A Mhuirnín Ó

by erebones

Summary

Fluff and sex. That is all.

Notes

I'm so sorry for the following: trampling all over Ms Gaskell's story without actually reading it; paying entirely too much attention to Mr. Armitage's facial features; ignoring sexual norms of the time; the appalling lack of plot.

A Mhuirnín Ó means "my darling love."

Margaret had never been kissed before. She had been a rambunctious child, but upright, and her swift and promising bloom into womanhood had been a smooth one. But, strangely enough, she felt no fear or nervousness as Mr. Thornton touched his lips to hers. She was nervous, that is, but not because of the kiss. She was nervous because of her proposition. She feared, more than anything, that he would think she was trying to buy his love or his hand in marriage, when there was nothing farther from the truth. But there was no trace of anger about his countenance, nor so much as a shadow on his stern brow. Indeed, he almost looked childlike: his slim mouth turned up ever so slightly at the corners, and the crinkling of his slate-blue eyes made him appear years younger. So she felt no fear when he rested his hand against her cheek, and no qualm as his nose nudged hers and their mouths met.

Her aunt would have had fifty fits to see her acting so shamelessly in such a public place, but Margaret could hardly bring herself to care. She was a grown woman with her own means, and with the man she loved kissing her with such sweet abandon her belly was turned to water. She
had nothing to fear from society.

“You’re coming home with me?”

The open, joyful surprise in his face nearly broke her. How, Margaret wondered as she climbed into the carriage, had she not seen his softer side until now? True, she had seen him smile and laugh with his colleagues, his business partners – his equals. But she had had little evidence of that mirth directed at her. And this, this arm around her shoulder, this warmth at her side, this mouth upon hers, was not quite mirth. It was sweeter, gentler. It was honesty, it was affection, it was trust. It was something she’d seen passed many times between her parents – more so in Helston than in Milton – and she’d envied them for it. Now, though they might be alarmed at her choice, she wished they could see the love in her own heart, with Mr. Thornton’s smile hovering just at the corner of her eyes.

They spoke the entire way to Milton, their voices low in spite of the privacy of their near-empty carriage. Thornton never took his arm from her shoulders, and she leaned into him and his warmth, the solidness of his body. Occasionally, when their conversation lapsed, she would play with the flower in her lap, still bright and cheerful in spite of the beginning of wilt at the edges of its petals. Thornton’s other hand would come across and brush the back of hers, and he would whisper something in her ear to make her laugh. So the time passed in pleasant company, and Margaret’s heart grew lighter and lighter within her as they sped north.

They weren’t inclined to wait, or to make it an affair of great expense. True to her earlier words, on the morning of her wedding – a fine summer day that dawned clear and blue – Margaret laid out her favorite dress, a simple gown of bright salmon edged with pale yellow lace. Mary Higgins laced her into it with smiling eyes, and pinned her curls into a delicate braided crown at the top of her head. Then, with a stomach full of butterflies and a heart full of peace, she draped a thin shawl around her shoulders and stepped out of Thornton manor into the fine sunshine.

Mr. Thornton – John, she reminded herself – was waiting outside, leaning slightly against the porch railing. He straightened at her approach, that tiny smile curled into place as if he wasn’t quite sure he was allowed to be happy. He had dressed as she, finely but simply, with a silky blue departure from his usual black waistcoat. His pocketwatch glinted in a silver drape against his stomach, and his necktie was a rich midnight blue that made his eyes darker and more tempting.

He met her at the doorstep with a bow, and brought something from behind his back. “I know you are most likely too grown-up for such things, but I thought this might be acceptable.” Between his fingers was a yellow rose, its petals furled as if just opening.

“It’s beautiful,” Margaret whispered, captivated. “But where did you find it?”

His slight smile grew, curved with mischief. “I persuaded Mother to plant yellow climbing roses along the rear façade of the house. A small wedding present. I will show you, after the ceremony.” With gentle fingers, he threaded the stem into her hair so that the flower beamed bright and cheerful from the fall of curls around her face.

“You know,” she murmured, humor heavy in her voice, “a yellow rose means friendship, Mr. Thornton. You’re not getting cold feet, are you?”

“Indeed not,” he laughed, his mirth sudden and contagious. “A marriage should be based upon friendship, should it not? Friendship and love?” His hand, still hovering near her hair, moved to touch the curve of her cheek. “But it has other meanings, as you well know.” He stepped closer, face bowed to hers. “Joy, for the joy you give me in becoming my wife. Gladness, for the gladness in my heart when I turned to find you standing beside me at the train station. Welcome
back, for your return to Milton, and to my heart.” His nose brushed the soft skin of her hairline.

“And promise of a new beginning. I think that one explains itself.”

“I believe it does,” Margaret agreed, eyes lifting to his. He was close enough that she could feel his warmth. His hand traced lightly, shiveringly, down her neck to rest on her shoulder, his thumb nestled just so in the hollow of her collarbone.

Behind them, there were youthful shouts in the courtyard. Five children, all scrubbed and dressed in their maudlin best, scrambled to attention at the bottom of the stairs, doing their best to hide the bunches of yellow roses behind their backs. Margaret hid a smile behind one hand.

“It looks like our escort has arrived.”

Thornton turned and offered his arm. “Then we’d best go. Wouldn’t want to be late for our own wedding.”

They walked through the streets this way, attended by the Boucher children, who were quite liberal with their flowers. By the time they arrived at the church, there were no petals left, and Mary Higgins waited by the steps with an attempt at a severe expression, arms full of replacements. Margaret just laughed and kissed her cheek, and allowed the girls to pepper her hair with sprigs of roses while Thornton excused himself into the church.

Mrs. Bell, who had been persuaded to stay in England a little longer, did Margaret the service of escorting her to the altar. There she and Jonathan Thornton were joined in holy matrimony, with flowers in their hair (even John had not escaped) and joy in their hearts.

They invited only close friends to the party afterward, in spite of Mrs. Thornton’s mumblings that the other masters of Milton would not take being cheeked so lightly. But she was inclined to look kindly on Margaret after all that had happened, and so they got away with it. The only unfortunate guest was Fanny, husband firmly in tow, but they set her up with Edith and Mrs. Shaw, and any unpleasantness was neatly prevented.

Margaret’s father had once told her that two things brought people of all classes and trades together: funerals, and weddings. Looking around the fine lawn of the Thornton manor, with its fringe of cheerful yellow where roses would someday climb and clamber at will, she was inclined to believe it. Here was tiny Sholto, tottering along on unsteady legs as the little Boucher girls led him with careful hands. And there was Nicholas Higgins, engaged in hearty conversation with Mr. Bell. Under the awning, Mary Higgins and Edith tittered together in sly whispers. And her own dear Mr. Thornton was on the grass in the shade of an enormous oak, the oldest Boucher boy sat upon his knee with a book in his tiny hands, reading aloud and haltingly.

For a moment, Margaret saw her own child there in his place, and her heart caught in her chest. What would they look like, the babies she would bear John? Tough little things no doubt, and strong-willed, with curly black hair and that tiny mischievous smile – the very same being leveled at her right now from across the lawn. She couldn’t keep from smiling back. Picking up her skirts, she walked along the grass until she reached them, and there she sat, plucking dried yellow petals from her hair.

The air was fresh and golden around them as the little boy blurted and stumbled over the words. John met her eyes over his blond head. “Cur-i-ous-ly,” he said, soft but enunciating clearly, and the boy echoed him with halting steps. Smiling, John slid his hand across the grass to meet Margaret’s. “Little Thomas has quite a way with words, Margaret, as you can see.”
“Just so.” Her eyes crinkled as the boy looked up, seeming surprised to see her. Suddenly shy, he closed his little book and sprang up, bowing, and darted away over the lawn. “Oh,” she said, disappointed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare him off.”

“He is skittish,” John admitted, “but he’ll come around. As I have.” He grinned at her, eyes alight with the shared joke, and Margaret smiled back, full to the brim with affection.

“I can’t decide what I like best about your face.” She braced her chin on her hand, gazing at him through the mirror of her vanity. His brow quirked in amusement as he slid his hands into his waistcoat pockets, returning her stare from the middle of the room. “Your nose is so lovely,” she went on, tracing the object in question with her eyes. “But I find myself quite captivated when you smile. Your bottom lip sort of… hides away, as though it were shy.”

He ducked his head, laughing at her with his eyes. “I did not know I was wedding such a fanciful creature. Margaret.” He said her name so gently, gaze darting up to meet that of her reflection. With patient steps he moved across the room to stand just behind her, and his hand came to rest lightly on her shoulder over the thin layer of her shift. The warmth was shocking through the fabric. Margaret leaned into it, watching with bated breath as he stooped to kiss the top of her head, nose buried amongst the curls. “Will you come to bed with me?”

“Yes,” she breathed, quiet as a prayer in the darkened room. She lifted her hand, seeking his, and drew it to her mouth for a kiss. “I would like nothing better.”

He took her hand and led the way to the master bedroom, the coverlets turned back on the bed and a pleasant warmth crackling in the fireplace. Here, with her guidance, he fumbled with the laces of her corset, dissolving them both into giggles more than once until he’d finally managed to rid her of it. Then, with slightly more coordination, he sought out the multitude of pins keeping her hair in place. One by one they slid free to be placed into his waistcoat pocket, until Margaret’s hair tumbled down in a loose braid. This he unwound patiently, his fingertips combing through the loose waves and massaging her roots. The sensation was alarmingly seductive. It sent wave after wave of chills cascading down her spine, and her head melted to the side as his nails scraped lightly at her scalp, thumbs rubbing in slow, soothing circles at the nape of her neck.

A rather pathetic “don’t stop” escaped her when he finally drew his hands away. He chuckled low in his throat and swept her hair out of the way, leaning close to kiss the side of her neck. Feather-light as it was, the warmth and slight roughness of a day’s worth of stubble moved like a static shock against her skin. Then, slowly, he rubbed his mouth back and forth, the tip of his nose tracing a path along the curve of her shoulder.

“Do you know… erm…” he began, sounding flustered even with his lips resting on her shoulder.

“I know what to expect,” Margaret assured him, thinking with a small smirk of the letters she and Edith had exchanged leading up to and after her cousin’s marriage to Captain Lennox. She was a firm believer in being well-informed, propriety or no, and this was one instance in which she was grateful for the younger woman’s advice. She turned around to face her husband and rested her hands against his face, which was slightly warm and flustered. “You know, I’ve decided.”

“Decided what?” he asked, brows lifting.

“I like your lower lip the best. Because your smiles are so rare, they become more precious.” She stretched out her thumb to press against the smile in question. “Yes, just like that. You should smile more often, John.”

The smile stretched and grew, until the shape of teeth emerged against the pad of her thumb. “Call
me ‘John’ more often and I’ll be sure to.”

“I’ll have to do that,” she whispered, and leaned closer, tipping her face to his.

His mouth may have been slim and sharp, like the keen edge of a knife, but his kisses were warm and sweet and languorous. Time seemed to slow and blur under his attentions, and Margaret was almost surprised when the press of his lips turned hot and hungry. But a fire had started in her own belly, flushing her skin and quickening the birdlike beat of her heart, and she met him in full force, letting him taste her and tasting him in turn. Inside, his mouth was slick, inviting; her breath came harsh through her nose as she stood on tiptoe, arms wrapping around his shoulders like they were meant to fit there.

“Margaret,” he gasped at last, breaking away to press his lips to her cheek. His chest heaved against her, as desperate for breath as she was; she panted against the damp curve of his neck, her fingers tight in his collar and her skin uncomfortably tight and tingling.

“I believe you have me at a disadvantage,” she said when no more words were forthcoming. Cherishing the adorable look of surprise on his face, she gently pushed at his chest until he came to a stumbling stop against the bed. “Sit,” she ordered tartly. “So I can look you in the eye without doing myself an injury.”

He was already flushed, but he turned still redder at her words. She chased the rush of blood beneath his collar, plucking the buttons on his waistcoat and pushing it off his shoulders. His shirt fell open generously at the throat and there she paused, just looking. She was allowed, now, she reminded herself – and allowed to touch, if she wished. Only slightly hesitant, she traced the generous sweep of his collarbone and hovered there over his sternum. The heat from his body rose to meet her touch.

“Are we even, now?” John asked, drawing a startled breath from her.

She pondered the question honestly. Slow and easy, a mischievous smile curled her lips. “No… no, I don’t believe so.” She stepped back a pace, the movement of her chemise brushing the sensitive mounds of her breasts. “Trousers.”

He stared at her, eyes wide and baby-blue. When she made no move to take back her request, he stood and undid the fastenings of his trousers. They dropped to the floor around his bare feet in a puddle of black. His shirt hung down freely now, sheer and white with the glistening hollow of his throat framed temptingly. Margaret’s eyes slid down of their own accord, down to the tenting of the fabric at his hips. Through the fabric she could see the shadow of dark hair, and a smear of rosy pink just touching the cotton’s underside.

John made a small noise in his throat, drawing her attention. “I can’t decide if you look utterly terrified, or utterly determined.”

“I’m not sure I’m utterly anything.” She licked her lips, and flushed when his eyes snapped immediately to her mouth. “Perhaps a little of both.”

He held out his hand. It was broad and solid and familiar, a small comfort. When she took it, he drew her against him and pressed a nuzzling kiss to her brow. “There’s nothing to fear, my darling. It’s only me.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “And I am glad of it.” His arms shifted around her body, waking up sensation all along her spine, and she muffled a gasp into the gaping collar of his shirt. “What happens next?”
“I thought you said you knew what to expect,” he reminded her teasingly.

“I do,” she insisted, and proved it with a shift of weight that pressed the curve of her hip defiantly into the crease of his thighs. His hardness pushed against her belly, and the hair around her face stirred as he let out a slow breath. “But as my husband, aren’t you… in charge of the proceedings?”

He drew his face away at that, looking at her directly. “If there is anyone in charge this evening, it is you, my dear. Your wish is my command.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, touched by his sincerity. “It’s only that I’m not… entirely sure what I ought to wish for.”

“Then how about this,” he said, and smiled slowly. “When you are ready, get out of your shift and climb into bed, and I will kiss every inch of you until you know exactly what to wish for.”

Suddenly she felt rather breathless. “That sounds quite agreeable.” In a burst of assurance, she undid the small ties at the front of her chemise and let it fall to the ground, baring herself to his eyes. He seemed quite determined to look and not touch; but she slid her arm along his until she found his hand, and this she placed at her own waist. “Help me into bed?”

“You’re a coy thing, aren’t you?” he murmured. With laughter written in the creases around his eyes, he scooped her up as if she weighed no more that a bit of cotton fluff and deposited her in the center of the mattress. Drawing away again, his hands lingered on her skin: following the curve of her hip and brushing her bare thigh with his knuckles. She shivered, feeling the fine hairs on her body rising response.

“Come, then.” She shifted her head on the pillow for a better view. “You’ve a promise to keep.”

He smiled shyly at her, bottom lip sneaking from view, and she felt a burst of affection in her chest. “So I have.” With slightly unsteady movements, he climbed onto the duvet and crawled to kneel beside her. “Where would you have me start?”

Margaret blushed, arms stretching above her head. “I suppose you can begin with my mouth, and… go down from there.”

“As my lady desires.” This time when he bent to kiss her she rose to meet him, eager to relearn the shape of his smile. She was only slightly disappointed when he broke the kiss after several heartbeats, because he soon bowed his head to her throat, and that, oh, that was divine. The vague rasp of stubble scraped along her nerves like wildfire, soothed by the warmth and wetness of his mouth. Then he dragged his tongue across the sweep of her collarbones, and she muffled a soft sound with the back of her hand.

“Don’t,” he said, sudden and low in the quiet intimacy of their bedchamber. “Don’t hide from me.” With shocking precision, he stroked a hand over the swell of her ribs to cradle her breast in the hollow of his palm. The barest scrape against her areola coaxed a whimper from her throat, and his lips stretched into a pleased smirk. “Just so.”

“John.” She was too embarrassed to ask him to do it again, but he seemed to know regardless. With the round pad of his thumb, he traced the circle of her nipple until she was squirming and anxious, a distinct throb awakening between her legs. Then, just when she thought she might go mad, he drew his hand away and replaced it with his mouth.

“John!”

Heaven help her, she could barely stand it. She pushed her fingers into his hair and held on – to
pull him closer or to push him away she wasn’t sure. But then he was kissing his way to the other side, laving her skin with warm attentions, and down her belly. It felt forbidden, the direction he was going – for she was no fool, and she could guess at his object – but Edith had hinted at such things in her letters, and the need between her legs was growing with every press of his lips.

At long last he paused, nose barely brushing the dusting of curls that protected her sex. “You must tell me if you wish me to stop,” he rasped. His eyes lifted to her, an inky blue that gleamed in the candlelight. “Will you?”

She nodded once, sharply. He bowed his head.

Margaret had never, in her few adolescent fumblings in the private darkness of her own chambers, managed to coax this rush of sensation from herself. Fearing she would wake the house, she pressed a hand over her mouth as John parted her folds with his thumbs and licked delicately at the very core of her. Every brush of his tongue sent a wave crashing over her head, dizzying her and raising her to unimaginable heights of euphoria all at once. Overcome, she found her legs parting wider of their own accord, knees lifting until she could stroke the arches of her feet over the bent plane of his back. He arched like a pampered tomcat under her errant strokes and pressed himself to her very center, sucking and mouthing until everything shook to pieces and she lost all sense of time and self.

When she gathered herself together again, John was lying alongside her, a satisfied expression on his face and his fingers petting gently through her hair. She reached for him, and kissed him sweetly. “What of you?” she whispered against his mouth, her hand sliding along the soft bristle of his sideburns.

He turned his head to kiss her palm. “You needn’t do a thing, my love.”

“I want to.” She kissed him again, melting and warm and persuasive. “Please.”

“Give me your hand,” he said, voice unsteady as he took her willing wrist. One by one he sucked her fingers into his mouth, laving between them with his tongue until the entire flat of her hand was slick with saliva. Then, gathering her courage, she let him guide her hand down, down beneath his shirt to the hot, hard flesh between his legs.

“There is… no trick to it,” he whispered with a strangled groan. “Just… so…” His mouth pinched tight as she followed the movements of his hand, exploring the smooth skin and the ridges she found there. She watched his face and marveled at the incredible power that welled up within her. Here was her husband, with all his power and his influence, sprawled on their bed with his mouth tight and slack by turns, his cheeks flushed a dull red and his eyes such a dark midnight blue they were nearly black as he panted and bit out his desire through his teeth. “Please,” he whimpered when she slowed, dragging the crease of her thumb along the underside. “Margaret…”

He gave little warning for his climax. His teeth sank deeply into his lower lip rather suddenly, and his dark eyes fell shut – then, with a few shuddering pulses, he tightened in her grip and spilled his seed onto his own belly and the rucked-up shirt around his ribs. Slowly he unwound, like a spring drawn tight, and Margaret stroked his thigh soothingly. “There,” he breathed, and tipped his head back into the pillow. “God, how I love you.”

Regaining a portion of her fastidious mindfulness, Margaret helped him out of his shirt and wiped him clean with tender strokes before curling up at his side. Her hair fell over her shoulder, and after a while he took a lock of it and ran it through his fingers as reverently as if it was a rosary. Margaret fell asleep like this: with his breath slow and steady in her ear, and the prayerful whisper of his touch lulling her into slumber.
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