hesitantly stepped into her room and found her seated at her dressing table, her face buried in her hands in an effort to muffle her cries.

“My dear!” He hurried to her side. “What is it?”

Margaret lifted a woebegone face to his as fresh tears welled in her eyes. Her skin was blotchy from crying, her nose red and her hair hung over one shoulder in a haphazard and unfinished braid as if she had simply forgotten about it halfway through. She groped for the handkerchief in her lap and lifted it to her eyes, mopping up the tears rolling freely over the apples of her cheeks.

“I… I am so-sorry.” She looked up at him through lashes wet and spiky from her tears. “I did not mean to disturb you.”

“You did not disturb me,” he promised. “What has –”

“Please.” She nervously knotted the damp cloth around and around her fingers. “It is nothing to concern yourself with, sir.”

“Nothing to concern myself with?” John hunkered down beside her and tentatively laid a hand over her restless fingers. “Whatever it is – it is obviously of great concern to you – and therefore, it is to me as well.”

“It… it is just…” Her lower lip trembled for a moment and she bit down hard to still it. “My friend… my friend Bessy… I’ve told you about Bessy, haven’t I?” she asked suddenly as if worried she had not acted with the requisite social niceties.

“You have,” he said soothingly. “You told me that she was very ill.” He remembered the sting of her words on that wretched day and the barely veiled indictment that the cause of her friend’s ill health somehow lay at his feet. Schooling his features into a calm mask, he waited for her to continue, though he had little doubt of what she would say.

“I stopped by to visit her this morning.” Her fingers clenched around the cotton square in her hand. “But when I arrived, her sister Mary… she told me… she said…”

Margaret dashed the back of her knuckles across one cheek in a manner similar to a child brushing away tears. “She died this morning. My friend is gone.” She raised a tear-swollen face to his. “I have never lost anyone I cared for before,” she confessed. “But now… now Bessy and I fear soon
A soft wail escaped her and she collapsed forward over their joined hands. John shifted onto his knees and awkwardly ran a soothing hand over her back while whispering gentle shushing noises under his breath. Her slender frame shook with the force of her sobs and acting on instinct, he freed his hand and wrapped both arms around her. She muffled her sobs against his chest and he rocked her back and forth, murmuring a soothing litany of words against her temple.

At last the storm passed and she turned her head until her cheek was resting against the ball of his shoulder.

“Poor Bessy,” she sighed. “I never knew her before she was ill. She was so often sick, so weary with pain and worry for her father and sister. But… but after she was gone,” she hiccupped, “her face was so peaceful, as if she had heard the call of angels and had seen the light of God.”

“Were you there all day?” Without giving it much thought, he continued rocking her back and forth, the gentle motion offering comfort to them both.

She nodded, brushing her face against his already damp shirt. “I waited for Nicholas – for her father, Mr. Higgins – to come home.” John missed a beat at the sound of the strike-leader’s name for he had not associated Margaret’s friend with the rabble-rousing mill worker until now.

“He seemed so surprised,” she whispered. “Bessy had been sick for so long, I think he believed she would never actually die.” She choked back fresh tears at the memory. “He ranted and raved in such a way…”

“Were you frightened?” John asked sharply.

“Oh, no. Not at all. He was simply raging against the unfairness of it all, I think.”

John had cause of his own to nurse a grudge against the labor leader, but he was not so hard-hearted that he did not feel an aching sympathy for the other man’s loss. “A parent outliving a child defies the natural order of things,” he murmured against her hair.

“That is just what Nicholas said. I believe the two of you are more alike than not,” she mused and despite her grief, she might have laughed had she seen the look of outraged indignation on his
“I stayed with him until he wore himself out and then I coaxed him into speaking with Father,” she murmured around the yawn she tried to hide against his shirt. Weariness claimed her in the wake of the emotion-filled day and her eyes fluttered closed as she sagged against him.

“Come love,” he whispered softly. “It is past time you sought your bed.” He eased back, ducking his head to meet her gaze with his own and rubbed his thumbs over the drying tracks of her tears. She nodded, but made no move to rise, lashes drifting closed before popping back open time and again.

“Allow me to just…” He reached out and with clumsy and inexperienced fingers, finished the last few plaits of her braid, securing the thick tail with a small length of fabric. “There!” he exclaimed, injecting a note of cheerful enthusiasm into his voice. Holding her hands in both of his, he pulled her to her feet and guided her the short distance to her bed.

“In you go,” he murmured, tugging back the linens to allow her to slide into the bed. He tucked the covers loosely around her and trimmed the wick of the lamp on the bedside table so that only a faint glow illuminated the room.

Her hand reached out from beneath the covers, groping for his.

“John,” she whispered. “Do you know what one of the last things Bessy said to her sister was?” She entwined her fingers with his to hold him near.

“I do not.” He sank down onto the edge of the bed. “Will you tell me?”

“She told Mary to give me her affectionate respects.” Tears welled again in Margaret’s eyes and she dashed them away impatiently. “That she would think of me at the very end…” She shook her head back and forth against the pillow.

“You were a good friend to her, Margaret.”

“She was a good friend to me.”

He nodded and stroked a gentle thumb over her quivering chin.
“You were both lucky to have found each other.”

She choked back another sob and nodded her head in violent agreement.

He raised her hand in his and pressed his lips against her knuckles. “Sleep now, my dear. Tomorrow will be another long day.”

“Will you stay?” she asked as heavy lidded eyes fluttered closed. “Until I am sleeping?”

“Of course.” He shifted, seeking a more comfortable perch on the edge of the mattress, his hip pressing against hers. Moments later, he heard a soft sough of breath escape her as she slid into sleep’s waiting arms. He waited for long moments after, until he was sure she would not awaken again soon.

“Sleep, my darling,” he whispered and pressed his lips against her forehead in a lingering kiss before reluctantly rising to return to his own room. He hesitated as he crossed the threshold, choosing to leave the door between their rooms open should she have need of him in the middle of the night before seeking his own bed and a restless night’s sleep.

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He found her pacing the foyer of her parents’ home one evening. Increasingly, the family’s attention was focused entirely on Maria Hale as each day saw her slipping further from them. John came to visit more often now, not to share a meal or take a lesson with Mr. Hale, but to offer what care and support he could to his wife and her family.

“John!” No sooner had he stepped through the open door than Margaret was upon him. “Thank God you are here.” She grabbed his hand in hers and tugged. He followed in her wake as she towed him into the small parlor at the end of the narrow hall.

“What is it, Margaret?” He set his hat on a nearby table and shrugged out of his overcoat. He sank onto a settee, watching as she resumed pacing a tight circle around the room, wringing her hands and muttering softly under her breath.

“Is it your goal to wear a hole in the carpet, my dear?” he asked in a bid to regain her attention.
She whirled to face him, her cheeks flushed and eyes fever-bright.

“I must speak with you John,” she said earnestly, dropping down beside him before once again falling silent. Long seconds passed and he waited, patiently watching her fingers nervously pleat and then smooth out the fabric of her skirt.

“Margaret,” he finally prompted. His brows winged up in surprise when she startled violently at the sound of her name and he laid a hand over hers to calm her.

“Can you not tell me?” he asked.

Her bosom rising and falling beneath the soft cotton of her blouse, she drew in a shaky breath. “I have a brother,” she exclaimed suddenly.

“Come again?” Startled, sure he had misheard, he asked her to repeat herself.

Having blurted it out once, Margaret seemed fractionally calmer. “I have a brother,” she said again. “Frederick.”

John shook his head as if to clear it. “No. that’s not… Neither you nor your father have ever –”

“We kept it from you,” she told him solemnly.

He saw a wince distort her features and knew he had failed to disguise the hurt and shock from showing. Withdrawing his hand from hers, he lowered his head for a moment and when he raised it again, his expression was composed.

“Tell me.” He gestured with one hand before folding his arms across his chest in a manner she had come to recognize as defensive.

“It is a very great secret.” Her eyes were soft with an unspoken apology. Haltingly, sometimes brokenly, she told him of Frederick’s story. Of the untenable conditions onboard his ship, of the decision to mutiny and the charges brought against him by a vengeful navy. “He lives in Spain,” she concluded quietly. “In Cadiz. I have not seen him in years… More importantly, our mother has not seen him…” Her words drifted off on a forlorn sigh.
The hurt John had felt at being deceived by his wife and the man he had come to look upon as both friend and father could not hold up against the compassion swelling in his breast.

“Your mother longs to see him,” he guessed, imagining his own mother’s fierce desire to see him should they be so cruelly parted.

Margaret nodded jerkily, her fingers once again worrying the striped fabric of her skirt.

“And… you think he needs to come quickly.”

“Yes,” she whispered hoarsely. “As soon as possible.” She raised her face to his, eyes damp and desperate. John gazed into her pleading face and tried to reconcile his instinct to protect her from any hurt against his deep-seated belief in adhering to law and order. He had taken a solemn pledge as magistrate to uphold the law and part of him balked at the idea of flouting the law to bring a wanted fugitive – a traitor to the Crown – into the country.

Yet, he reasoned, he had made vows before God to love and cherish his wife. And he knew he would willingly turn his back on concepts of honor and duty to country if it meant relieving her – even if only momentarily – of the burden of grief she carried every day on her slender shoulders. His mind moved furiously, thinking of what it would entail to slip Frederic Hale into Milton unnoticed by the authorities; dismissing the possible repercussions to him and his business should anyone discover the truth.

“You and your family are not well known in these parts,” he began, thinking aloud. “Chances are there are none in Milton who know your brother’s story.”

“That is true. I… I told only Bessy,” she admitted hesitantly.

John bobbed his head decisively. “Write your letter, Margaret,” he instructed. “Tell your brother…” Lowering his voice, he laid out the plan forming in his mind.

Relief, gratitude and a surge of affection had Margaret throwing herself into his arms. “Oh, John. Thank you,” she breathed. Pulling back, she clutchsed his hand in hers. Rubbing her thumb over his knuckles, she impulsively raised it to her mouth in a fervent kiss.
His breath caught in his throat and he watched her cautiously raise her head to meet his eyes, saw her pupils dilate as his own gaze roamed hungrily over her face. He lifted a hand, swept a thumb across her temple and felt the mad flutter of her pulse in response. He curved his hand over her cheek, fingers toying with a tiny gold earring, then curling around the back of her head before lowering his mouth to hers in a sweetly tender kiss. He cupped her face between his hands and their mouths parted and met again and again. He dedicated himself to an exhaustive study of the curved bow of her upper lip; she shivered and learned the pleasure to be found in the scrape of his roughened chin against hers.

At last they drew apart and he could feel the minute tremors which coursed through her. Expressions of wonder, fear and confusion raced across her face and she rose to her feet on trembling legs, walking away without a word.

He stood slowly, biting his lip and looked away. Bitter defeat swept over him and he silently berated himself for frightening her off. Margaret stopped in the doorway and turned back.

“I… Mother will be wondering where I am.” Yet, still she lingered, staring at him while nervously fingering the lace collar of her blouse. She touched the tip of her tongue to her lip, as if gathering up the memory and taste of their kiss and he felt hope bloom when a shy smile crept over her lips before she hurried from the room.

Chapter End Notes

Well, despite going on before about how I was being careful to keep the sequence of events from the book and movie in order, I sure blew the sequence out of the water in the prior chapter. I thought I was paying the proper attention but I mixed up the order of events. Bessy passes before John and Margaret are in London for the Great Exhibition in the television series. I dropped the ball. But, it is what it is, as they say.
Carrying an armload of freshly ironed linens, Margaret ascended the stairs to check on her mother. The sound of the door swinging open startled her and she turned to peer down into the dimly lit foyer.

“Who’s there?” she asked in a wavering voice.

“Is Mr. Hale in?

“Fred?” She stared at the young man as he stepped into the light. “Oh Fred! You’ve come!” She flew down the stairs, dumping the neatly folded laundry in a haphazard pile atop a table and threw herself into her brother’s waiting arms.

“Margaret!” Frederick Hale plucked his sister off her feet and spun her in a joyous circle.

“Silly boy! Put me down!” she laughed, giddy with the elation of seeing her beloved brother for the first time in so very long. “Come in. Close the door before anyone sees you.” The reality of Fred’s precarious situation quickly returned and she moved to close the door – almost slamming it into the face of her husband who had been waiting just outside so as not to intrude upon their reunion.

“John!” she exclaimed. “I did not see you.” She tugged him inside and motioned for him to close the door before turning back to face her brother.

“Oh Fred. Thank God!”

“Mother?”

“She is alive,” Margaret promised. “She is as ill as she could be, but she lives. Oh, Fred.” She took his hands in hers. “When I did not hear back from you, I feared my letter had been lost.”
“Your husband conspired to meet me at the train and bring me directly here.”

“You knew? You knew he was coming and you said nothing?” Margaret directed a look of surprised hurt toward John.

“I received word only two days ago that he would be on tonight’s train,” John explained. “I did not want to get your hopes up if there was any chance something should go wrong at the last minute. I went to the station and happily he is here now.”

She smiled, her eyes telegraphing her thanks.

“Margaret? Did I hear the door?” Richard Hale shuffled wearily into the room and Margaret was struck by how lost and frail he had grown over these last painful weeks. “Fred? Is that you?” Richard lurched forward and pulled his son into his arms. “Oh, my boy,” he cried. He locked his arms around Fred’s shoulders and the two men rocked in a desperate embrace.

“Come.” Richard stepped back and wiped his streaming eyes. “Your mother will be overjoyed to see you.” He pressed a kiss against the young man’s forehead. “What a blessing it is to have you here, my boy.” The older man’s gaze roved hungrily over his son’s face. “But Fred, tell me. However did you know to come?” He followed his son’s gaze to where Margaret stood.

“Margaret?”

“I… that is John and I thought it best to send for him, Father.”

For the first time, Richard noticed John standing quietly near the door. Fear momentarily gripped the older man, who had for so long fiercely kept his son’s whereabouts hidden. Margaret silently shifted closer to her husband and Richard relaxed upon seeing the compassion reflected in John’s eyes.

“I thank you both,” he said humbly before turning back to his son. “Come now, Frederick.”

Margaret hastened to follow her father and brother up the stairs, stopping her ascent halfway when she realized John was not behind her.
“Are you not coming?” She wrapped a hand around the banister and peered down at him.

“No.” He shook his head. “I think perhaps this is a time for your parents to be alone with you and Frederick.”

Pleased by his kind insight, she inclined her head gratefully and turned to join her family. Once again, she hesitated, then hurried back down the steps.

“And what will you do?” she asked, resting a hand on the newel post.

“I thought I would go through to the kitchen and make a cup of tea.”

“Oh!” Flustered, she ran a hand over a loose tendril of hair hanging in her eyes. “I shall send Dixon –”

“Margaret,” he interrupted. “I have not always been a man with a household staff,” he said, reminding her of the harshness of his youth. “I do not claim to be skilled in the kitchen, but I *can* boil water,” he commented drolly, and earned a slight smile from his wife as his reward.

“Oh, of course, sir. I forget. You are a man of many talents.” She dipped into a mock curtsey and the light-hearted moment was a much needed break from the oppressive sadness pervading the house.

“Go on now.” He made a shooing motion with his hands. “I shall join you later.”

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Margaret spent the rest of the evening with her family gathered around Maria Hale’s bedside. The frail woman had worked up a smile and joy had lit her eyes at the sight of her son’s face and he spent long hours perched on the edge of the bed, his large hands engulfing hers. Margaret nodded off at some point while watching mother and son whisper quietly to one another.

She awoke early the next morning. Dawn’s pearlescent light filtered through the curtains of her
old room. Sitting up in bed, she was unsure how she had arrived there and had only the haziest memory of the low, soothing rumble of John’s voice as he carried her to her bed. Flipping back the covers, she realized she was clad only in her camisole, drawers and stockings and she flushed as she desperately tried to recall whether it had been Dixon – or her husband – who had unlaced her from her corset. She went to the closet and pulled out an old robe she had left behind, belting it tightly around her waist.

As always, she stopped first at her mother’s room. She peered closely at the ill woman, relieved to see the faint rise and fall of her breasts beneath her nightgown. Her father slept in a chair near the bed and Fred was curled into a ball alongside his mother. Dixon sat in another chair, watching over her mistress with tired eyes. She made to rise upon seeing Margaret hovering in the doorway until the younger woman gestured for her to remain in her seat. Of John, there was no sight.

She made her way down the back stairs and found him in the kitchen, shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbow, a pot of tea at hand and furiously transcribing a column of numbers into a ledger.

“Have you eaten?” she asked.

He dragged his attention from his papers and looked up with tired eyes. “Not yet.” He stretched his arms behind his back and rolled his head from side to side with a pained wince.

Margaret dug out the necessary items to make one of the few things in her limited repertoire of recipes and soon set steaming plates of scrambled eggs and toast onto the table. She took the chair across from him, refreshing his cup of tea and pouring one for herself. Grief and weariness made for a quiet meal.

“I have missed you,” John said eventually.

“I… I am sorry.” She flushed with guilt, knowing that she had been neglecting her husband and his family much of late. “But, my Mother –”

He shook his head and laid a finger over his lips in a shushing gesture. “There is no need to apologize. Your mother requires your presence. You are exactly where you should be.”

Her lips quirked upward in a grateful smile and they lapsed back into a comfortable silence. “I had thought to go home and change,” he said after a while. “I will come back directly after.”
“Are you not needed at the mill?” she asked curiously. Despite her focus in recent weeks on her mother, she had some vague notion that the mill continued to struggle.

John hesitated and stacked his papers into a tidy pile. “Nothing that cannot wait.”

“John…” She waited until he looked up from his papers. “Tend to your business. The mill does not grind to a halt, nor do your workers’ need cease to exist because of what is happening here.”

“I do not like to leave you now.”

“I shall be fine and will enjoy a nice, long visit with Fred,” she assured him. “Now go. Clean up, change. Visit your own mother and check in at the mill.”

Thus assured, he rose. “Thank you for breakfast,” he said and when she smiled, he swooped down to press his lips to hers in a lingering kiss. “I will return after noon,” he promised. Margaret blinked in bemusement, pressing the tips of her fingers to her lips as she watched her husband hurry from the room.

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Later that morning, while their mother slept, Margaret drew Frederick downstairs to the parlor for a visit. She sat near his side seemingly unable to stop touching him. A hand on his shoulder, fingers entwined with his, brushing the hair from his forehead – as if by touch alone she could convince herself that he was truly here beside her.

After a while, Fred popped to his feet and began pacing around the room. Waiting and worrying about his mother had his nerves on edge and he twitched the lace curtains aside to peer broodingly out the window.

“Come away from the window, Fred,” Margaret called softly. “Lest someone see you.”

“What a dreary place this Milton is.” Fred resumed prowling about the room. “What was in Father’s head to come all this way and expose you to these people?” he asked broodingly. “And where is your husband? Should he not be here?” he asked ill-temperedly. “What a scowl that man has!” he muttered under his breath, reflecting on the man who had spent the entirety of the prior evening standing quietly watchful in the doorway of the sick room.
“Mr. Thornton has much on his mind, Fred,” Margaret protested quietly. “There are other matters requiring his attention this morning. Do not judge him too harshly. He has been very good to us.”

“Forgive me.” Chastened, Fred shot her a look begging her forgiveness. “Who am I to criticize when I have neglected you and Mother all these years? It pains me more than you will ever know that your life and mine must always be separate unless I risk court martial.”

“No!” Margaret shook her head frantically. “No, Fred. You mustn’t.” She patted the cushion beside her. “Come,” she beckoned. “Tell me about Spain.”

Her brother settled on the settee beside her, slouching comfortably into the cushions. “I have a good position there. And the girl I wrote you about? Dolores?” He rolled his head against the back of the settee toward his sister and smiled beatifically. “I only wish you knew her. You would love her. You and Father and Mother!” he exclaimed animatedly.

“Oh, Margaret.” The bubble of his joy was swiftly deflated and he blinked at her sadly. “It is what I wish for you, my darling sister. My heart broke when I received your letter after your wedding. Margaret, if only –”

“Fred, do not –”

“You tried to put on a good face,” Frederick steamrolled over her protest. “But I know you too well, little sister. I could read between the lines of your letter to your misery. Margaret, whatever was Father thinking to force you to wed such a man?”

A low murmur from just beyond the parlor caught her attention and she squeezed her eyes tightly closed at the now familiar graveled tone of her husband’s voice. She worried and wondered what – if anything – he had overheard but his expression as the two men entered the room gave away nothing. He settled onto a chair in the corner, seemingly content to listen to the others while away the hours reminiscing about happier times and she set her concern aside.

When Dixon appeared in the doorway to summon them, it was John’s strong arms that steadied her when she attempted to stand on legs that threatened to buckle. In the long, sad hours of the vigil that followed, she was aware of him standing in the doorway, a quiet presence ready to lend a helping hand to her mournful father and of his concerned gaze bent upon her.
Her throat tight with unshed tears, Margaret watched as her mother’s gaze roved one last time over the faces of all whom she loved until at last her eyes slid closed on a long, final exhalation of breath.

“She’s not gone.” Fred clutched his mother’s hand in his. “Margaret?” Though he was the elder brother, his quavering tone was that of a disbelieving child and she tried to smile at him reassuringly. Turning, she saw her father leaning heavily against the doorway, John nearby with a hand on the older man’s elbow. Bending forward, she pressed her lips against her mother’s forehead, one tear splashing on Maria Hale’s face in a final benediction, before rising to make a place for her father at his wife’s side.

She wobbled once upon gaining her feet and then instinct propelled her across the room and into the comforting arms of her husband.

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“Fred! You cannot stay. You must leave. *Before* the funeral!”

Margaret grasped her brother’s arm and gave it a little shake.

“Margaret, no! What are the chances this man even knows about me, let alone that he would learn of Mother’s passing and look for me at the funeral? With Aunt Shaw and Edith in Italy and unable to make it, there will be few people there as it is. I am staying!” Fred yanked away from his sister’s grasp, defiantly folding his arms across his chest.

Margaret turned her head to the woman standing in the doorway. “Dixon? Tell him!”

A sad smile crossed the other woman’s face, her plump chin quivering with suppressed emotion. “Mr. Fred,” she said hesitantly. “The mutiny was a very *big* story at the time —”

“It was in all the local newspapers, Fred,” Margaret interrupted urgently.

“And there’s still a *big* reward, Mr. Fred. A man like Leonards — that is all he would care about. We don’t want him poking his nose in around here.”
“Leonards?” Once again, John was seated in a chair in one corner of the room; always nearby while still trying to give the small family some sense of separation and privacy. “Is that not that the name of the fellow Jane is always going on about?”

“Jane?” Margaret wondered in some astonishment. “Our Jane?” Her brow furrowed in thought. Devoting so much of her time to her mother in recent weeks, she had not been paying much attention to what had been happening at their home, but…”

“I believe you are right, John.”

“Do you know this Leonards chap, Margaret?” Frederick demanded.

“I… No.” She laid a hand over her forehead for a moment and collected her thoughts. “No. Our maid, Jane, is engaged to a man who goes by the name of Leonards.”

“He did say he had a fiancée working at one of the big houses in town,” Dixon added helpfully.

“What are the odds?” Margaret breathed. “And all the more reason for you to go, Fred. Jane will certainly know of Mother’s funeral arrangements. If she mentions it to him… Oh, Fred, don’t you see the danger?”

“I wish I’d met this Leonards,” he said bitterly. “It is wrong that I should have to leave before Mother’s funeral. I’ve a good mind to face it out and stand trial.”

John looked up sharply at the sound of Richard Hale’s sharp cry of dismay.

“Have a care, Frederick.” He tilted his head meaningfully toward the older man. Fred blinked, surprised by the other man’s interference, though he modulated his tone in deference to his father’s distress.

“If only I could find witnesses and defend myself to show what a monster Captain Reid was!”

“You think a court martial is where justice is administered,” Richard sighed tiredly.
“Fred has never tried to defend himself.” Margaret eagerly latched onto the idea of trying to clear her brother’s name so that he could return home a free man.

“How can I?” Fred exclaimed. “I cannot commission a pamphlet even if anyone would bother to read it.”

“What about a lawyer?” Inspired, Margaret began to speak slowly as a plan formed in her mind. “I know a lawyer who is honorable and clever! I am sure he would if I… Well, if we asked.” She jumped up excitedly and clasped her father’s hand in her own. “Mr. Henry Lennox, Father. You remember him.”

“Do what you will.” Richard agitatedly rolled his head against the high back of his chair, clutching the blanket tucked around his legs with his free hand. “Write to Henry if you must, but do not keep Fred in England!”

“Lennox?” Startled by the sound of her husband’s low growl, she spun to face him.

“You would call upon Lennox to help?” John hunched forward in his seat, his hands dangling loosely between his legs as he stared into his wife’s face and she flinched at the look of hurt and bitter anger glinting in his eyes.

“Do you know him, John?” Richard asked wearily.

“We’ve met,” John spat, never breaking eye contact with his wife.

“And what did you think of him?”

“I have little enough of an opinion of him,” John sneered. “But then, I had only a brief opportunity to meet him.” He leaned back in his chair, his eyes a cold and icy blue. “I would defer to Margaret’s… superior knowledge of the man and his character.”

“John…” she pleaded.
“Henry Lennox?” Fred’s voice pulled her attention from her husband’s brooding face. “Edith’s brother-in-law?”

“Yes.”

“He might be all right,” Fred said hesitantly. “I could write to him about all the details.”

“Yes.” She moved to her brother’s side and laid her hands on his forearm. “But you must leave tonight by the night train. I shall accompany you.”

“I will take him.”

“He is my brother.” Margaret said in response to her husband’s autocratic declaration. “I would that it was I who saw him off.”

“And you are my wife.” John reminded her. “I’ll not have you traipsing about alone after dark, Margaret. There are men desperate enough these days to do anything, even attack a woman if there is a chance she has coin in her purse.” His eyes flashed, daring her to defy him on this. “Say your goodbyes here.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it abruptly, recognizing the mulish look on her husband’s face meant she was doomed to failure should she choose to pursue an argument.

“Thank you,” she acquiesced.

John yanked his frock coat from the back of his chair and shoved his arms into the sleeves. “I shall return later with the carriage to take Frederick to Outwood Station in time to meet the last train to London this evening.” His expression briefly softened and he laid a comforting hand on his tutor’s arm. “All shall be well, Richard,” he assured the older man and with a curt nod to the others, he strode from the room.

“John!” Margaret hurried after him. “Where are you going?”

“I believe you have a letter to write to Mr. Lennox, Margaret.” She shrank back at the coolness of her husband’s expression. “And I’ve work enough of my own to attend.”
“John,” she protested. “I… Henry… I believe he can help us.”

“Yes, madam. I am sure he would be delighted to assist you in any manner he can.” Irrational though it was, John seethed at the idea that her first instinct had been turn to the other man for help. He snatched his overcoat from a peg near the door and slipped it on.

She laid a hand over her breast, as if to quiet the wild thumping of her heart and took the few short steps necessary to close the distance between them. Some spark of feminine awareness flared to life and she recognized the jealousy behind her husband’s bitter words.

“It is not a competition, John.” She clutched his top hat to prevent him from leaving before she said her piece. “I know who my husband is,” she told him with a pointed look.

His shoulders sagged, and embarrassed that his loss of control had led him in any way to impugn her character, a flush stained his cheeks. “I apologize. I was out of line.” He fixed his gaze at a distant point over her head. “It is true – I do not care for the man, but if you believe he can assist Fred, then you must do as you will.”

She held his hat toward him with a forgiving smile. “Go,” she told him. “But come back in time for an early dinner. We shall raise a glass to Mother and send Fred off with a full belly.”

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Margaret had received a missive from Henry Lennox sent by an express rider indicating that he had met with Fred and would look into the legalities of the case. More importantly, he had assured her that he had delivered Fred to his ship. Knowing her brother was safely on his way back to Spain, she pushed John’s frightening tale of an encounter with a drunken man who had identified and accosted Fred on the train platform from her mind and focused instead on the ritual of burying her mother. Worry for her father had her hovering over him night and day until finally, two days after the funeral, he sent her home.

“I appreciate your concern, my dear. But I would like to be alone now to deal with my thoughts and perhaps to wallow for a time in my memories.”

“But, Father…”
“I shall not starve, Margaret. Dixon will take good care of me.” He patted her hand with his. “And you may come to visit as much as you should like, but you have a husband and a home requiring your attention.”

She dined that evening with her husband and his family. Mrs. Thornton had kindly pretended not to notice her daughter-in-law’s barely existent appetite and for once no one attempted to rein in Fanny as the young woman singlehandedly filled the void in the conversation with her silly chatter.

After dinner she joined her husband in his study, quietly curling up in a chair with her needlework while he labored over his papers. Long weeks of worry and grief caught up with her and she raised the back of her hand to her mouth to stifle a yawn. A glance at the clock showed that it was only just past seven in the evening, but she could no longer keep her eyes open.

“If you will excuse me, John, I think I shall go up.” She set aside her embroidery and crossed the room to his side, waving him back into his seat when he began to rise.

“Of course, my dear. You must be exhausted.” He twisted in his chair and caught her hand in his, pressing his mouth against her knuckles in a tender kiss. “Sleep well.”

She was halfway up the stairs when she heard a small commotion at the door and a servant’s voice announcing to John that a police inspector wished to speak with him. Remember that her husband was the local magistrate, she tried to ignore the inspector’s presence in her home, but could not shake the sense of foreboding which gripped her. She slipped down the stairs and stood outside John’s study door.

“I am sorry to disturb you, sir, but I need to speak with you.”

“Of course,” she heard John reply. “It’s Mason, is it not?”

“Yes sir,” Mason replied. “Well… you see, a man died at the infirmary.”

“Was he ill?”

“Yes. The doctors think that the man had a drinking habit and some internal complaint –”
“That does not seem a matter to bring before the magistrate,” John commented.

“No sir. Normally it would not. But this fellow was found along the embankment near Outwood Station before he was brought to the hospital and it may be he was involved in a fight at the station prior to his death.”

Cold terror coursed through her and Margaret swayed dizzily, slapping a hand to the wall to support herself.

“I see,” she heard John say in a neutral voice.

“Yes, well…” Mason cleared his throat. “You see, sir, we… Well, we have a witness who claims you were there.”

“You have a witness who saw me…?”

“No, sir. That is, the witness claims to have seen your carriage leaving the station that evening and I hoped that perhaps you could tell me if you saw anything amiss that evening –”

Knowing John would shy away from telling an outright lie to an officer of the law and frightened that he would implicate himself, Margaret buried her face in her hands. He had helped to bring Fred home and then back out of the country safely, compromising his own innate sense of honesty in order to bring her family together one last time. Drawing in one long, calming breath and then blowing it back out again slowly, she pushed the door open with one hand.

“John!” she scolded, pasting a questioning smile on her face. “You did not tell me we had company.” She moved to her husband’s side and glanced toward the police inspector with a cool and pleasant nod. “Would you care for some tea, Officer…?”

“Mason, ma’am. Inspector Mason. And no, ma’am, that is no tea, ma’am.”

“Inspector Mason.” She smiled pleasantly and shook his hand.
“Margaret.” John fixed his gaze on hers and inclined his head toward the door. “Inspector Mason and I have something to discuss and then I –”

“Yes, John,” she interrupted, pointedly ignoring his warning look. “I could pretend that I did not already overhear your conversation.” She threaded her hand into the crook of his elbow. “But I do not like to lie to the authorities.” She lowered her voice to a coquettish stage whisper and leaned forward as if to impart a great secret. “I must confess, sir, I was standing outside the door listening,” she told the inspector, her dimpled smile hiding the cold terror dancing along her nerves.

“Yes, ma’am. I mean…” Flustered by her sudden appearance, Mason struggled to gather his thoughts.

“Am I to understand that you believe my husband to be involved in a man’s death?” she asked, her voice suddenly, deadly quiet.

“Well ma’am, it is just that we have a witness –”

“What night did this altercation supposedly take place, Inspector?”

“Margaret.”

She again heard the warning tone in her husband’s voice and felt the tightening of his arm beneath her hands. She pressed her fingers into his flesh and kept her gaze pleasantly affixed to the other man.

“Inspector?” she prompted.

Mason coughed and glanced at the notebook in his hands. “Thursday, the twenty-sixth. Between the hours of eleven and midnight.”

“Well then.” She summoned a bland smile to hide her jumping nerves. “It could not have been John’s carriage your witness saw, for he was with me that evening.” She arched a brow, challenging the inspector to doubt her word. “You may have heard that my mother passed just last week.”
Margaret inclined her head graciously before going on. “And my husband and I are still… newly wed.” She pressed her cheek against John’s bicep and cast a shy smile into his face. “I can assure you, Inspector, my husband has been most attentive, especially at this trying time. He has barely left my side.” She pursed her lips and cocked her head to one side. “If you would like, I could attest that my husband and I were together all evening on the twenty-sixth.” Unable to believe her own audacity, a flush rose naturally to her cheeks and she fluttered her lashes, burying her face in John’s sleeve.

Mortified by the implication in her words, Mason cleared his throat and stared blindly at the notebook in his hand. “No, ma’am. That won’t be… that is I mean to say…” He shook his head violently and loudly cleared his throat. “I am sorry to have disturbed you both, especially at such a time. It was only that our witness was so positive.” He closed his notepad and stuffed it into his breast pocket. “I will be sure he knows he was mistaken. I hope you will forgive my impertinence, but I had to do my duty.”

Margaret accepted his stammered apology with a serene tilt of her head, though everything inside her was screaming for the man to take his suspicions and leave.

Desperate for an escape from the awkward turn the conversation had taken and unwilling to challenge the young bride, he thrust out a hand toward John. “Good evening,” he said. “I’ll be on my way now.”

John, having been rendered mute by his wife’s foolhardy display, managed to shake the inspector’s hand and mumble some response. The couple watched him scurry across the foyer and let himself out and John collapsed into a chair as Margaret closed the study door and sagged against it in relief and shock at her brazen behavior.

“Margaret.” He rubbed a hand over his face, his palm rasping against the dark stubble covering his jaw. “What were you thinking?” he whispered. “I am going to have to go to the police station tomorrow and tell the truth.”

“You cannot!” she protested.

“Fred is safely back in Spain by now,” he reminded her. “And the police have no reason to suspect that he was ever in Milton, let alone involved in this incident.”
“I am not worried about Fred!” she exclaimed. “I am worried about you!”

“My dear, the witness does not claim to have seen me on the platform, or anyone near the man who has died. He simply mentioned having seen my carriage nearby.”

“And what reason will you give for being at the station that evening?” she challenged hotly.

“I do not know,” he said with a weary sigh. “I will tell them I was taking a family member to meet a train. It is the truth.”

“What family member?” she pressed. “Why were they here? Where were they going?” She rapidly fired the questions at him to show how easily the police could expose his excuses. When he merely met her gaze with his own stubborn look, Margaret pressed a tightly clenched fist against her stomach as if by doing so she could stop the roiling nausea gathering there. “Would you expose me as a liar?” she asked, quietly changing tack, willing to use any weapon in her arsenal to protect him from himself, even guilt.

“It will be a simple enough thing to convince them that you acted misguided, seeking only to protect your husband.”

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the door. “I may have been foolhardy,” she admitted. “But I do not care. I cannot allow you to… you cannot…” Her breath escaped on an exasperated sigh. “You know if word of this gets out – that you were at the station at that time… it will not matter whether you convince the police of your innocence or not. The damage will be done. Even a hint of scandal would have a negative impact on your standing in society.”

“I do not like it, Margaret. I am a magistrate sworn to uphold the law. It was one thing to turn a blind eye to bringing Fred home. It is entirely another thing altogether to circumnavigate the law for my own benefit. It does not sit comfortably with me.”

“I know,” she said sympathetically. “I know that. But there are too many people who rely on you, John. All your workers. Do you think the mill could survive this kind of scandal? What would your buyers think?”

Visibly deflated, he covered his eyes with one hand and shook his head.
“Your mother… and Fanny. What will they do?” she pressed. “They need you too.”

“And you, Margaret? Do you need me?” he asked tiredly.

She slid her hands behind her back, flattening her palms against the door. “Why would you ask that?” she said in a quavering voice.

He dropped his hand from his eyes and propped his elbow on his desk, wearily rubbing his fingers over his brow. “I cannot help but remember that your first instinct was to turn to Henry Lennox for help,” he reminded her.

“Oh, John.” She heaved a long sigh. “I explained. He is a lawyer and friend of the family. I –”

“And I overheard you.” He cut off her explanation. “I was not trying to eavesdrop, but I heard you and Fred talking.”

She shook her head, confusion evident on her face. “I do not know what you…”

He shoved his chair away and sprang to his feet to patrol the tight confines of his study. “You were… You were comparing his joy in finding love, to the misery of your lack of it.”

She pushed away from the door and moved to his side. “Fred spoke of a letter I wrote months ago.” She laid her fingertips on his arm to still his agitated pacing.

“And now?”

“I do not know,” she admitted. “I do not know what it is I feel. But, John… I know it is not misery.” She wanted nothing more in that moment than to erase the look of grim resignation on his face. Rising onto the tips of her toes, she laid her hands on his chest. Curling her fingers into the fabric of his shirt, she insistently tugged until he lowered his head towards hers. Eyes open so that she could watch his reaction, she tentatively pressed her lips to his.

Beneath her hands, she felt his heart slam hard against his chest, heard the breath catch in his throat. When she did not immediately move away, his hand slid to the small of her back, shifting her closer still. Pressed together from chest to hip, she closed her eyes, wrapping her arms around
his neck and strained upward on her toes until they ached.

He touched his tongue to the seam of her lips and she gasped, her head swimming dizzily when he deepened the kiss. He cradled the back of her head in his palm and banded the other arm around her hips, lifting her until her toes barely grazed the ground. At last they tore apart, chests bellowing to fill starved lungs.

Faces close, she stared at his mouth for long seconds before again touching her lips to his in a chaste kiss, gently kicking her toes to find purchase on the floor. He lowered her, bending forward at the waist to steal another kiss before loosening his grip on her.

Fingers pressed against her lips, she stumbled back toward the door, dazedly groping for the knob. Stopping, she raised her hands to her disheveled hair, shoving loose tendrils away from her face. She tugged at her blouse and twitched her skirt into place.

“Good night.” She yanked the door open and promptly knocked herself in the head with it, ruining her attempt at a dignified exit. He raised a fist to his mouth, hiding the grin that threatened to break loose when she winced and rubbed two fingers against the tender spot. She peered at him and saw the amusement lurking in his eyes and rolled her own in response.

“Good night,” she repeated and slipped from the room, settling for a quick, if inelegant escape. Pulling the door closed behind her, she sagged against it momentarily before making her way to her room on legs that trembled still.

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Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I do not know if it warrants note or not, but the tenor of the story changes slightly in this chapter. Though I don't believe it to be overtly explicit in nature, intimacies do lie ahead...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I have received a letter from Mr. Bell.” Richard Hale greeted his daughter with a wave of the paper clutched in his hand.

Margaret drew off her bonnet and set it aside. “We have not seen him since Mother’s funeral,” she said as she slipped out of her coat. “I trust he is well?” She settled in a chair near her father.

“He has made the most extraordinary suggestion.” Richard peered at her over the top of his spectacles.

“Truly?” She smiled at her father’s faintly scandalized tone. “Well then. You must tell me straight away, Father.” She shared an impish look with Dixon who had bustled into the room bearing a tray laden with a tea pot and cups.

“Go on, Father.” Margaret poured the tea. “Do not keep me in suspense a moment longer!”

Richard accepted a cup and saucer and balanced it in one hand while skimming through the letter in the other. “Ah, yes. Here it is. He mentions there is to be a reunion of all my Oxford friends and he suggests that I break away from here and join them.” He huffed out a little laugh. “Extraordinary, don’t you think?”

“Why ever so, Father? I know you have wished to attend previous reunions.”
“I am still in mourning, Margaret. How would it look?”

“Oh, Father.” She set her cup aside with a little clatter. “No one who knows you would ever doubt your love and devotion for Mother, nor your grief at her loss. I think you should accept Mr. Bell’s invitation.”

“Do you truly, Margaret?”

“Why yes, of course.” She leaned forward and laid a hand over his. “In truth, I have been worried for you, Father. You have kept to yourself too much since Fred’s leaving and Mother’s passing, with only my visits and Dixon for company.”

“And my pupils. And John when he can get away from the mill.”

“Yes, but you do not get out as you once did. And you turn down invitations to dine with us more often than you accept. Did you think I do not notice?”

His lips curved in a crooked smile. “You are a good girl, Margaret.” He patted her hand. “You have a kind heart, like your mother.”

They shared a smile and the memory of the woman they had both loved.

He pursed his lips contemplatively and glanced at the letter in his hand. “Perhaps I will go to Oxford…”

“Wonderful!” Margaret beamed, happy to see something spark to life in her father’s eyes.

“I could not leave you, my dear, if I was not assured of your happiness,” he told her. “It gives me great comfort to know you are settled and content with John.” He took a sip of tea and peered at her slyly over the rim of the cup. “Of course, it is how I knew it would be. I hope you have learned to trust an old man’s instincts in matters such as this.” He smiled to himself and stirred a miserly bit of sugar into his tea. “I always knew you would be safe and happy with John…”

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Her father’s words played over and over in Margaret’s head that evening as she prepared for bed. Was he right? Certainly she could concede that she was safe with John. Her comfort and care were of primary concern to him and despite his reserved nature, he was unapologetic in showing it.

But happy? Content?

Margaret dragged a brush through her hair, the steady, rhythmic strokes at odds with the turmoil she felt within. She thought ‘unnerved’ was a better descriptor of her state of mind, for she often found herself drawn to her husband – sometimes shockingly so.

Though she was unschooled in such matters, she was deeply aware of his desire for her; could all but feel the scorching heat of his brooding, hooded gaze when it rested upon her. She was mindful of the intensity of his feelings and knew on an instinctive level that he kept those feelings on a tightly-held leash. They touched and kissed more often now and she enjoyed the strength of his embraces and the heat of his mouth moving on hers.

But she was also frightened at times by her own response and the accompanying sense of being out of control during those moments when an answering need roared to life within her – tiny electric jolts bursting to life, traveling along her nerve endings and settling achingly in deep and secret places. She stared into the mirror, saw the flush riding high on her cheeks, felt that indescribable something pulse and flutter within her.

Settled? Content? Her lips curved in a rueful smile. No, she thought. Those were most certainly not the words to describe her roiling feelings.

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She was like a ghost. A pale and silent wraith drifting through their home. John watched her and worried. From the moment Mr. Bell had arrived bearing his terrible news, Margaret had withdrawn into herself. Dazed and listless, she had ceded the planning of the funeral to him and there were times during the service when he thought it was only his arm around her which kept her upright.
Back at the house, she had stood at his side accepting condolences with a dry-eyed and vacant stare. She barely spoke throughout the day, only cursorily responding even to Edith’s expressions of concern. As darkness fell, she excused herself and he watched her slowly ascend the stairs, one hand wrapped around the banister as she dragged her feet from one riser to the next.

John felt despair settle over him. His own grief at the sudden loss of the man he had long considered as friend and had recently come to view as father, coupled with his concern for Margaret weighed heavily on him. With a murmured apology to Margaret’s aunt and cousin and to his mother and sister, he followed in his wife’s wake. Rapping his knuckles lightly against her door, he pushed it open to find her room empty. A faint light glowing on the other side of the adjoining door caught his attention and following it, he found her in his room. She was standing near the window, staring forlornly through the glass at the amber glow of the gas street lamps below.

He approached her and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Oh, my dear.” He ran a thumb over the nape of her neck. “Would that there was something I could say or do to comfort you.”

She turned then, her face crumpling with his words. “Just… would you…”

She took a step toward him and he opened his arms to her. He drew her to his chest and bent to rest his cheek against the crown of her head. The dam holding back her emotions finally broke. Her shoulders shook with the force of her sobs and he ran one hand up and down the length of her spine in long, soothing strokes, crooning nonsensical words of comfort into her ear.

Long moments passed and at last she quieted, sagging with exhaustion against him. She leaned back and looked up at him, her lips twitching in a sad smile. He cupped her face in his hands and pressed his mouth to her forehead in a lingering kiss. Rolled his lips over one cheek and then the other, sponging up her tears. Brushed a kiss onto the tip of her nose and touched his mouth gently to hers.

She curled her fingers around his wrists and rose onto her toes, her mouth opening eagerly to his and the kiss quickly changed from one meant only to offer comfort to one now passionate and needy. Margaret’s hands slid from his wrists to clutch at his forearms and she pulled herself closer to him. He groaned, flattened his hand against the small of her back and curled the long fingers of his other hand around the back of her neck, holding her a willing captive.

Her hands moved restlessly over his chest, fingers clutching his shirt in tight fists as she strained to get even closer. A serrated moan escaped her throat, vibrating against his lips and he tore his mouth from hers.
“Margaret,” he groaned, cupping her face between his palms. “Wait.”

She strained against his grip, mindlessly seeking his lips with her own and he capitulated, losing himself in another greedy exploration of mouths.

“Stop,” he panted, pressing his forehead to hers. “Margaret.” He tightened his grip on the back of her neck, forcing her head back and she reluctantly dragged her eyes open.

“If we do not stop now…” He hissed out a breath when she shifted restlessly against him. “Margaret, if you do not want this, you must tell me to go,” he whispered harshly, his chest heaving beneath her hands as he gulped in air.

Her teeth worried the swollen flesh of her lower lip and he held his breath as she raised a slumberous gaze to his.

“Do not,” she whispered. She twined her arms around his neck, pressing the entire length of her body to his. “Do not go.”

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She dragged her eyes open early the next morning, greeted by the pale, watery gleam of dawn’s light filtering through the curtains and the unfamiliar weight of a man’s arm tossed carelessly over her hip. Her gaze traveled with curious detachment over his arm. One part of her mind idly noted the dark hair sprinkled over the pale skin, the sleep-relaxed curve of muscle over bone, the long fingers splayed loosely, but possessively, over the sheet covering her hip, while another part of her brain was bombarded by flashes of memories of the previous evening.

*Careful fingers tugging loose the chignon at the nape of her neck, winnowing through the thick fall of her hair, carelessly scattering tiny hairpins over the carpet at their feet and twining the heavy, silken skein around his hand, holding her hostage to his heated kisses…*

*The fervent press of his mouth to her palm, peering up at her through the sweep of his lashes, worship in his eyes…*
The harshness of his breathing matched by the frantic fluttering of her heart beating like the wings of a hummingbird…

The methodical pop and release of each tiny hook along the back of her gown…

The whistling rasp of her corset laces hastily yanked through their moorings…

Impatient fingers pushing aside the straps of her camisole, trapping her arms at her sides as she succumbed to the overwhelming flood of sensations coursing through her.

The heat of his breath against her cheek...the damp slide of his mouth over her collarbone…the tickle of his tongue dipping into the scented hollow at the base of her throat…

She shifted restlessly beneath his arm, biting her lip to hold back a moan as the continued barrage of images assailed her.

The calloused pads of inquisitive fingers skating over the silken curves of her breasts rising above the lace edge of her camisole…the wet heat of his mouth offering both comfort and torment…

The catch in his breath, her name trembling from his lips on a soft cry…

The hot slide of his tongue against hers…

The dizzying sensation of being swept from her feet and carried to his bed…the darkly possessive look on his face as he spread her tangled hair over his pillow…

The manacle of his long-fingered grip pinning her wrists to the pillow on either side of her head…

She remembered,

Trepidation and anxiety melting away beneath the onslaught of each drugging kiss and the
welcome weight of his body crushing her into the crumpled bedcovers…

The shuddering of his limbs when she ran restless hands over the satin of his back…her fingertips skimming a path along the damp hollow of his spine…the flex and release of his muscles beneath her hands…

The needy cry trembling from her lips at the exquisite scrape of his hair-roughened chest against the sensitive tips of her breasts…

The warmth of his mouth swallowing her breathy, pained gasp…the press and burn of her body yielding inch by inch to his, discomfort slowly giving way to a delicious sense of fullness…

The reassuring rumble of his voice whispering words of praise into her ear…

She raised a hand to her burning cheek and remembered,

The instinctive tangle of her arms and legs around him in a four-limbed embrace…the eager arch of her body to his…the slow climb to exquisite agony and the glorious tumble of release…

Falling asleep to a whispered, endless litany of love.

She squeezed her eyes closed, mortified by her wanton behavior. Overwhelmed by the onslaught of memories and faintly horrified by the thought of having to look him in the eye, she slowly, carefully slid away from him. She perched on the edge of the mattress and clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the gasp that threatened to escape her at the sight of her garments wildly strewn about. Easing to her feet, she tiptoed about the room, gathering her clothing into her arms and clutching it before her like a shield.

Panic engulfed her when John shifted and rolled onto his back and she held her breath, lest he awaken. Though everything in her was screaming silently for rapid flight, she felt curiously frozen in place, unable to tear her gaze from him and the chance to study him without notice. He was rather beautiful, she thought idly. In sleep, his brow was unfurrowed, the usual lines of worry smoothed away. Thick lashes lay in dark crescents high on his cheeks. Mussed hair and the morning scruff of whiskers on his jaw lent him a disheveled, rumpled look, softening the patrician length of his nose.

Dark hair scattered over a broad chest narrowed to a thin trail along his stomach and disappeared
beneath the low slung blanket draped over his hips. One arm was flung over the mattress to the spot she had just abandoned and when her name escaped his lips on a soft sigh, she felt something deep within her pulse in response.

Biting back a longing groan, she crept silently over the carpeted floor and through the adjoining door to her room. Holding her breath, she eased the door shut and turned the key, cringing at what seemed to her the overly loud snick of the lock falling into place. Sighing with relief, she slumped against the wood and waited for her wildly beating heart to slow.

On the other side of the room, she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the cheval mirror and padded toward it, dumping the rumpled pile of clothes in her hands to the floor at her bare feet. Cocking her head to one side, she studied the woman reflected in the glass with sense of detached curiosity, barely recognizing herself in the disheveled figure who stared back. Wild tangles of hair spilled over her shoulders and down her back. She raised one hand to press the tips of her fingers to swollen, bee-stung lips. Faint red marks covered the creamy skin of her neck and throat, extending to the upper swells of her breasts and she closed her eyes as another memory assailed her.

A shiver rippling along her spine at the scrape of his teeth over her neck; the gentle suction of his mouth over the wild pulse beating in her throat...the welcome burn of his roughened jaw against the smoothness of her cheek...

Stepping closer to the mirror she ghosted her hands over the rounded swell of her hips and the finger-shaped bruises marring the pale flesh.

Big hands framing her hips, spinning her to face him...

Heat flushed through her and she hurried to yank a robe from her closet. Thrusting her arms through the sleeves, she clutched it closed in a white-knuckled grip and sank onto the edge of her bed. Mortification swamped through her, for even as memories of her outrageous behavior flooded her mind, she wanted him still.

She blushed hotly at the memory of her blatant rejection of John’s entreaty that they end things before they went too far. Well brought up young women did not beg for their husband’s attentions, she thought sourly.

Nor did they stand before a mirror shamelessly cataloguing the evidence of said attentions the next morning.
Then again, she thought bitterly, a well brought up young lady would not have gotten herself into a situation where she had been forced to marry in the first place!

She lowered her gaze to her bare feet and felt a wave of shame and guilt sweep over her. Proper young ladies most certainly did not behave in such a manner on same day in which they had buried a beloved parent. She cringed to imagine what her parents would think of her now.

Embarrassed tears prickled the backs of her eyes. How had it happened? One moment she had been seeking the comfort of his arms and the next moment she had thrown herself at him. In her mind rang the words of the older women she had known. Of their whispers of the duties of the marital bed and of Edith’s blushing reassurance on the eve of her wedding that the wifely obligation could be quite pleasant.

Surely, there had to be something wrong with her, Margaret thought wildly. A flaw in her character which had caused her to behave in such a shameless manner. Quite pleasant did not adequately describe the heights of pleasure she had found which had eagerly driven her back into her husband’s arms when he had reached for her again and again in the night.

She shuddered to think what John would say – what he would think – of the wantonness of her behavior in the cold light of day. She scrubbed her hands over her face. She was frightened by the intensity of her need for him. A need which had been unleashed by the wild emotions which had ricocheted through her, and over which she knew she had to find some measure of command.

She sprang from the bed, pacing the length and breadth of the room and one thought hammered at her over and over – too much, too much, TOO much.

Too much loss. Too much grief. Too much guilt.

Too much of a lack of control. Too much conflict and confusion.

It was his fault, she thought, suddenly, unreasonably angry. Or maybe it was this town. What she knew with certainty was that once upon a time, she had never struggled to keep her emotions in check. She had become a different person since arriving in Milton and meeting the master of Marlborough Mills. Gone was the serene Margaret of her youth, and in her place was a conflicted, confused woman.

She laid her hands against her flushed cheeks and sagged, the anger ebbing away as quickly as it had washed over her, leaving behind the realization that her feelings for John were the most
bewildering thing of all. That the loss of her much prized sense of self-control was centered on him and had been from the very moment of their meeting. She recalled the odd fascination and attraction she had felt when she had first laid eyes on him. The way she had immediately been drawn to his commanding, brooding presence standing high above on the catwalk, surveying his domain. That fascination had quickly given way to outrage on her part… but despite her many protestations, the attraction had remained.

Creeping again to the mirror, she saw the disquiet reflected in the wide eyes which stared back and came to the realization that at the heart of it all lay fear. She thought of all the times his need for her – his love for her – was so clearly written on his face before he remembered to school his features into a bland mask. She hated that he felt that he must hide his feelings and she knew that she was allowing fear to govern her actions. But… some part of her did not want his love. Did not want to love in return.

For in her experience, love equaled loss and she was tired, so very tired of being left behind.

Maybe, she thought wearily, it would be better, for once, to be the one who left first…

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John awakened to two realizations: he had overslept, and Margaret was gone. He closed his eyes and let the memories of the prior evening flow through him. Their coming together had been all he had hoped for – and more than he had ever allowed himself to imagine.

Burying his face in the rumpled bedclothes, he stretched pleasantly aching limbs before rolling to his feet to scoop up his clothing from where it lay piled on the floor near the bed.

Of Margaret’s presence there was no sign. If not for her delicate scent on his own skin, he could have believed his memories to be little more than a dream and he felt a small niggle of worry creep in at her notable absence. Something sharp pricked the sole of his foot and he bent down to pick up a hairpin. He stared at the tiny object cradled in the palm of his hand and remembered the sound of the soft moan which had escaped her throat when he had freed her hair to tumble down her back. He recalled the eagerness of her response to his touch and felt a renewed confidence.

Washing quickly, he dressed and went in search of his wife. Upon learning that she had gone to begin sorting through her father’s things in the company of her aunt and cousin, he had thought immediately to join them. When his mother told him that Margaret had promised to return in time for lunch, he went instead to his office, eagerly willing the hands on the clock to move more
quickly to noon and the hour at which he could see her again.

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Impatiently wrapping up a conversation with his foreman, John yanked his frock coat from the back of his chair and hurried out, his long legs carrying him swiftly across the mill yard toward the house. In his haste, he slipped once on the snow slick ground before regaining his footing. He shoved the door open, his face turning eagerly toward the staircase at the soft sound of her voice coming from above. He was drawn as if on invisible strings to the foot of the stairs and he raised his fingers to his mouth as though to corral the smile which threatened to split his face in two.

The smile faded and all the joy he had found in the day drained away at the sight of Margaret descending the stairs toward him, her face pale and drawn. His thoughts were a whirling mass of confusion as a dozen little details competed at once for his attention.

His mother’s hand reaching out to stop him, the urgent whisper of his name dying on her lips.

The pained sympathy written on Edith’s face. The fascinated confusion on Fanny’s.

Margaret’s refusal to meet his eyes. The satchel clutched tightly in her hand. The unbuttoned coat covering her black gown. The pile of luggage stacked near the door which he had somehow missed in his fevered rush.

Mrs. Shaw’s murmurs of the need to take Margaret home immediately.

‘Her home is with me,’ he thought wildly. The words clawed against the awful lump in his throat for release but would not come, for above it all was his wife’s tear-ravaged face.

“Margaret.” He took a lurching step toward where she stood frozen on the bottom step and wrapped one hand around her arm. “Margaret…” He felt the fine tremors running through her and was dimly aware of the others melting away to lend them some semblance of privacy.

“Margaret.” He could not seem to stop saying her name.

“I… I brought you Father’s Plato.” She shoved a small book toward him. His fingers closed
instinctively around it and he stared blindly at the faded gold lettering stamped onto the worn leather binding.

“You are… leaving?” His other hand convulsed around her arm. “Margaret, please. I do not understand.”

“John.” She reached toward him, then thought better of it, curling her fingers into a fist and pressing it instead against her breast. “I… I need… time. I must get away.” He ducked his head close to hers, straining to make out the words whispered in a tear-clogged voice. “I have known little but grief and sorrow since I have been in Milton.”

He reeled, his head snapping back as if struck, her words piercing through him with the swift accuracy of an arrow. He straightened his back, trying to gather the tattered remnants of his pride about him as if to shield him from further pain and utterly failing.

“My dear. Can we not discuss this?” he pleaded, misery coating his words.

She shook her head violently, staring at the floor with an intensity that would suggest she could find the answers to all of life’s questions there.

“Will you not even look at me?” he asked brokenly, and when she slowly complied, he felt his heart slam painfully against his breastbone, for on her delicate features he could see his own agony reflected back.

“I love you, Margaret.” His lips moved with words which could barely be heard, so quietly were they whispered.

“I know.” Tears spilled over her lashes. “But I have to…” Her head turned from side-to-side and she looked wildly around the room before meeting his gaze once again. “I just… It is too much. I cannot –” She pressed both hands over her heart as if to keep it from bursting from her chest. “Please,” she sobbed, begging him to understand what she barely understood herself. “Please…”

“Shh.” He gathered her into his arms, unable to bear the sight of this broken woman in the place of his proud, stubborn Margaret. He cupped a hand over the back of her head, cradling her against his chest, his own tears sliding down his cheek and into her hair.

She finally pulled away. A sad smile trembled on her lips and she cradled his face in her hands,
She finally pulled away. A sad smile trembled on her lips and she cradled his face in her hands, her thumbs wiping away the evidence of his tears.

“I am sorry,” she whispered brokenly. “I wish –”

They stared at one another for a long, heartbreaking moment and then lunged forward, mouths fusing in a frantic kiss, tearing apart only at the sound of Edith softly clearing her throat.

“Margaret,” she said apologetically. “If we are to make our train…”

John’s gaze roved over his wife’s face as if desperate to commit her features to his memory. “It is snowing,” he whispered hoarsely. Reaching out with trembling hands, he fumbled with the buttons of her coat, methodically pushing each one through its hole and snuggling her collar beneath her chin. “Best to stay warm.”

She curled her fingers around his and drew their clasped hands to her breast. “Thank you, John, I…”

“It is alright,” he murmured, his lips moving against her forehead in a tender kiss. “God keep you, Margaret.”

“And you, John.” She stepped back slowly, her fingertips lingering against his as they drew apart. She wrenched away with a soft cry and allowed her aunt to lead her from the house and he lurched forward, one hand raised as if to stop her.

“I promise we will take good care of her, Mr. Thornton.” Edith’s soft voice halted him in place and he slowly turned his face toward her, blinking rapidly to bring her into focus. Her expression was soft with sympathy and she lingered for a moment, her hand resting on his arm.

“Perhaps,” she suggested quietly. “You will come to visit us in London. After a time…?”

He nodded jerkily, his gaze fixed at a point over her shoulder as his wife disappeared through the open door. He shoved a hand into his pocket, his fingers clutching convulsively around the tiny hairpin he had fancifully tucked away that morning as a talisman.

Vaguely aware of Edith’s sympathetic sigh, he woodenly trailed after her as she joined her mother
and cousin. Unaware of the biting cold and icy flakes of snow swirling madly about him, he watched Margaret climb into the carriage, heard the driver cluck softly at the horse and saw the vehicle lurch forward.

“Look back,” he whispered desperately, his whole body straining forward as the carriage continued to roll away, its wheels leaving tracks in the snow marking the growing distance between them.

“Look back at me.”

She did not.

Chapter End Notes

A couple of notes, actually. I slightly edited and reposted the prior chapter in the hopes of more clearly describing Margaret’s motivations in the confrontation scene with the police inspector. Some readers found her actions to be out of character – and I would agree, though that was more or less my intent – as my goal had been to show a Margaret who was willing to risk embarrassment in order to provide an alibi for John and protect him when she feared he would not protect himself. I realize in re-reading it that I may have missed the mark and I modified the scene ever so slightly in an effort to clarify my line of thinking for any readers who may come across this story in the future.

My apologies for the delay in posting a new chapter. I confess that I have spent an inordinate amount of time dithering over this chapter eight. It has been written, roughly, for well over a week and I’ve edited and reworked and had many internal debates over the love scene as I debated the merits of writing it as a “fade to black” more in keeping with novels of the time and my desire to write an intimate, but hopefully not distasteful scene. In the end, you can see which side of the argument won. I realize it may not be to everyone’s tastes, but ultimately, it is the story as I want to tell it.

Weekends are when I usually get most of my writing and posting done, but I’m out of town next weekend for three days so there will likely be another delay in posting the next chapter. We’re probably coming up on the end now. Maybe two or three chapters more before winding this story up.

Thanks to everyone who has been following, reading and commenting on this story. It’s much appreciated.
Dear Margaret,

I pray this letter finds you well and having arrived safely in London. I trust you are comfortably settled with Edith and Mrs. Shaw.

I must confess, I hardly know what to say to you, Margaret. I have sat at my desk in a futile effort to compose this letter for more than an hour, debating the merits of filling the page with trivial matters and to avoid that which might cause embarrassment or discomfort, but my mind cannot focus on anything other than the loss of your presence and the manner in which we parted.

I believe I owe you an apology, for I fear it was my behavior which drove you to flee Milton. I am heartily ashamed that it took your putting hundreds of miles between us for me to finally accept that your feelings and mine are not of a similar nature – and likely never to be – and to understand how badly I had overstepped. I pray you will believe me when I assure you it was never my intent to attempt to make you to feel things you do not, nor to take advantage of your grief – though it appears that is what I have done.

I am heartsick and can do little but extend my sincere apology, beg your forgiveness and offer assurances that should you choose to return to Milton, I will not impose on you again in such a manner.

Margaret, I have read and re-read my words above. My desk is littered with the crumpled evidence of my bungling efforts to express what is in my heart. I shall end by saying that I know you put great store in a frankness of tone and forthrightness and I can only hope my awkward attempts to apologize do not instead cause offense.

Yours,

John
My Dear Sir,

I am arrived and comfortably settled in my former room. Aunt Shaw and Edith seem to be of a like mind that I should be pampered and spoiled and so it seems I shall want for little.

The weather here is not so cold as it was.

I find that I too am incapable of writing of trifling matters and to write of the weather when you have laid so much bare to me. You speak to me of frankness and forthrightness and these are qualities in which I have always taken pride. Yet I find myself flushed and flustered in reading your words and I find myself unsure of how to proceed. I have no doubt that propriety would forbid me to speak of such things and remain a lady, and yet I must speak for I cannot allow you to continue to berate yourself unjustly.

I wish I had the words to explain the turmoil I felt that morning – and that I continue to feel today – but I must assure you that it was not your behavior which caused me pain, but rather my own. Oh, how to explain what I barely can make sense of myself, except to give you every assurance that you have no cause to castigate yourself, sir, for I believe it was I who took advantage.

You confuse me. And when I am with you, I confuse myself. Like a child, I ran from that which frightened me and yet I hope that some time and distance will help me to find clarity. I know not whether that gives you comfort or pain, though I it is my fervent hope that you will know it is not my desire to cause you any injury.

Will you write me again, John? And share with me the mundane along with the noteworthy?

I pray you will,

Margaret

~*~*~

Dear Margaret,
Please forgive me for not writing sooner. Business at the mill, meetings with my banker and a near endless parade of tasks, both large and small, compete for my attention and it seems there are not enough hours in the day to accomplish all I must.

And, in the spirit of honesty, I confess that I took a day or two to deliberate over your letter to me. There is much I would say, but I do not wish to cause you further discomfort. Instead, I hope you will allow me to express my relief in the knowledge that you are receptive to our continuing correspondence.

In the short duration of our marriage, I have spoken with you but a little of my work, for your time and attention was rightly consumed by the needs of your family. But it seems that if I am to continue to write you, much of what I have to share will be of my work, as it is the mill which consumes most of my time.

I hope I shall not bore you.

However, rather than set your eyes to glazing over with the minutiae of the inner workings of a cotton mill, I shall instead share with you some happy news.

Fanny is engaged to be married. Mr. Watson, another mill owner whom I believe you have met on occasion, has asked for her hand. I think him perhaps a little too much older than she – as he is at least eight years my senior – but Mother believes it to be a good match and Fanny appears to be delighted. Of course, Fanny has never been much in the company of her own peers, having been raised by only our mother and a much older brother, and so I have hope that she will be content and comfortable in her marriage.

The wedding is set for late spring. I wonder if you will be home by then.

Margaret, though I claim to be focused on little else but my work, you must know you are never far from my thoughts and that my last act of each day is to pray for your comfort and happiness. Enough of what is going on here in Milton. Tell me, my dear, what are you doing to keep busy in London?

John

~*~*~
Dear John,

Happy news indeed. I shall write to Fanny myself to express my joy in her good fortune and to wish her much happiness.

As for me, I am well enough. Aunt Shaw and Edith spend many mornings paying calls on friends. Thus far, I have been excused from accompanying them as I am still in mourning. Still, they have visitors enough here at the house. Thankfully, they seem to be content that I make an appearance, even if I do not add much to the conversation.

London is damp and cold but on those mornings when Aunt and Edith are away, I bundle up myself and Sholto and I push him around the park in his pram. He is a delightful child and never fails to make me smile – even when I am at my lowest.

John, I feel I must be honest and tell you that Henry Lennox is a frequent guest here. He is, of course, Captain Lennox’s brother and so he joins the family often for Sunday dinners. I hope it will not trouble you to know that he and I have been discussing ways in which he can help Fred. At this point, neither of us has much of an idea how we can go about doing so, but it feels good to be doing something and I hope you will be pleased for me.

You mention the mill and, if we are being honest – and I hope that we will be – Marlborough Mills has often been a point of contention between us. And yet time, distance – and a newfound maturity discovered in the wake of the loss of Mother and Father – have opened my eyes to the fact that, though I often feel things impulsively and passionately, I do not always allow for another’s point of view. Though you are correct when you mention that my attention was fixated on family matters in the last few months, almost to the exclusion of everything else, I do not wish you to believe I was wholly unaware of your cares and concerns with regards to your work and I am sorry that I did not make the time to discuss it with you.

I have come to understand that, in many ways, you are the mill and the mill is you. I wish you would not hold back for fear I will find it tedious. For how else am I to learn to understand who my husband is, if I do not have some understanding of his life’s work?

Margaret
...Margaret, the simple truth is that the mill has continued to struggle, never quite regaining its footing in the aftermath of the strike. We are behind in our orders and have been unable to make up for the lost time, despite the mill operating on extended hours. My banker has implied that I should consider dabbling in a speculation, but I fear risking everything – though not taking the chance may just as well cost me all, regardless.

For now the bank has agreed to extend the loan...

~*~*~

...How is it that Marlborough Mills struggles in the aftermath of the strike when other mills do not? I admit that I am not well versed in the nuances of engaging in a speculation, though, of course, I am not unaware of your family’s history in such matters and can well understand your reluctance to take that path. But I must ask – is speculation really so very risky?

~*~*~

...I will try my best to explain the situation I now face.

Marlborough Mills suffers differently than other mills in large part because I invested so much of our capital in making improvements at the mill itself. Two years ago I spent a fair amount to have wheels installed in each of the sheds to help blow away the fluff. You know firsthand from your friend Bessy what the fluff can do to a person’s health. Anyone who spends any steady amount of time in a cotton mill – myself included – has inhaled frightening amounts of fluff into their lungs and stomachs, though, of course, none more than the workers themselves. It seemed to me a smart investment to install the wheels to keep the air as clean as possible although, as you well know, even with the installation of the wheels, the air is still filled with the damnable stuff.

In addition to the wheels, I invested in new machinery. We had large orders and I needed the machinery to keep up. And though it is cheaper to purchase cotton from Egypt or the Caribbean, I purchased in bulk from America, for I consider it to be the most stable supplier.

But since the strike, it has been difficult to catch up on our outstanding contracts – and it appears now that we will never be able to catch up.

You asked also about the speculation. Fanny’s intended, Watson, has come up with a scheme and she natters on endlessly of the brilliance of his plan and attempts daily to coerce me into joining
with Watson. You are correct, of course, in my personal bias against such practices. But even
discounting my family’s tragic experience – speculation, by its very nature – is extremely risky. If
I were to invest in Watson’s plan and it turns out to be successful, then the mill’s financial
difficulties would be over. But if it fails, I will have risked everything – not only my own fortunes,
but I will have injured others. For the moment, the payroll is secure.

I do not know what to do, Margaret. Dare I risk the mill and the livelihoods of myself and my
workers by joining in Watson’s scheme? I think you would counsel me otherwise…

~*~*~

…Oh, John. No, of course, you must not risk so much. I see that now. I certainly understand the
temptations of a speculation but like all things which come too easily, there is too great a chance
to lose all.

I wish I could advise you. Please tell me, what can I do?

~*~*~

…You are sweet to be so concerned, Margaret. As for what you can do… pray. Pray for a
summer that is warm. Pray that people will want to purchase cotton clothing. Pray that our buyers
pay their bills on time.

Just… pray.

~*~*~

… I believe you know that I correspond with Bessy’s younger sister, Mary. She has written to me
that Boucher – he who instigated the violence at Marlborough Mills on the day of the riot – has
taken his own life, and his wife, who had been long ill, passed but a few days later leaving their
children orphaned.

Mary’s father, Nicholas, has taken in the Boucher children but she worries greatly, for he has
been unable to secure employment, and now with so many hungry mouths to feed…

Oh, John. I know your feelings regarding Higgins and what the strikers have cost you. And I know how great a thing it is that I ask of you now, but for the sake of those poor children – can you not see fit to offer a job to Nicholas?

I pray daily for your well-being and a lifting of your burdens and remain ever,

Yours,

Margaret

~*~*~

My dear Margaret,

I hope you will be glad to know that at your behest, I have taken Higgins on, though I saw fit to warn him that I would let him go at the first sign of any trouble. For now we seem to be getting on well enough. He keeps to his time and puts in an honest day’s work. I can ask no more…

~*~*~

Dear John,

I hope you were not overly worried by the delay in receiving this letter. You will not believe where I am!

My godfather, Mr. Bell, stopped by my aunt’s house quite unexpectedly the other day and proposed that we take a trip to Helstone. Though the calendar tells me spring is just around the corner, winter’s grip seems unwilling to let go of its hold over London. It has been unrelentingly gray and gloomy of late, and I longed for the taste of sunshine and home offered by just the thought of Helstone.
And so I am writing to you from a sweet and tidy room at an inn not far from my childhood home and I have discovered a curious thing. I was elated to return to Helstone, expecting it to be the paradise I remembered and, of course, I quickly realized that try as we might, it is impossible to go back and recapture the carefree bliss of childhood. So instead, I shall treasure those memories always.

I told Mr. Bell that when we first moved to Milton, I was guilty of romanticizing the South – and by way of comparison, was determined to find fault in everything that Milton was not. When I admitted that I am now hard-pressed not to do the exact opposite, he had quite the chuckle to think that I would consider Milton to be in any way romantic. And though I did not contradict him, I find that it is not so difficult a thing to admit to myself that Milton now holds a certain appeal.

But enough of a foolish young woman’s ramblings. Mary tells me that you have taken an interest in young Tom Boucher, insisting that he must have a good education…

~*~*~

Dearest Margaret,

Though I was saddened to know that your return to Helstone did not live up your imaginings, I would not be truthful if I did not admit that I take heart in your newfound softening towards Milton…

Fanny’s wedding preparations are slowly driving me mad. Her every waking moment is consumed by her plans or shopping for her trousseau. She stops only to sleep or to continue to badger me to join Watson in his speculation – though I think perhaps my reminder that I will be unable to pay the expenses wrought by the extravagance of her wedding if I lose money on his scheme, may stop her from plaguing me further on the subject.

Still, I see the joy she takes in the planning of her wedding and am made happy by that. My sister is a spoiled and silly young woman, but she was made so at my hands and Mother’s. She was barely toddling on her own feet when Father died. Mother and I were so focused on the basics of putting food on the table and a roof over our heads, that guilt over our inability to provide Fanny with our time and attention, led us to indulging her in other ways. Little things like making sure that she had the most comfortable bed and allowing her to eat her fill while we went hungry, led to greater indulgences once we began to rebuild our fortune. Mother and I worked as one to pull our family out of poverty and, as a result, Fanny has always been on the outside looking in at the pair of us.
Underneath it all, I believe she has a good heart and I recognize I have no one to blame but myself for her shallowness of thought, for I gave her things rather than my time, and so I wish her much joy and happiness in her marriage.

…Hoping you will consider coming home for the wedding, I remain,

Your husband,

John

~*~*~

My Dear John,

I will give all due consideration to your request that I return home for the wedding, but I pray you will not be too hopeful. Though I am feeling better, my grief is still strong and though almost three months have passed since I lost Father, I am still in mourning and am unsure of the propriety of attending a celebration so soon. I do not wish to cast a pall over what should be a joyful day.

Whether I attend or not, please know that I shall be thinking of her – and of you.

Now, Mary tells me that you and Higgins have concocted some scheme to open a dining hall for the workers. Oh, John – how wonderful!...

~*~*~

…Do not praise me overmuch, Margaret, for my motives are not as altruistic as I think you wish to believe. Like the installation of the wheels in the shed, I see the dining hall as an investment in my workers – for if they eat well, they work well…

~*~*~
...I think you know me well enough now, John, to know that I would never shower you with false praise, but neither will I sit and allow you to denigrate what you have done. Never have I presumed Marlborough Mills to be a charitable institution. But by having a care for your workers, you are opening paths of trust and communication with them which will hopefully lead to a day when strikes will be a thing of the past.

Oh, John, my dear. I am so very proud of you.

Yours,

Margaret

~*~*~

...Higgins persuaded me today to join him for lunch in the workers’ dining hall. How very quiet the room became when I entered, but soon enough they ignored me. Perhaps because of Higgins’ acceptance of me – he is a natural leader and the others follow where he goes.

But I think it more likely it was because they know you are their friend and champion and perhaps I am made more palatable to them by my association with you. I knew taking you to wife was a brilliant idea.

When are you coming home, my love?...

John

~*~*~

...Do not shift praise to my unworthy shoulders, John. Your employees recognize the steps you
have taken to improve their working conditions in the past. Why, Bessy told me on more than one occasion that it was Nicholas who insisted she work for you after she began to show signs of illness, for he knew even then your mill to be the safest. And now the dining hall… these are your accomplishments, John, not mine.

I am glad to learn that Fanny’s wedding was such a lovely event and I regret now that I was not in attendance. I should have been. In hindsight, I see that it was my place to be there. But I do not know that I am ready yet to return to Milton, and I feared that I would not be able to bring myself to leave you a second time should I have come back for the wedding. Absence, it seems, has opened my eyes to things I was too stubborn to see before.

I long to come home to you John, and fear it at the same time. Soon, I think… Soon.

Until then, I am ever,

Your Margaret

~*~*~

My darling Margaret,

Your words are a balm to my weary soul. And yet I do not know what it is you will come home to, if indeed this house will still be ours in a few months’ time.

I can, for the first time, understand my father’s thinking when he chose to risk our family fortune on a speculation. I confess there are moments when I am sorely tempted, but fear has thus far stayed my hand. Am I allowing fear and pride – that I should not make the same mistake as my father – to direct my decision?

If I play and win, I will have saved the mill and no one will ever need know how close I came to dismal failure. Our family – and the families of all my workers – will profit.

And yet, if I play and lose… or if I choose not to play, I still risk all.

I know not what to do. I find myself paralyzed with indecision…
Lost in worried thought, Margaret sat quietly in the sitting room attached to her bedroom and stared vacantly into the flames burning low in the fireplace. John’s most recent letter clutched in her hands, she had retreated from her family’s company directly after dinner, and in the low light of a table lamp, read it again for at least the tenth time since its arrival in the afternoon post.

Her husband’s anxiety was evident in every sentence, his desperation visible in the splotched ink and the bumps and ridges on the underside of the paper, so violently did he gouge the words onto the page. She clutched the crumpled paper to her heart and felt tears prickle the backs of her eyes.

Whatever was she doing sitting here? She should be upstairs, packing a bag to return to Milton on the morning train. A soft rapping on the door pulled her from her reverie and she looked up to see Dixon poke her head into the room.

“Miss Margaret,” the older woman whispered. “You have a visitor.”

Margaret closed her eyes and shook her head as she pictured Henry Lennox waiting on the other side of the door.

“Dixon, please tell him –”

“Tis Mr. Thornton,” Dixon interrupted.

“Mr. Thornton!” Margaret lifted trembling hands to her hair, pressed her fingertips against suddenly flushed cheeks.

“Send him in, Dixon. Send him in!”

And then he was there. After so many months apart, he stepped into the room. Unaware of Dixon
quietly retreating and closing the door, Margaret had eyes only for him.

Hat in hand, he stood frozen with uncertainty near the door. Her gaze roved eagerly over him, noting his haggard appearance. Exhaustion was evident in the lines etched onto either side of his mouth and in the drooping of his posture.

Margaret began to rise to her feet, but she dropped back into her seat in surprise when he tossed aside his hat and a small satchel to rush across the room to kneel at her side. Clutching her hands in both of his, he bent his head over their clasped fingers and pressed a fervent kiss to her knuckles, whispering in a rambling voice so low, she had to strain to make out his words.

“I have failed my mother and you.” His chest and shoulders heaved as if he had run a great distance. “I have failed to keep my pledge to your father to take care of you. Please forgive me, Margaret.”

She bent low, resting her cheek against the crown of his head. “What has happened, John? Why have you come? Please tell me.” She squeezed his hands tightly and urged him to explain.

He looked up, eyes shining wetly with unshed tears. “Watson’s scheme was a great success, but I let fear hold me back from investing with him and now… I do not think I can keep the mill going much longer.” He freed a hand from hers and covered his face in shame.

“You were right to leave me, Margaret.”

“Oh no, John. I was wrong.” She ran her fingers through his hair. “So very wrong. My place is at your side and I am sick with shame for abandoning you as I did.”

“No,” he whispered. “You had enough grief to deal with and now I am heaping more onto your plate. What was I thinking when I forced you into this marriage?” He shook his head and a muscle twitched wildly beneath the whisker-shadowed skin of his jaw. He pressed his lips together and fought for control. “It was selfish of me, for by the time of the strike, I knew the mill could be in trouble and still I persisted in pursuing you, wanting only my own way –”

“Hush now,” she commanded with a sharp tug of her fingers in his hair. “I will not listen to any more of this nonsense, for that is not how our marriage came to be and we both know it. We are each of us to blame for any number of things which have gone wrong between us, but a claim of selfishness is not a burden you should take on, for it is simply not true.”
She ducked her head and looked deeply into his haunted eyes.

“Let us go home tomorrow. Together.” Her lips trembled into an encouraging smile. “And perhaps together we will figure this out.”

He shook his head and rose to his feet, pacing across the room to the window. Twitching the heavy drapery aside, he stared through the glass as the last of the daylight sank behind the building across the street.

“No.” He drew in a deep breath and squared his shoulders resolutely. Turning away from the window, he graced her with a sad smile. “I did not come here to bring you back to Milton,” he told her. “I came to release you.”

“Release me?” Stunned, she wobbled to her feet, clutching the back of the chair for support. “Release me from what?”

“From our marriage. It is no secret that you were an unwilling bride and were coerced into the marriage. I will attest truthfully to that and we can have the marriage annulled.”

“A-annulled?” she stuttered, eyes wide with shock. “How can you… Why would you…?” Nausea roiled and she pressed a fist against her mouth. How could this be happening now? Now when she had finally come to the realization that what she wanted more than anything was to be with him – to be his wife. Now when she had made the decision to return to him – he was determined to turn from her?

“Margaret,” he said entreatingly. “I would free you to find happiness with another.”

“With whom? Henry Lennox?” She snarled the other man’s name in fear and pain, and felt a viscous satisfaction at seeing him flinch, his face drained of color.

“Yes.” His voice was strained and he touched a hand to his collar as if the one word had been torn from his throat. “If Henry pleases you, then yes.”

“And if he does not please me?”
“Then someone else. Someone worthy of you.”

“And if I told you that I had already planned to return to Milton? If I told you that I had been sitting here just moments before you arrived, making plans to pack my things and be on the first train out of London tomorrow morning?” She glanced down at the white-knuckled grip she had on the back of the chair and then back up to meet his gaze and she saw love and longing flicker in his eyes before he schooled his features into a calm mask.

“Margaret…”

“Is that how this works?” she demanded. “You make all the decisions and I am simply to obey? I have no say in whether I remain married to my husband? In whether I am permitted to return to our home?”

His eyes fluttered shut and she saw his body strain towards hers before he checked himself back into place.

“I do not want you to return because you pity me.” Expressions of hope, need and fear chased one another across his face before resolving once again into the familiar stoic mask.

Seeing him waver, she felt relief – and a womanly power – surge through her. She kept her gaze trained on him; saw his eyes narrow warily as she moved toward him in slow, deliberate steps.

“What cause have I to pity a man who is so strong and proud? A man brave enough to stand by his convictions no matter what?” Reaching his side, she laid a hand on his chest and closed the gap between them.

“And to what end?” he asked bitterly. “Where has that conviction led me but to utter ruin?”

“Is it not better to remain true to your beliefs?” she asked. “I am proud that you have done so.”

“And will you remain proud when the mill is shuttered and the house is lost?”
“Yes. Even if the worst should happen and the mill is forced closed, we will figure it out. I was the selfish one, John. Not you. I was wrong to leave you. I will not do so again.” She shifted, taking the final step which brought her body flush against his.

“Please, John.” Her words were a whispered exhalation of breath against his cheek. “Please do not cast me aside. Not now when I want nothing more than to be with you. The greatest mistake I ever made was to leave you. Please forgive me. Please take me home. Please let me help you.”

*Please love me* she entreated silently.

“Oh, Margaret.” His shoulders slumped and he pressed his forehead to hers. “I cannot ask you to come home. If the mill fails, I… I do not know if I have it in me to climb out of ruin yet again.”

“You do,” she whispered fiercely. “I know you do, John. And I will be there with you to help. I swear, I shall not abandon you again.”

The breath seemed to leave his body in a violent expulsion of air and he crushed her in his embrace, his arms wrapped tightly around her as if he could somehow absorb her through his very skin. Lifting her from her feet, he buried his face in the curve of her neck.

“Margaret. My Margaret.”

She shivered, the heat of his words branding the delicate flesh of her throat, and curled her arms possessively about his shoulders, basking in the quiet joy of the moment until at last, he set her on her feet again.

“Be sure, Margaret.” He framed her face between his hands, his thumbs tracing gentle patterns over her cheeks. “I could not survive it were you to come home only to leave again.”

She smiled softly and the confidence of her choice shone in her eyes, seemingly lighting her up from inside and she had a startling moment of clarity – realizing that from the moment he had stumbled through his wedding vows, he had been imprinting himself on her heart. On her soul. She did not know what the future held for them – but she knew she wanted to face it at his side.

“I am sure,” she vowed. “I wish I could say that I always felt for you as I do now, but I cannot.
The truth is, my feelings for you have been changing so gradually since our marriage and I think, had I remained in Milton these last months, I might still not realize the difference. Difficult as it has been, our time apart has helped me to understand myself better. To come to understand you better."

“And how is it that being apart from me was so good a thing?” he asked. “What has changed from then until now?” The hoarse rumble of his voice and the weary despair reflected in his eyes spoke of the utter loneliness of their separation and the toll it had taken on him.

“Do you not know, John?” Her lips trembled into a soft smile, a tiny dimple winking at the corner of her mouth. “I love you. I know now that the seed was there before I left, but it was your letters, John. The open, honest, rawness of your thoughts and feelings and concerns poured out onto those sheets of paper which allowed me to finally come to understand who you truly are.”

Teary-eyed, she blinked to clear her vision. “I heard your voice in my head as I read your letters, John, and through your words, I finally came to understand the man I had married. They may not have been filled with poetry and romance, but your warmth, your humor and kindness, and most of all your feelings for me, shone through. They are, to me, the most beautiful of love letters and I shall cherish them always.”

His face crumpled, his chin wobbled once, then again, with barely concealed emotion before he once more buried his face in her neck. She wrapped her arms about him in a fierce embrace. Pressing her body to his, she felt the trembling of his muscles beneath her hands, heard his heart thundering beneath her ear so quickly that she thought it might burst from his chest.

“John,” she whispered. “My sweet John.” Silent tears tracked down her cheeks as relief poured through her. All would be well now, she thought thankfully.

He lifted his head and she shivered as his gaze roved hungrily over her face, love and longing evident in the softness of his expression. She raised a hand to touch one finger to the dampness glistening on his lower lashes, smiled when he used his thumbs to wipe away the silvery tracks left behind by her own tears. She curled one hand behind his neck, anchoring the other in the lapel of his coat and drew him down so that she could meet his mouth with hers.

They kissed like it was the first time – each hesitant touch of their mouths a soft and gentle greeting. And then slowly, tentativeness gave way to need. His arms crushed her close and she strained onto the tips of her toes in a bid to get closer. Their heads tipped this way, and then that, mouths moving together hungrily.

His hand curved lightly around her throat, anchoring her to the greedy possession of his mouth.
When at last they parted, their chests heaved in unison. Her head swam, her brain slow and sluggish when he swept a lazy thumb over the damp fullness of her lower lip and she was not sure who was the more surprised when her tongue instinctively darted out to draw the salty taste of his flesh into her mouth.

The sound of his startled gasp broke the spell between them and she dropped down onto her heels. His hands fell loosely to her hips and he took a step back as if to put a little distance between them. Reluctant to let him go, Margaret curled her fingers into the starched cotton of his shirt.

Sucking in a deep breath, she slowly raised her head and hesitantly met his gaze with her own.

“You have traveled far today, sir.” A hot blush stained her cheeks, and she fought bravely to keep her eyes locked on his. “Are you not ready to seek your bed?”

A delighted smile broke over his face, wiping away the lines of worry and exhaustion which had been etched there, aging him prematurely.

“Indeed, madam.” His hands fell from her hips and sought hers, twining their fingers together and raising hers to his mouth. “There is nothing I desire more,” he breathed against the soft flesh.

“Well then.”

She took a bold step back and led him toward the adjoining door to her room.
Margaret awoke alone the next morning, the rumpled sheets of the bed – and the unfamiliar ache of her muscles – the only evidence that she had not spent the entirety of the previous night unaccompanied. Fear that John had returned to Milton without her momentarily clutched at her belly, but then she remembered his passionate embrace and the whispered declarations of love which had passed between them and the fear fled as quickly as it had come over her.

Sitting up, she searched for her robe amidst the crumpled bedcovers and thrust her arms through the sleeves, belting it about her slim waist before making her way to the dressing table. A brilliant smile lit her face at the sound of a soft tapping on the door.

“Come in,” she called eagerly expecting her husband’s reappearance.

The smile fell away from her face as Dixon bustled into the room bearing a tea tray set for one. Lowering her eyes, Margaret snatched up her hair brush, agitatedly rubbing her thumb over the soft bristles.

“Good morning, Miss,” Dixon murmured, setting the tray down and pouring her mistress a cup of tea.

“Good morning, Dixon.” Margaret lifted her eyes to the mirror and met the older woman’s gaze in the silvered glass. “I seem to have overslept.” She blushed and again lowered her gaze to her lap. “Have… have you seen my husband?” she asked tentatively.

“Yes, Miss.” Dixon took the brush from Margaret’s unresisting fingers and began to work at smoothing the tangles from the young woman’s hair. “The Master said he had a meeting to attend this morning, but he would return straightaway after.”

The maid laid a hand on Margaret’s shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze as the girl slumped in ill-disguised relief.
“I am returning to Milton with Mr. Thornton.” Margaret sipped her tea, relaxing into the rhythmic stroke of the brush through her hair. “I would, of course, have you join me, Dixon, for I can scarcely remember a day in my life when you were not there.” She reached over her shoulder to clasp her fingers over the other woman’s. “But I would understand if you would prefer to remain in London. I am sure Aunt Shaw can find a permanent place for you in her household if that is your wish.”

Dixon straightened her shoulders and blinked away the tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. “I’ll come back to Milton, if you and the Master’ll have me,” she said. “After all, Miss Margaret, I helped to raise you. I’ll not have someone other than me helping you to raise your own babes when the time comes.”

Margaret rolled her head to press her cheek against their joined hands resting on her shoulder. Closing her eyes, she flushed as memories of the prior evening washed over her and laying a free hand atop her stomach, wondered if a new life grew there even now.

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Margaret was carefully folding a blouse in a thin sheet of tissue when a rapping at the door drew her attention.

“Come.”

A pleased smile broke over her face as her husband poked his head past the door and stepped inside.

John’s gaze roved about the room, noting Margaret’s precise movements as she tucked the tissue wrapped garment into an open bag; saw her coat draped over the foot of the bed.

“You’re coming home with me?”

By way of answer, Margaret snapped closed the clasp of the bag and picked up her coat. Draping the coat over her arm, she handed the satchel to him. His fingers stroked over the back of her hand before taking the small bag from her. Wondering joy lit his eyes and curved his lips and she stretched up on her toes as if to taste the quiet happiness radiating from him.

“I thought perhaps last night was a dream,” he whispered against her lips.
Margaret stroked a thumb over his cheek and narrowed her eyes. “Then let’s not ever awaken,” she suggested playfully. They lingered thusly, her hand on his cheek, his resting lightly on her hip. Breathing each other in, they enjoyed the simple pleasure of being together.

“Is the carriage here?” She threaded her arm through her husband’s as they descended the steps.

“It is being brought from the stables now.”

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, she laid a hand on his forearm. “Will you take our bags out while I say my goodbyes?”

“Of course, my dear.” He pressed a lingering kiss to her forehead before leading her to the parlor near the door where her family awaited. Margaret stood back as John made his own farewells, bowing over Mrs. Shaw’s hand and clasping Captain Lennox’s firmly. He and Henry exchanged stiff nods and then he was bending at the waist to accept the brush of Edith’s lips over his cheek.

“Did I not promise to take good care of her?” The blonde cast a fond smile toward her dark-haired cousin before looking back at the man who towered above her.

“You did indeed, madam.” John’s gaze followed hers to where his wife stood speaking quietly with her aunt. “I thank you.”

“You took your time coming to visit,” Edith noted, bouncing Sholto on her hip. “Though your timing seems to be exquisite, Mr. Thornton.” She arched her brow and graced him with a tiny smile. “Now I shall have to ask the same favor of you, sir.”

“Nothing matters more to me than her care and happiness,” he promised.

“I know.” Edith squeezed his hand and then made a little shooing motion with her fingers. “Now, go. I believe the carriage has arrived.”

John impulsively tapped a forefinger to Sholto’s nose, earning a hearty giggle from the boy. Hefting his bag and Margaret’s, John inclined his head to her family one last time before taking his leave.
“Margaret.” Henry stepped forward and hastily caught both her hands in his own, drawing her a few steps away from the others.

“I cannot let you leave without knowing…” He gripped her hands tightly in his and ducked his head to look directly in her eyes. “You must know what you are returning to. Your husband’s business –”

“I already know everything, Henry.” Margaret cut off his words with a firm shake of her head. “John and I have been corresponding since I left Milton and I have known all along what is happening at the mill. I know you are only looking out for me, but I must return with him.”

“Margaret, I know you feel a sense of obligation –”

“You are wrong, Henry. For I love him.”

His shoulders sagged in defeat. The quiet resolve of her tone held more weight than would have an impassioned declaration.

“I am sorry if I gave you cause to…” Her words trailed off, a befuddled frown marring the smooth skin of her forehead. “Henry, I… I am grateful to you for all you are doing to help Fred, but I never… that is I…”

Henry held her gaze for a long moment and in his eyes, she saw a spark of sadness and then, spine erect and face carefully blank, he took a step back. Holding out his hand, he gave hers a perfunctory shake.

“Goodbye, Margaret.”

She stared into his face for a heartbeat or two and then resolutely turned away to rejoin the rest of her family. Captain Lennox was the first to reach for her, pulling her into a boisterous hug before setting her back at arms-length.

“Have a good journey, Margaret. And do be sure to write to Edith often for I know she shall be lost without you,” he added with an ever-jovial twinkle in his eyes.
Returning his smile with one of her own, she murmured her promise to stay in touch before turning to her aunt. Mrs. Shaw’s mouth was set in a grim line; her eyes damp with concern and Margaret knew that Henry had taken it upon himself to inform her family of the mill’s financial troubles.

“Dixon will finish packing the rest of my things and follow in a few days.” Margaret sent a smile to the maid standing nearby. “I thank you, Aunt, for all your many kindnesses.” She affectionately bussed her lips over the older woman’s cheek. “I would have been lost these past months without you.”

“You are a good girl, Margaret.” The older woman bit her lip to keep it from trembling. “I know your parents would be very proud of you,” she said, before drawing her niece into a long embrace. “Take care, my dear.”

“I will, Aunt. And thank you again.”

She turned toward Edith, little Sholto bouncing excitedly in his mother’s grip at Margaret’s approach. Holding out her hands, she caught the little boy as he launched himself from his mother’s arms into hers. Babbling nonsensically, he patted his hands against her cheeks and Margaret rounded her eyes and made gasping noises as if she understood every excited word. She peppered kisses all over the baby’s face and playfully nibbled the soft skin of his neck, eliciting a squealing laugh in response.

Perching the little boy on her hip, she laid her cheek against her cousin’s.

“I shall miss you most of all, Edith,” she whispered.

“Oh! And I shall miss you, Margaret.” Edith glanced over her cousin’s shoulder to where the others stood gathered. “I know they are worried for you, Margaret,” she said, meeting the other girl’s eyes. “But I am not. I am instead delighted.” She drew her cousin into her embrace and the two young women rocked back and forth. “He loves you very much, I think,” she said softly, stepping back and laying a hand on Margaret’s face.

“And I him,” Margaret vowed.

“I know.” Edith arched a knowing brow and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “I
cannot help but notice that you seem… quite refreshed this morning, Margaret.” She smiled delightedly at the flush which bloomed over her cousin’s face.

“Edith!” Margaret hissed. Narrowing her eyes in mock disapproval, she hefted Sholto from her hip and handed him back to his mother.

“No go. Your husband is waiting for you.” Edith laughed and gave her cousin a good-natured push toward the door. “Write to me as soon as you can, Margaret,” she called, standing on the top step and waving as John Thornton handed his wife up into the waiting carriage.

Grasping Sholto’s tiny hand in hers, she waved goodbye until the carriage disappeared around the corner.

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The train to Milton was not crowded and John and Margaret lucked into having a car to themselves for the entirety of the trip.

“I know we have many things to attend to once we reach home.” Margaret twisted in her seat to face him, earnestly clutching his hands in hers. “But for now, may we not just enjoy these few short hours of time to be alone, together?”

John dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose and stretched an arm along the high velvet back of the seat. Her head pillowed on his shoulder, she smiled to herself as he toyed with a tendril of her hair or set the tiny gold hoop in her ear to dancing with a flick of his forefinger and they whiled away the hours whispering softly to one another and stealing kisses. As the morning lengthened, Margaret’s head lolled toward the window and she contentedly watched the passing scenery from the safety and comfort of her husband’s arms.

Disembarking the train in Milton later that day, they boarded a waiting hansom cab for the short ride home and in short time pulled to a halt in the mill yard. Some of the yard workers paused, surprised to see the Master’s wife alight from the cab, and as her eyes wandered over the property, she saw Higgins standing at the top of the mill steps, a pallet of raw cotton tossed over one shoulder and a welcoming smile on his lips. She raised a hand in greeting before allowing John to swing her down to the ground.

Looking up, she saw the lace curtains twitch and her mother-in-law’s face appear in the window. Surprise at seeing her son return with his wife was etched over the other woman’s stern features
and Margaret drew in a deep breath, unconsciously girding herself for battle as John took her hand and led her up the steps.

“We are home, Mother.” Margaret heard the conflicting tones of both warning and pleading in her husband’s voice as he addressed his mother and she unconsciously leaned into the supportive hand he had settled at the small of her back.

“So you are,” Hannah Thornton noted coolly. “Welcome back, Margaret.”

“Thank you.” Margaret met the other woman’s quietly appraising look without flinching. “I am glad to be home.” She knew John was aware of the tense undercurrents flowing between herself and his mother when he gently drew her closer to his side, quietly presenting them as a united front.

Mrs. Thornton’s gaze flickered over them once, though her impassive expression did not betray her thoughts.

“Mr. Miller stopped earlier this morning, hoping to speak with you.” She directed her attention toward her son. “I was not sure when you would return, but told him I would let you know as soon as I heard from you.”

“I –” He glanced down at his wife and then back up to meet his mother’s gaze.

Margaret tilted her head back. “Go,” she encouraged.

“Are you sure?” His concern at the thought of leaving her alone with his mother was evident.

“Quite sure,” she said. “You must not neglect the mill another moment on my account.”

“I will see to it that Margaret is settled.” His mother’s voice interrupted their quiet conversation. He bent a questioning look upon his wife and she smiled reassuringly in response.

“Go,” she repeated. “I shall see you at dinner.”
He turned then, stopping at his mother’s side on his way to the door. His back to her, Margaret could not see his face, but saw Mrs. Thornton’s expression soften slightly in response to whatever it was he had silently conveyed to her.

The two women faced one another warily as the door closed behind him and Margaret met her mother-in-law’s assessing gaze passively. Some unnamed emotion flickered behind the other woman’s dark eyes and she let out her breath on a quiet sigh.

“Come along then.”

Margaret followed John’s mother up the wide staircase to the upper floor and to the familiar room which was hers.

“I shall have the room aired out and your things brought up.”

“Oh…”

Margaret’s thoughts betrayed her. Her gaze shot wistfully to the door separating her room from John’s. A flush stained her cheeks as she became aware of her mother-in-law’s penetrating look and she hastily ducked her head, staring at the carpet beneath her feet for a long moment.

“I wanted to hate you.”

Margaret’s head shot up at the other woman’s words.

“If I am being honest, I must confess there have been times when I have hated you.” Hannah moved toward a window, her fingers toying with the scalloped edge of the lace curtain. “You broke his heart when you left.”

“I know.”

Ashamed by her own behavior, Margaret straightened her shoulders, prepared to withstand a tongue-lashing from the older woman and was surprised instead to find her mother-in-law looking back at her without judgment.
“However, it is evident that something has changed between the two of you,” Hannah said. “I have despaired for him.” Pained emotion swam in Mrs. Thornton’s eyes. “But today I saw a spark of life in his eyes for the first time in months and I am sure it has everything to do with you. I am grateful to you for that.”

Her throat tight with unshed tears, Margaret simply nodded, surprised by the unexpected note of praise in the other woman’s voice.

“You know of all that is happening with the mill? The trouble he faces?”

“Yes. We have discussed it often in our letters these past months.”

“He went to London to tell you of the speculation? Of Mr. Watson’s success? And that he believes the bank will call the loan due any time now?”

“And to set me free.”

Margaret saw the expression of shock which passed over the older woman’s face.

“To set you…? I do not understand. He offered…”

“An annulment.” Tears sprang to Margaret’s eyes and she coughed delicately to clear her throat.

And yet, here you are. Now when all is nearly lost,” Mrs. Thornton said wonderingly. “That speaks well of you, Margaret, for I do not think it only duty which caused you to return.”

“No,” Margaret furtively knuckled a stray tear from the corner of her eye. “Duty had little to do with it. I love him.”

Hannah folded her arms tightly across her middle as she moved toward her daughter-in-law.
“He will not give up the mill easily,” she said. “I do not know how it will end – or when – but do not be worried. He’ll see us right.”

Margaret nodded vigorously in agreement, concern for herself the least of her worries.

“He will need you, Margaret.” A faintly pleading note colored Mrs. Thornton’s words. “Now, more than ever, he will need you.”

Margaret took two steps forward, closing the distance between them.

“I shall not leave again.” She laid a hand on the other woman’s forearm. “I shall never leave him again.”

She was startled awake when the book she had been reading fell from her loose grip with a dull thud against the floor. Stifling a yawn behind one hand, she peered toward the clock on the mantle and then at the empty bed.

Rising, she went to the window and gazed across the mill yard to see a light faintly glowing in his office. Almost midnight, she thought darkly, and he was still at his desk.

Yet again.

Sighing, she thrust her arms through the sleeves of her robe and stuffed her bare feet into a pair of shoes. It was past time to fetch her husband home.

Taking up a lamp in one hand, she crept through the house and eased the door open, not wishing to awaken anyone else. She clutched the lapels of her robe tightly in one hand as she stepped out into the cool night air. Crossing the mill yard, she entered the building, hurrying through the gloom toward John’s office.

She stopped in the doorway, her heart melting with compassion at the sight of her husband. Sound
asleep, his head was pillowed on the various papers strewn across the top of his desk and over his shoulders was a darkly knit shawl – evidence that his mother had already come and gone earlier in the evening.

“John.” Reaching out, she laid a gentle hand on his back and called his name softly but despite her best efforts, he startled awake, lurching upright and looking wildly about the room.

“Shh.” She rubbed her hand over his shoulder. “There is no cause for alarm. Everything is fine, John.”

Calming as he became aware of his surroundings, he lifted a hand to the back of his neck, rolling his head from side-to-side, wincing at the aching stiffness settled at the base of his skull. Margaret brushed his hand aside and settled her own on his shoulders. Her fingers dug into the knotted muscles, soothing away the soreness until she felt the tension slowly ease its grip.

“It is late. We should go back to the house.” Her murmured words broke the quiet stillness of the room. He tipped his head back, eyes blinking open and closed owlishly, and she tenderly touched her mouth to his in an upside down kiss. Rather than rising, he drew her to his side and leaned tiredly against her, snaking his arms around her waist and burying his face into the soft folds of her robe. Bending forward, she bowed her body over his, cradling him close and hummed a tuneless song. When she felt his grip begin to loosen and his weight sag against her, she knew he was once again sliding back to sleep.

“John,” she called, threading her fingers through his hair to rouse him again. “Come to bed.”

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Twined in one another’s arms, his head was pillowed on her breasts, his fingers toying with the finely milled cotton of her nightgown as she carded her fingers through his hair, stroking and soothing.

“Thank God Fanny is taken care of,” he whispered hoarsely into the dark.

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When the whistle blew signaling the end of the final shift at Marlborough Mills and the gears on the massive machines slowly ground to a shuddering halt, Margaret stood with Hannah Thornton,
the massive machines slowly ground to a shuddering halt, Margaret stood with Hannah Thornton, keeping vigil over the man they both loved. The two women clutched hands and watched at the mill workers listlessly filed out of the building, the men staring stoically ahead while some of the women softly wept.

Margaret wrapped a comforting arm around her mother-in-law’s waist, turning her head when the other woman spoke.

“You should go,” Hannah murmured with a meaningful tip of her head and Margaret’s gaze traveled across the now silent and cavernous room to rest on her husband. His shoulders slumped in defeat, John stood on the metal catwalk near a window, staring at the rapidly emptying mill yard and her heart ached to see him brought so low.

Squeezing her mother-in-law’s hand, she began to make way toward her husband, stopping only when Higgins and little Tom Boucher approached her.

“Miss Margaret.” Nicholas doffed his cap and clutched it tightly in one hand. Glancing over his shoulder at the dark clad figure standing sentinel near the window, he turned back, his lips quirking into a sad half-smile.

“If ’e’s ever in a position to take on workers again, there’s a fair number of us willing to run a mill for him.” He stretched out a hand and offered her a rolled up piece of paper.

“What is this?” Margaret asked.

“A gift for the Master. I got up a petition to collect the names of them that would come back to work for ‘im. Whenever he says the word.”

Tears glittered in her eyes as she unrolled the petition and she bit her lip at the long list of names.

“Thank you, Nicholas.” She rested her free hand against his burly chest and rose onto her toes to press a kiss against his grizzled cheek. “What will you do now?” she asked worriedly.

“Look for work, I reckon.” He shrugged matter-of-factly. “The Master said he’d put in a good word for me with the other masters so…” He glanced down into her concerned expression and rubbed a knuckle against her chin. “You’re a good girl, Miss Margaret,” he told her. “Don’t be frettin’ about us. The Master paid me a fair wage and I’ve managed to set a bit of coin aside to tide
us over until I can find work.”

She nodded blindly, tears scalding her eyes as she flung her arms around him.

“God bless you, Nicholas.”

His breath hitched and he noisily cleared his throat before stepping back. Leaning down, he scooped young Tom up into his arms.

“You best go to him now, Miss Margaret.” He glanced again toward the lonely figure near the window. “He needs you.”

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My Very Dear Margaret,

I had an idea after your father died, that should you ever have need of it, I would find a way to offer you my help.

I never thought to have a family, for I have been much content in my life as an Oxford academic. But I would like to think that if I had a daughter, she would be as kind and loving and gentle a girl as you.

I have often thought how depressing it would be if one were to leave one’s fortune to people who were waiting around, hoping you would die off. So I made the decision to sign the bulk of my income and property – including title to the land and buildings which currently comprise Marlborough Mills – to you now. Do not think to argue with me over this, Margaret, for my mind is quite made up on the matter and I have already made the necessary arrangements with my solicitor. Your father was my oldest friend and you have always been dear to me, though I regret that I was often remiss in being a part of your life as you grew up. And, it seems that I shall likewise be unable to play the role of grandfather to any children you may someday have.

You see, my dear, I have been to my doctor and... well, suffice to say, I have made the decision to live out the rest of my life – what is left of it – in South America in perfect peace and prosperity knowing that you are putting my money to good use.
Margaret, do not weep for me. Rather, I would have you think of me living the life under the Argentine skies. Not many men can plan their exit from this world in such a leisurely way and I am blessed to be able to do so. Just as I have been blessed to be able to call you ‘daughter’.

By the time you receive this letter, I will be on a ship bound for warmer climes and the place where I spent many a happy day in my youth. Do not berate me for taking the coward’s way out and saying my goodbyes in such a manner as this, but I could not bear it otherwise.

Be well my dear. Be happy.

Your affectionate godfather,

R. Bell

“No. I will not take your money, Margaret and that is final!” He had worried when Margaret had withdrawn into herself for two days upon receiving Mr. Bell’s letter and he wondered how much grief one person could be expected to take in such a short period of time.

But now, all such sympathies had been pushed aside as John folded his arms across his chest and glared at his wife, the stubborn expression on his face matched only by the mulish tilt of her chin.

“Oh John, please be sensible.”

He watched her pace back and forth before the darkened fireplace in their room, one part of his brain idly noting the manner in which the spring sun slanting through the windows teased out the red highlights in her hair.

“You know as well as I do that any monies I have are yours. By right of law, if nothing else, it is you who has control of my property.”
“Do you think I give a damn what the law says?” He raked a hand through his hair. “The money is yours!”

“Oh John, do not be so stubborn.” He looked up as she made an impassioned plea. “Only think of what we could do with this money. You could save Marlborough Mills. Re-employ all those who lost their jobs. Perhaps, even start a school for the children of the mill workers,” she wheedled, unrepentantly playing on a subject she knew him to hold dear. “Children like young Tom Boucher.”

John shook his head tiredly. Still feeling the stinging defeat of having his business fail, he had spent the last two weeks in meetings with his creditors and vendors hashing out plans to pay back that which he owed. And now this… his mind was awhirl with ways in which to protect Margaret’s fortune from the vultures that would circle once her inheritance became known. Hunching forward, he let his hands dangle between his legs and stared at the carpet beneath his feet.

“Mr. Bell left his fortune to you, Margaret. He pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers and raised his gaze to hers. “Keep it instead for our children.”

A beatific look came over her face and she glided across the room to stand within arm’s reach of him.

“Our children,” she repeated. “Like this one?”

He felt his heart lurch against his breastbone and as he watched her hand settle over her midsection, he slipped from his chair and fell to his knees before her.

“Margaret.” He stared at the delicate white fingers unconsciously caressing her stomach and raised a shaking hand to cover hers. “Are you… are we…?”

She nodded vigorously, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Yes, my love. We are going to have a baby.”

“But how… when… How long have you known?” He stared at their joined hands covering her stomach as if he could somehow see through her to the child growing within.
“I have suspected for some time now,” she admitted. “So I went to see the doctor a few days ago and he confirmed it. But then Mr. Bell’s letter arrived and…” Her voice trailed off helplessly as she thought of the turmoil of the last few days.

“Oh, my darling.” He framed her belly between his hands, smoothing the soft fabric taut against her body, imagining her round and ripe. “Oh, my beautiful, darling wife.” He wound his arms around her hips and pressed a kiss over the place where their child was nestled and she bent at the waist to rest her cheek against the crown of his head. Locked together thusly, they swayed back and forth, lost in their hopes and dreams.

Recovering himself, John sat down and drew her onto his knee, his hand automatically moving to splay protectively over her still flat stomach.

“You have made me very happy, my love.” Leaning back, he drew her head down onto his shoulder and closed his eyes contentedly.

“A loan then.” Her words were a puff of warm air against his neck and he groaned. The love of his life was nothing if not obstinate.

Her head popped up. “A loan!” she repeated and smiled, thrilled by her own cleverness.

“A loan?”

“Yes!” She sat up straight and adopted a serious manner, the effectiveness of which was slightly diminished by her perch on his lap and his large hand splayed possessively over her belly. “If you will not take our money, then perhaps you would consider allowing me to loan it to you. I am sure that investing the funds into the mill would pay a much better rate of interest than simply allowing the money to lie in a bank.”

A dimple appeared at the corner of her mouth and he knew she thought herself triumphant and though he was tempted and nearly swayed by her enthusiasm, reality once again came crashing down upon him.

“Margaret, my dear. You cannot think to turn such sums over to me when I have already proven to be a bad risk.”
The smile fell away from her face and her brows beetled together in irritation.

“You are not a bad risk,” she hissed, her temper rising. “You played by the rules honorably –”

“– and lost,” he said pointedly.

“Your workers believe in you. Higgins believes in you,” she said, reminding him of the list of names Nicholas had presented to her.

“Your mother believes in you.”

He nodded silently, for there was never any doubt as to the fierceness of that woman’s faith in him.

“And I believe in you, John.”

He closed his eyes when she cupped his face between her hands, desperately wanting to allow her to convince him to her way of thinking.

“I believe in you.” She pecked a kiss against his forehead. “I trust you.” She dropped another onto the tip of his nose. “Please let me prove it,” she begged and peppered fierce kisses over his face.

“A loan…?” He pondered the thought, letting it roll around in his head for a moment or two.

“Yes.” She popped upright again, her cheeks flushed with eagerness.

“A business proposition.”

“Yes, yes. Whatever you want to call it.” A tendril of hair tumbled over her forehead as she nodded vigorously in agreement. “If you insist, we can even have a solicitor draw up loan papers to make it official.”
“Not Henry Lennox,” he growled playfully, his eyes narrowing on hers.

She laughed, the dimple again appearing in her cheek.

“Not Henry,” she agreed, thrusting out a hand to shake on the deal.

John looked at the slim white hand she proffered and wrapped his own around it, yanking her down to cover her lips with his own.

Sealing their bargain with a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

A thank you to each and every person who left a comment, sent feedback, or just took the time to read my story. I’ve said before that writing fic is enjoyable for me simply as a hobby but knowing that others are enjoying my efforts… that puts it over the top for me and I truly appreciate every kind thought and word.

I’m ending this now and marking it as complete. Though I will not say that I’ll never revisit, if I do so, it will be in the form of drabbles or snippets perhaps to check in on John and Margaret and their family or maybe even to insert a scene to expand on a previous chapter or fill in a blank between chapters. I make no promises but I’ve enjoyed being in John’s and Margaret’s heads and in their world. I have a few loose and vague ideas rolling around in my head, but I thought this a good place to wrap up this particular story.

I thank you again.

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End Notes

Undoubtedly the "forced to marry" trope has been done to death. Yet after a recent re-watching of the movie, I cannot shake this idea - which has bloomed into a full grown story - from my head.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!