Margaret Hale, with less pride and prejudice

by pointlace

Summary

What if Margaret Hale was more friendly and less proud? The book consistently refers to Margaret as haughty or proud. How would the story have progressed if she had approached the Hale Family's relationship and interactions with Milton and the Thorntons differently and with a less prejudicial eye?

Notes

A/N: Quick disclaimer: This my first fanfiction, so I will try very hard to make it good but comments and advice are certainly desired.
At the beginning of the story, the timeline will move a bit quickly, as my goal is to get to Milton and the meat of the story. I will use clips from the book within the text, as these particular bits always get me thinking and wondering, What if. . . .
Chapter 1

Margaret Hale had greatly anticipated giving up those items which were considered necessities on the wealthy and fashionable Harley Street, in her Aunt Shaw’s house, but were, in fact, believed to be luxuries in the eyes of much of the rest of the world. She had been conscious of her pride in eschewing those same pleasures and being able to do without them all. But the cloud never comes in that quarter of the horizon from which we watch for it. As Margaret had visited her home only on holidays while residing with in London, any slight complaints by her mother over some trifle or another had been overlooked and forgotten in favor of her greater remembrance of general happiness and contentment.

She returned to Helstone in July and much preferred her time calling upon particular friends and performing those duties which were required of the parson’s family. Her life in the neighborhood was, to her thinking, perfect; it was her life within the walls of Helstone that was not. As the autumnal rains and storms came on in the second half of September, Margaret was obliged to remain more in the house than she had previously and was unable to avail herself of the invitingly open expanses out of doors.

As Helstone was not located within easy walk of any acquaintance of their standard of cultivation, Mrs. Hale took to plaintively protesting their out-of-the-way location and lack of proximity to those individuals with whom it would not be a trial to associate. Margaret was so happy out of doors, at her father's side, that she almost danced but the evenings were rather difficult to fill up agreeably, as Mr. Hale had long ago taken to retiring to his library in the evenings, while his wife was partial to the more feminine pursuits of embroidery and needlework. Though she had married a clergyman, Mrs. Hale viewed the interruptions of family life which arose out of Mr. Hale’s duties as hardships to be both struggled against and merely endured.

It was after tea, on a quiet evening, that Mr. Hale stood, leaning his elbow upon the chimney piece and his head upon his hand. His countenance showed thoughtful, as if he were musing over something deeply. Margaret was present, tidying some piece of her mother’s embroidery. Mr. Hale lifted his head of a sudden and said in a desperate voice, ‘Margaret, could you join me in my study? I must speak with you on a matter of grave significance to our entire family.’ Shocked she was but curious, as well, so she followed him with no little trepidation.

It was done; the issue was already settled. The Hales were to leave Helstone, the place where Margaret had thought to always return, her beloved green country of friends and comfort. Mr. Hale had, for some length of time, been reading literature that, when taken in combination with his sensitive character, caused him to entirely doubt his right to continue in the living which had been his for many years now. He felt his loss most acutely, even though it was entirely of his own doing, and wished to acquaint Margaret with such details as he deemed necessary to ensure that she could communicate the news to Mrs. Hale.

On Margaret’s inquiry as to where they should go on quitting Helstone, Mr. Hale informed his daughter that he had fixed upon Milton-Northern, as it provided opportunities for him to earn his way. In that place also was to be found an anonymity, which he sought most passionately, so as to be unknown to all and none could remind him of that which he regretted leaving. It was a bustling manufacturing town and the soon-to-be-former parson wished for nothing more than a busy life, even if it was not happy. Mr. Hale had corresponded with his friend of many years, a Mr. Bell, who was a fellow of Plymouth College in Oxford and owned properties in Milton. This man, the g-dfather to Margaret’s older brother, had offered what help he could in recognition of their long-standing connection and had noted that the position of private tutor was not only available but eminently suited to Mr. Hale’s abilities.

It fell to Margaret to arrange their removal and thus, she had no time to ponder the gravity of this change or examine her own emotions concerning their leaving Helstone for a locale that could not have been more opposite to the serene, natural surroundings that had lived in Margaret’s mind’s-eye for the whole of her life. A fortnight! That was the entirety of the time allotted to packing and
preparing for their future, one in which they must be far removed from all familiar faces and places. If not for the force of busy-ness, Margaret knew that she would become mired in sorrow and despair but – no! She was made of different stuff; she would arrange the whole, as her parents relied upon the energy of her youth.

Margaret had decided upon Heston, a spot not too distant, perhaps thirty miles, from Milton, for her mother to enjoy the sea air, while she and her father traveled to Milton-Northern to find the Hale’s new lodgings. Dixon was to accompany her mistress at the shore, as Mrs. Hale would be quite lost without her loyal and beloved servant and particularly as Mr. Hale would not present in Heston.

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The time apportioned to Margaret for her last enjoyment of Helstone was at an end and the packers had come to collect those things that made up the reassurance and remembrances of years past. Books, attire and furniture were bundled and boxed in readiness for storing the objects until a more permanent abode could be found for the items and their owners. That last night, in the privacy of her familiar bedroom, Margaret found herself in great danger of permitting the suppressed tears that had threatened from her first knowledge of their plight. She both wished for slumber and feared it: Sleep would prevent memorizing faithfully every detail, every knot in the floorboards which she was nevermore to call her own, but to remain awake was to think and question, leading to the inevitable doubts and fears. It was late when fatigue overcame her restless thoughts and, as Margaret found oblivion, a single tear escaped and slowly crept down her cheek. At the mercy of railroad time, they were gone early in the morning, torn away from their cherished home by punctuality and necessity. The journey went past London, that scene of past delight and enjoyment but now a shadow and sorrow on their northward trek.

On reaching Heston, Margaret gained her first perception of the not insignificant difference in the manners and actions of the Northern folk. The shop people were unlike the storekeepers in the South; there was no idleness, no lounging about quietly watching passers-by. There was a purposefulness about them, a fierce dedication to their trade that showed in their incessant motion. Margaret was, despite any former notion of shoppy people and tradesmen, fascinated by their resolve and conviction, as it was of a likeness with her own.

One evening, it was arranged that Margaret and her father were to go to Milton on the next day to search for their house. Mr. Hale was anticipating meeting Mr. Thornton in person, as they had maintained a regular correspondence since their mutual acquaintance Mr. Bell had taken pains to introduce the one to the other’s notice.

Though a person might be frightened of an unyielding future, it must be met; better to greet your tomorrow with composure, regardless of how uncertain it might be, than to shrink away in alarm. Thus, Margaret and Mr. Hale found themselves entering Milton, taking note of the regular, smallish brick houses, and as they gained the wider roads, they were forced to stop frequently to accommodate passing vehicles; though there were a vast number of trucks and wagons and vans, they all appeared to be carrying cotton, in its various forms. Again, Margaret perceived the resolute nature of the Northern people, the unending trudging of some entering the enormous, smoking factories, some exiting those same buildings, and she wondered at the character of Milton’s inhabitants – what nature of existence could she expect in this new reality?
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Now on to Milton...

Chapter Notes

I should mention that I've never seen the mini-series; I have only read the original book so my "divergences" will be coming solely from book material.

Margaret's father took her through the entrance of the hotel, and leaving her at the foot of the staircase, went to the address of the landlord of the house they had fixed upon. Just as Margaret had her hand on the door of their sitting-room, she was followed by a quick-stepping waiter. 'I beg your pardon, ma'am. The gentleman was gone so quickly, I had no time to tell him. Mr. Thornton called almost directly after you left; and, as I understood from what the gentleman said, you would be back in an hour, I told him so, and he came again about five minutes ago, and said he would wait for Mr. Hale. He is in your room now, ma'am.'

Margaret thanked him and continued through the door fearlessly, accustomed as she was to society. Mr. Thornton was no more frightful a personage than another and she had, during her time in her Aunt Shaw's home, certainly come into contact with several daunting individuals. There was yet another reason for thinking well of him: he had shown himself to be amenable and had, by his correspondence with her father, already provided some measure of relief to the oppressive feeling of uncertainty in removing to a locale entirely unknown.

As Mr. Thornton had been expecting a middle aged clergyman with a small daughter, he was rather discomposed and astonished as Margaret progressed into the room. She did not at all answer his expectations and, further, was quite beautiful – was this perhaps Mr. Hale's daughter? She did not appear astonished at his presence in their sitting room; he, therefore, reasoned that she must indeed be Miss Hale, else he would have been the recipient of much ill will and distress.

'Mr. Thornton, I believe!' said Margaret, after a half-instant's pause, during which his unready words would not come. 'Will you sit down? My father brought me to the door, not a minute ago, but unfortunately he was not told that you were here, and he has gone away on some business. But he will come back almost directly. I am sorry you have had the trouble of calling twice.' She spoke gently but with conviction.

Mr. Thornton was in habits of authority himself, but she seemed to assume some kind of rule over him at once. He had been getting impatient at the loss of his time on a market-day, the moment before she appeared, yet now he calmly took a seat at her bidding. 'Do you know where it is that Mr. Hale has gone to? Perhaps I might be able to find him.'

Margaret told him of her father's destination – the landlord of a house for let in the suburb of Crampton. She apologized yet again to Mr. Thornton for any lapse in conversation, as she would endeavor to entertain him, despite the fatigue from their travel, until her father returned. Mr. Thornton, who had been struggling to repress his admiration, could no longer, as her conduct was unexpectedly cordial for one used to living in the Southern counties. In her innocence, Margaret detected nothing of his regard and perceived only that he was a man unused to conversing on topics not related to business.
On Mr. Hale’s entrance, Mr. Thornton stood to greet him, as if for an old friend, and the two men spoke at length regarding Mr. Bell, the landlord of Marlborough Mills and Mr. Hale’s great friend. Margaret removed herself to sit near the window, relaxing for the first time since their leaving Helstone. All would be well, she thought with hope, and began to quietly study the street seen below.

In her exhaustion, she did not attend the conversation and, thus, was unaware when her father spoke to her. He had to repeat his words respecting the landlord’s disinclination toward compromise, which caught Mr. Thornton’s notice. He had, of course, heard what Mr. Hale had said of the unsightly paper in the Crampton house but now determined that it must have been Miss Hale who had objected to it. This was perfectly reasonable, as Miss Hale had such a superior appearance about her that he should be ashamed of assuming that rather vulgar building would suit.

Mr. Thornton tried to tell himself that he was not watching Margaret that she thought of him as a great rough fellow without refinement, despite her soft speech and not unkind look. Mr. Hale, meanwhile, with his kindly country hospitality, was pressing him to stay to luncheon with them. Mr. Thornton felt that it would have been very inconvenient for him to do so but then Margaret softly seconded her father's invitation and so they three were to lunch together.

When they removed to their new house in Milton, the obnoxious papers were gone. The landlord received their thanks very composedly; and let them think, if they liked, that he had relented from his expressed determination not to repaper. There was no particular need to tell them, that what he did not care to do for a Mr. Hale, unknown in Milton, he was only too glad to do at the one short sharp remonstrance of Mr. Thornton, the wealthy manufacturer.

Margaret and Dixon fell to the business of unpacking and organizing their new residence in Crampton. Mr. Hale had gone over the accounts and, after calculating the entire cost of their removal, had become alarmed at what a great amount of money had been paid out. Margaret was struck anew by the strong contrast between their current circumstances to that which had come before; all that had occurred whilst she was residing in London - the habitual dinners, the calls, the shopping, the dancing evenings, were all going on, going on forever, though her Aunt Shaw and Edith were no longer there; and she, of course, was even less missed – and she, Margaret, was here in smoky Milton. The only remnant left to her of that old life was that which remained in her memory; vivid thoughts she could take out and examine minutely at her leisure, The smooth sea of that old life closed up, without a mark left to tell where they had all been.

Despite her broken-hearted homesickness, Margaret meditated on the harsh, unforgiving judgments that would be applied to Mr. Hale’s choice, his principled decision to give up his parsonage. If she had been still on Harley Street at Aunt Shaw’s, what evil would have been assigned to her from her association with her father? She pondered on what might have been and was the more sanguine about their present for it.

One day Margaret and her father had been as far as the fields that lay around the town; it was early spring, and she had gathered some of the hedge and ditch flowers, dog-violets, lesser celandines, and the like, with an unspoken lament in her heart for the sweet profusion of the South. Her father had left her to go into Milton upon some business; on the road home, she met some humble friends, who she had frequently happened upon during her walks. The girl looked wistfully at the flowers, and, acting on a sudden impulse, Margaret offered them to her. Her pale blue eyes lightened up as she took them, and her father spoke for her.

‘Thank yo, Miss. Bessy’ll think a deal o’ them flowers; that hoo will; and I shall think a deal o’ yor kindness.”

Margaret asked their name and place of residence, as she meant to call upon them.
After a moment, the father answered, 'It's Nicholas Higgins. Hoo's called Bessy Higgins. We put up at nine Frances Street, second turn to th' left at after yo've past th' Goulden Dragon.'

Margaret thanked him and assured Nicholas that she merely wished it as a gesture of friendship and would like to visit, if it was acceptable to him. They parted ways with civility on both sides.

The day after this meeting with Higgins and his daughter, Mr. Hale came upstairs into the little drawing-room at an unusual hour. As was his wont, he wandered about the room, staring at various objects, and behaved in such a manner as Margaret became aware that he desired to delay the telling of a matter.

At last, he declared, 'My dear! I've asked Mr. Thornton to come to tea to-night.'

Mrs. Hale was displeased with the news and Margaret noted the expression of pain that overspread her mother’s countenance, which had been more frequent of late.

Margaret replied, ‘No, Mamma, it will be well. We will give him a welcome, and some cocoa-nut cakes. Dixon will be flattered if we ask her to make some.’

It was at that precise time, that a similar scene was being enacted in Mr. Thornton’s house. Mrs. Thornton was seated, working, in her dining-room. She heard what she believed to be her son and called him. He opened the door and showed himself.

'What has brought you home so early? I thought you were going to tea with that friend of Mr. Bell's; that Mr. Hale.'

'So I am, mother; I am come home to dress!'

His mother exclaimed, 'Dress! humph! When I was a girl, young men were satisfied with dressing once in a day. Why should you dress to go and take a cup of tea with an old parson?'

Mr. Thornton dutifully responded, 'Mr. Hale is a gentleman, and his wife and daughter are ladies.'

'Wife and daughter! Do they teach too? What do they do? You have never mentioned them.'

'No! Mother, because I have never seen Mrs. Hale; I have only seen Miss Hale for an hour and one half.'

'Take care you don't get caught by a penniless girl, John.'

'I am not easily caught, mother, as I think you know. But I must not have Miss Hale spoken of in that way which, you know, is offensive to me.' He turned and shut the door and was gone.

Mrs. Thornton watched after him thoughtfully with only the merest glimmer of jealousy visible in her eyes.
Mr. Thornton left the house without coming into the dining-room again, as he was rather late. Anxious not to give unintentional insult his new friend, he walked particularly hurriedly toward Crampton. He was escorted into the little drawing room; Mr. Hale’s generous greeting was in contrast to his wife’s cold one; Mrs. Hale, however, had the evident excuse of illness, with her drawn and pallid face, and excessive coverings.

As the darkness of evening was upon them, Margaret was occupied in lighting the lamp. An open davenport stood in the window opposite the door; in the other there was a stand, with a tall white china vase, from which drooped wreaths of English ivy, pale-green birch, and copper-colored beech-leaves. Pretty baskets of work stood about in different places and books, not cared for on account of their binding solely, lay on one table, as if recently put down. Behind the door was another table, decked out for tea, with a white tablecloth, on which flourished the cocoa-nut cakes, and a basket piled with oranges and ruddy American apples, heaped on leaves. It appeared to Mr. Thornton that all these graceful cares were habitual to the family; and especially of a piece with Margaret. She stood by the tea-table in a light-colored muslin gown, which had a good deal of pink about it. She looked as if she was not attending to the conversation, but solely busy with the tea-cups, among which her round ivory hands moved with pretty, noiseless, daintiness. She had a bracelet on one taper arm, which would fall down over her round wrist. Mr. Thornton watched the replacing of this troublesome ornament with far more attention than he listened to her father. It seemed as if it fascinated him to see her push it up impatiently, until it tightened her soft flesh; and then to mark the loosening--the fall. He could almost have exclaimed--‘There it goes, again!’

His disappointment was acute when the preparation had passed and the consuming of the delightfully placed items was obligatory. Once her duty was completed – the tea and cakes had been appropriately handed round – Margaret withdrew to a chair at some distance from her father and his guest. The men were speaking and, as their conversation progressed, she could not but note the contrast in appearance of the two.

Mr. Hale, though a gentleman, had an almost feminine air about him; it was in the manner of his slight figure and his rather delicate features of countenance. Mr. Thornton, however, gave an impression of earnestness and great decisiveness, until he smiled, which expression caused him to look positively open and joyous. Margaret rather liked this smile and wondered what else about Mr. Thornton was quite so interesting and unexpected. She fell back into her own thoughts -- as completely forgotten by Mr. Thornton as if she had not been in the room, so thoroughly was he occupied in explaining to Mr. Hale the magnificent power, yet delicate adjustment of the might of the steam-hammer, which was recalling to Mr. Hale some of the wonderful stories of subservient genii in the Arabian Nights--one moment stretching from earth to sky and filling all the width of the horizon, at the next obediently compressed into a vase small enough to be borne in the hand of a child.

‘And this imagination of power, this practical realization of a gigantic thought, came out of one man's brain in our good town. That very man has it within him to mount, step by step, on each wonder he achieves to higher marvels still. And I'll be bound to say, we have many among us who, if he were gone, could spring into the breach and carry on the war which compels, and shall compel, all material power to yield to science.’

‘Your boast reminds me of the old lines--"I've a hundred captains in England," he said, "As good as ever was he."’

‘It is no boast of mine,’ replied Mr. Thornton; ‘it is plain matter-of-fact. I won't deny that I am proud of belonging to a town--or perhaps I should rather say a district--the necessities of which give birth to such grandeur of conception. I would rather be a man toiling, suffering--nay, failing and lacking success--here, than lead a dull prosperous life in the old worn grooves of what you call more aristocratic society down in the South, with their slow days of careless ease. One may be
'You are mistaken,' said Margaret, roused by the aspersion on her beloved South to a fond vehemence of defense, that brought the color into her cheeks and the angry tears into her eyes. 'You do not know anything about the South. If there is less adventure or less progress--I suppose I must not say less excitement--from the gambling spirit of trade, which seems requisite to force out these wonderful inventions, there is less suffering also. I see men here going about in the streets who look ground down by some pinching sorrow or care—who are not only sufferers but haters. Now, in the South we have our poor, but there is not that terrible expression in their countenances of a sullen sense of injustice which I see here. You do not know the South, Mr. Thornton,' she concluded,

'And may I say you do yet not know the North?' asked he, with an inexpressible gentleness in his tone, as he saw that he had really hurt her. Margaret kept her eyes down as she wished to hide the tears that were waiting, unshed, called up by her passionate rebuttal.

'At any rate, Mr. Thornton,' said Mrs. Hale, 'you will allow that Milton is a much smokier, dirty town than you will ever meet with in the South.'

'I'm afraid I must give up its cleanliness,' said Mr. Thornton, with the quick gleaming smile. 'But we are bidden by parliament to burn our own smoke; so I suppose, like good little children, we shall do as we are bid--some time.'

'You seem to have a strong objection to acts of parliament and all legislation affecting your mode of management down here at Milton,' said Mr. Hale.

'Yes, I have; and many others have as well. And with justice, I think. The whole machinery--I don't mean the wood and iron machinery now--of the cotton trade is so new that it is no wonder if it does not work well in every part all at once. Seventy years ago what was it? And now what is it not? Raw, crude materials came together; men of the same level, as regarded education and station, took suddenly the different positions of masters and men, owing to their cleverness, as regarded opportunities and probabilities, which distinguished some, and made them far-seeing as to what great future lay concealed in that rude model of the mechanical spinning frame. The rapid development of what might be called a new trade, gave those early masters enormous power of wealth and command. I don't mean merely over the workmen; I mean over purchasers--over the whole world's market. Why, I may give you, as an instance, an advertisement, inserted not fifty years ago in a Milton paper, that so-and-so (one of the half-dozen calico-printers of the time) would close his warehouse at noon each day; therefore, that all purchasers must come before that hour. Fancy a man dictating in this manner the time when he would sell and when he would not sell. Now, I believe, if a good customer chose to come at midnight, I should get up, and stand hat in hand to receive his orders.'

Margaret felt compelled to listen and lifted her head to watch Mr. Thornton, curious as to what was coming next. Mr. Thornton glanced at her momentarily and continued.

'I only name such things to show what almost unlimited power the manufacturers had about the beginning of this century. The men were rendered dizzy by it. Because a man was successful in his ventures, there was no reason that in all other things his mind should be well-balanced. On the contrary, his sense of justice and his simplicity were often utterly smothered under the glut of wealth that came down upon him; and they tell strange tales of the wild extravagance of living indulged in on gala-days by those early cotton-lords. But by-and-by came a re-action, there were more factories, more masters; more men were wanted. The power of masters and men became more evenly balanced; and now the battle is pretty fairly waged between us. We will hardly submit to the decision of an umpire, much less to the interference of a meddler with only a smattering of the knowledge of the real facts of the case, even though that meddler be called the
'Is there necessity for calling it a battle between the two classes?' asked Mr. Hale. 'I know, from your using the term, it is one which gives a true idea of the real state of things to your mind.'

'It is true; and I believe it to be as much a necessity as that prudent wisdom and good conduct are always opposed to, and doing battle with ignorance and improvidence. It is one of the great beauties of our system, that a working-man may raise himself into the power and position of a master by his own exertions and behavior; that, in fact, everyone who rules himself to decency and sobriety of conduct, and attention to his duties, comes over to our ranks; it may not be always as a master, but as an over-looker, a cashier, a book-keeper, a clerk, one on the side of authority and order.'

'Do you then say that you consider those who are unsuccessful in raising themselves in the world as your enemies?' Margaret asked with no little curiosity.

'As their own enemies, certainly,' replied Mr. Thornton. But he felt that his answer was a poor one and wished to explain but to best illustrate what he wanted to say by telling them something of his own life; but was it not too personal a subject to speak about to strangers?

Still, it was the simple straightforward way of explaining his meaning; so, putting aside the touch of shyness that brought a momentary flush of color into his dark cheek, he said: 'I am not speaking without reason. Sixteen years ago, my father died under very miserable circumstances. I was taken from school, and had to become a man (as well as I could) in a few days. I had such a mother as few are blessed with; a woman of strong power, and firm resolve. We went into a small country town, where living was cheaper than in Milton, and where I got employment in a draper's shop (a capital place, by the way, for obtaining a knowledge of goods). Week by week our income came to fifteen shillings, out of which three people had to be kept. My mother managed so that I put by three out of these fifteen shillings regularly. This made the beginning; this taught me self-denial. Now that I am able to afford my mother such comforts as her age, rather than her own wish, requires, I thank her silently on each occasion for the early training she gave me. Now when I feel that in my own case it is no good luck, nor merit, nor talent,—but simply the habits of life which taught me to despise indulgences not thoroughly earned,—indeed, never to think twice about them,—I believe that this suffering is but the natural punishment of dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure, at some former period of their lives. I do not look on self-indulgent, sensual people as worthy of my hatred; I simply look upon them with contempt for their poorness of character.'

When Mr. Thornton rose up to go away, after shaking hands with Mr. and Mrs. Hale, he made an advance to Margaret to wish her good-bye in a similar manner. It was the frank familiar custom of the place and Margaret was as yet unused to it. She began to bow her farewell but saw his hand half put out, quickly drawn back. She looked inquiringly at Mr. Thornton and asked benignly, 'I am accustomed to bow but you seem to be inclined to shake hands. Is this commonplace in the North?' She put forward her hand to show a willingness to accommodate. Mr. Thornton was shocked into silence at her admission and gravely shook her outstretched hand. It was the first time their hands had touched but only Mr. Thornton appeared aware of this fact.
This chapter will be a lot of the book but coming up next chapter will be the beginning of my significant divergence.

‘Margaret!’ said Mr. Hale, as he returned from seeing his guest downstairs, ‘I could not help watching your face as Mr. Thornton made his confession of having been a shop boy. I had known it all along from Mr. Bell so I was aware of what was coming. You were surprised, to be sure.’

‘Oh, Papa! You don't mean that you thought me so silly? I really liked that account of himself. He spoke about himself so simply—with so little pretense and with such tender respect for his mother. I was inclined to disagree when he was quietly professing to despise people for careless, wasteful improvidence, without ever seeming to think it his duty to try to make them different,—to give them anything of the training which his mother gave him, and to which he evidently owes his position, whatever that may be. In true fact, I was rather disappointed in Mr. Thornton to not have put forth the effort to improve the lives of those around him but it may be that he might not have felt at leisure to do so.’

‘I don't I think, Mr. Hale, you have done quite right in introducing such a person to us without telling us what he had been,’ said Mrs. Hale, ‘I really was very much afraid of showing him how much shocked I was at some parts of what he said. His father "dying in miserable circumstances." Why it might have been in the workhouse!’

'I am not sure if it was not worse than being in the workhouse,' replied her husband. 'I heard a good deal of his previous life from Mr. Bell before we came here; and as he has told you a part, I will fill up what he left out. His father speculated wildly, failed, and then killed himself, because he could not bear the disgrace. All his former friends shrunk from the disclosures that had to be made of his dishonest gambling--wild, hopeless struggles, made with other people's money, to regain his own moderate portion of wealth. No one came forwards to help the mother and this boy. There was another child, I believe, a girl; too young to earn money, but of course she had to be kept. At least, no friend came forwards immediately, and Mrs. Thornton is not one, I fancy, to wait till tardy kindness comes to find her out. So they left Milton. I knew he had gone into a shop, and that his earnings, with some fragment of property secured to his mother, had been made to keep them for a long time. Mr. Bell said they absolutely lived upon water-porridge for years--how, he did not know; but long after the creditors had given up hope of any payment of old Mr. Thornton's debts (if, indeed, they ever had hoped at all about it, after his suicide,) this young man returned to Milton, and went quietly round to each creditor, paying him the first instalment of the money owing to him. No noise--no gathering together of creditors--it was done very silently and quietly, but all was paid at last; helped on materially by the circumstance of one of the creditors, a crabbed old fellow (Mr. Bell says), taking in Mr. Thornton as a kind of partner.’

'That really is fine,' said Margaret. 'But it would be better if he did not seem to test everything by the standard of wealth. I think Mr. Thornton a remarkable man but I wonder if he might see the trouble of others, in addition to his own.'

Her father replied, 'I don't set him up for a hero, or anything of that kind. But good night, child. Your mother looks sadly tired to-night, Margaret.'
Margaret had noticed her mother's unwell appearance with anxiety for some time past, and this remark of her father's sent her up to bed with a dim fear lying like a weight on her heart. The life in Milton was so different from what Mrs. Hale had been accustomed to live in Helstone, in and out perpetually into the fresh and open air; the air itself was so different, deprived of all revivifying principle as it seemed to be here; the domestic worries pressed so very closely, and in so new and sordid a form, upon all the women in the family, that there was good reason to fear that her mother's health might be becoming seriously affected. There were several other signs of something wrong about Mrs. Hale. She and Dixon held mysterious consultations in her bedroom, from which Dixon would come out crying and cross, as was her custom when any distress of her mistress called upon her sympathy. Once Margaret had gone into the chamber soon after Dixon left it, and found her mother on her knees, and as Margaret stole out she caught a few words, which were evidently a prayer for strength and patience to endure severe bodily suffering. Margaret yearned to re-unite the bond of intimate confidence which had been broken by her long residence at her Aunt Shaw's, and strove by gentle caresses and softened words to creep into the warmest place in her mother's heart. But though she received caresses and fond words back again, in such profusion as would have gladdened her formerly, yet she felt that there was a secret withheld from her, and she believed it bore serious reference to her mother's health. She lay awake very long this night, planning how to lessen the evil influence of their Milton life on her mother. A servant to give Dixon permanent assistance should be got, if she gave up her whole time to the search; and then, at any rate, her mother might have all the personal attention she required, and had been accustomed to her whole life. Visiting register offices, seeing all manner of unlikely people, and very few in the least likely, absorbed Margaret's time and thoughts for several days. One afternoon she met Bessy Higgins in the street, and stopped to speak to her.

'Well, Bessy, how are you? Better, I hope, now the wind has changed.'

'Better and not better, if yo' know what that means.'

'Not exactly,' replied Margaret, smiling.

'I'm better in not being torn to pieces by coughing o' nights, but I'm weary and tired o' Milton, and longing to get away to the land beyond; and when I think I'm farther and farther off, my heart sinks, and I'm no better; I'm worse.'

Margaret turned round to walk alongside of the girl in her feeble progress homeward. But for a minute or two she did not speak.

At last she said in a low voice, 'Bessy, do you wish to die?' Margaret shrank from death herself, with all the clinging to life so natural to the young and healthy.

Bessy was silent in her turn for a minute or two. Then she replied, 'If yo'd led the life I have, and gotten as weary of it as I have, and thought at times, "maybe it'll last for fifty or sixty years--it does wi' some,"--and got dizzy and dazed, and sick, as each of them sixty years seemed to spin about me, and mock me with its length of hours and minutes, and endless bits o' time. I tell thee --thou'd been glad enough when th' doctor said he feared thou'd never see another winter.'

'Why, Bessy, what kind of a life has yours been?'

'Nought worse than many others, I reckon. Only I fretted again it, and they didn't.'

'But what was it? You know, I'm a stranger here, so perhaps I'm not so quick at understanding what you mean as if I'd lived all my life at Milton.'
'If yo'd ha' come to our house when yo' said yo' would, I could maybe ha' told you. But father says yo're just like th' rest on 'em; it's out o' sight out o' mind wi' you.'

'I don't know who the rest are; and I've been very busy; and, to tell the truth, I had forgotten my promise--'

'Yo' offered it! We asked none of it.'

'I had forgotten what I said for the time,' continued Margaret quietly. 'I should have thought of it again when I was less busy. May I go with you now?' Bessy gave a quick glance at Margaret's face, to see if the wish expressed was really felt. The sharpness in her eye turned to a wistful longing as she met Margaret's soft and friendly gaze.

'I ha' none so many to care for me; if yo' care yo' may come.

So they walked on together in silence. As they turned up into a small court, opening out of a squalid street, Bessy said, 'Yo'll not be daunted if father's at home, and speaks a bit gruffish at first. He took a mind to ye, yo' see, and he thought a deal o' your coming to see us; and just because he liked yo' he were vexed and put about.'

'Don't fear, Bessy.'

But Nicholas was not at home when they entered. A great slatternly girl, not so old as Bessy, but taller and stronger, was busy at the wash-tub, knocking about the furniture in a rough capable way, but altogether making so much noise that Margaret shrunk, out of sympathy with poor Bessy, who had sat down on the first chair, as if completely tired out with her walk. Margaret asked the sister for a cup of water, and while she ran to fetch it (knocking down the fire-irons, and tumbling over a chair in her way), she unloosed Bessy's bonnet strings, to relieve her catching breath.

'Do you think such life as this is worth caring for?' gasped Bessy, at last. Margaret did not speak, but held the water to her lips. Bessy took a long and feverish draught, and then fell back and shut her eyes.

The feverish color came into her cheek, and the feverish flame into her eye. 'Oh! my heart!' She put her hand to it, and became ghastly pale. Margaret held her in her arms, and put the weary head to rest upon her bosom. She lifted the thin soft hair from off the temples, and bathed them with water. Nicholas understood all her signs for different articles with the quickness of love, and even the round-eyed sister moved with laborious gentleness at Margaret's 'hush!' Presently the spasm that foreshadowed death had passed away, and Bessy roused herself and said,--'I'll go to bed,--it's best place; but,' catching at Margaret's gown, 'yo'll come again,--I know yo' will--but just say it!'

'I will come to-morrow, said Margaret.

Bessy leant back against her father, who prepared to carry her upstairs; but as Margaret rose to go, he struggled to say something: 'G-d bless thee, wench.'

Margaret went away very sad and thoughtful. She was late for tea at home. At Helstone, unpunctuality at meal times was a great fault in her mother's eyes but now Margaret almost longed for the old complainings.

Mr. Hale welcomed Margaret back and queried if she had been successful in her endeavor to find a new servant girl.

'Suppose I try,' said Mr. Hale. 'Everybody else has had their turn at this great difficulty. Now let
me try. I may
be the Cinderella to put on the slipper after all.'

'What would you do, papa? How would you set about it?'

'Why, I would apply to some good house-mother to recommend me one known to herself or her
servants.'

'Very good. But we must first catch our house-mother.'

'You have caught her. Or rather she is coming into the snare, and you will catch her to-morrow, if
you're
skilful.'

'What do you mean, Mr. Hale?' asked his wife, her curiosity aroused.

'Why, my paragon pupil (as Margaret calls him), has told me that his mother intends to call on
Mrs. and Miss
Hale to-morrow.'

'Mrs. Thornton!' exclaimed Mrs. Hale.

'The mother of whom he spoke to us?' said Margaret.

'Mrs. Thornton; the only mother he has, I believe,' said Mr. Hale quietly.

'I shall like to see her. She must be an uncommon person, her mother added. 'Perhaps she may
have a relation who might suit us, and be glad of our place. She sounded to be such a careful
economical person, that I should like any one out of the same family.'

'My dear,' said Mr. Hale alarmed. 'Pray don't go off on that idea. I fancy Mrs. Thornton
completely ignores that old time of trial, and poverty, and economy, of which he speaks so openly.
I am sure, at any rate, she would not like strangers to know anything about it.'

Mr. Thornton had had some difficulty in working up his mother to the desired point of civility.
She did not often make calls; and when she did, it was in heavy state that she went through her
duties. Her son had given her a carriage; but she refused to let him keep horses for it; they were
hired for the solemn occasions, when she paid morning or evening visits. She had had horses for
three days, not a fortnight before, and had comfortably 'killed off' all her acquaintances, who
might now put themselves to trouble and expense in their turn. Yet Crampton was too far off for
her to walk; and she had repeatedly questioned her son as to whether his wish that she should call
on the Hales was strong enough to bear the expense of cab-hire. She would have been thankful if
it had not; for, as she said, 'she saw no use in making up friendships and intimacies with all the
teachers and masters in Milton; why, he would be wanting her to call on Fanny's dancing-master's
wife, the next thing!'

'And so I would, mother, if Mr. Mason and his wife were friend less in a strange place, like the
Hales.'

'Oh! you need not speak so hastily. I am going to-morrow. I only wanted you exactly to
understand about it.'

'If you are going to-morrow, I shall order horses.'

'Nonsense, John. One would think you were made of money.'
'Not quite, yet. But about the horses I'm determined. The last time you were out in a cab, you came home with a headache from the jolting.'

'I never complained of it, I'm sure.'

'No. My mother is not given to complaints,' said he, a little proudly. 'But so much the more I have to watch over you. Now as for Fanny there, a little hardship would do her good. I must dress now. ' He left the room straightaway.

Mrs. Thornton was silent after this; for these words bore relation to a subject which mortified her. She had an unconscious contempt for a weak character; and Fanny was weak in the very points in which her mother and brother were strong.

Mr. Thornton came in, just before going to the mill.

'Mother! I need hardly say, that if there is any little thing that could serve Mrs. Hale as an invalid, you will offer it, I'm sure.'

'If I can find it out, I will. But I have never been ill myself, so I am not much up to invalids' fancies.'

'Well! Here is Fanny then, who is seldom without an ailment. She will be able to suggest something, perhaps--won't you, Fan?'

'I have not always an ailment,' said Fanny, pettishly; 'and I am not going with mamma. I have a headache to-day, and I shan't go out.'

Mr. Thornton looked annoyed. His mother's eyes were bent on her work, at which she was now stitching away busily.

'Fanny! I wish you to go,' said he, authoritatively. 'It will do you good, instead of harm.'

'John always speaks as if I fancied I was ill, and I am sure I never do fancy any such thing. Who are these Hales that he makes such a fuss about?'

'Fanny, don't speak so of your brother. He has good reasons of some kind or other, or he would not wish us to go. Make haste and put your things on.'

But the little altercation between her son and her daughter did not incline Mrs. Thornton more favorably towards 'these Hales.' Her jealous heart repeated her daughter's question, 'Who are they, that he is so anxious we should pay them all this attention?'
Here comes Mrs. Thornton (drum roll, please!) and where we will now begin to see some changes.

Mrs. Thornton had only, of late years, had leisure time enough to indulge in society; however, she was shy and did not at all enjoy the obligation of visiting and making acquaintance with strangers. As such, she was more forbidding and stern looking than usual.

Margaret was busy embroidering a small piece of cambric for some little article of dress for Edith's expected baby—'Flimsy, useless work,' as Mrs. Thornton observed to herself. She liked Mrs. Hale's double knitting far better; that was sensible of its kind. The room altogether was full of knick-knacks, which must take a long time to dust; and time to people of limited income was money. She made all these reflections as she was talking in her stately way to Mrs. Hale, and uttering all the stereotyped commonplaces that most people can find to say with their senses blindfolded. Mrs. Hale was making rather more exertion in her answers, captivated by some real old lace which Mrs. Thornton wore; 'lace,' as she afterwards observed to Dixon, 'of that old English point which has not been made for this seventy years, and which cannot be bought. It must have been an heir-loom, and shows that she had ancestors.' So the owner of the ancestral lace became worthy of something more than the languid exertion to be agreeable to a visitor, by which Mrs. Hale's efforts at conversation would have been otherwise bounded. And presently, Margaret, racking her brain to talk to Fanny, heard her mother and Mrs. Thornton plunge into the interminable subject of servants.

'I suppose you are not musical,' said Fanny, 'as I see no piano.'

'I am fond of hearing good music; I cannot play well myself; and papa and mamma don't care much about it; so we sold our old piano when we came here.'

'I wonder how you can exist without one!' Fanny remarked with feeling.

'Fifteen shillings a week, and three saved out of them!' thought Margaret to herself, 'But she must have been very young. She probably has forgotten her own personal experience. But she must know of those days.'

Margaret's manner had an extra tinge of friendliness in it when she next spoke.

'You have good concerts here, I believe.'

'Oh, yes! Delicious! Too crowded, that is the worst. The directors admit so indiscriminately. But one is sure to hear the newest music there. I always have a large order to give to Johnson's, the day after a concert.'

'What is your preference in music then?' Margaret queried.

'Oh; one knows it is the fashion in London, or else the singers would not bring it down here. You have been in London, of course.' Fanny offhandedly replied.
'Yes,' said Margaret, 'I have lived there for several years.'

'Oh! London is the place that I long to see!'

Margaret was puzzled. ‘Surely London is an easy journey?’

'Yes; but somehow,' said Fanny, lowering her voice, ‘mamma has never been to London herself, and can't understand my longing. She is very proud of Milton; dirty, smoky place, as I feel it to be. I believe she admires it the more for those very qualities.'

'If it has been Mrs. Thornton's home for some years, I can well understand her loving it,' said Margaret, in her clear bell-like voice.

'What are you saying about me, Miss Hale? May I inquire?' came Mrs. Thornton’s rather imperious request.

Margaret was not sure how to reply but, in an effort to make her guest comfortable, she answered, ‘Fanny and I were discussing the differences between London and Milton. As you have had many years here, I understand that you prefer Milton to any other location. The favor of a place is upon its inhabitants, you know.’

Mrs. Thornton was – for herself – moved by Margaret’s declaration and was disappointed to not be able to find fault.

'Do you know anything of Milton, Miss Hale? Have you seen any of our factories or our magnificent warehouses?'

'No.' said Margaret. 'I have not seen anything of that description as yet.'

'They are very curious places,' said Mrs. Hale, 'but there is so much noise and dirt always. I remember once going in a lilac silk to see candles made, and my gown was utterly ruined.'

'Very probably,' said Mrs. Thornton, in a short displeased manner. 'I merely thought, that as strangers newly come to reside in a town which has risen to eminence in the country, from the character and progress of its peculiar business, you might have cared to visit some of the places where it is carried on; places unique in the kingdom, I am informed.'

'I am glad to visit if you would be so good as to procure admission for me.' Margaret had noted Mrs. Thornton’s cold tone and wished to show tractability, particularly to Mr. Hale’s friend’s mother.

With a note of surprise, Mrs. Thornton replied, ‘I shall be proud to accompany you to the print-works, or reed-making, or the more simple operations of spinning carried on in my son's mill. Every improvement of machinery is, I believe, to be seen there, in its highest perfection. When do you wish to go? I do not put off until tomorrow what can be reasonably accomplished today.’

Margaret arranged to tour one of the mills of Mrs. Thornton’s choosing, the next day. She would present herself at Marlborough Mills that afternoon and Mrs. Thornton would escort her.

Fanny and her mother took their leave with quiet dignity and much swishing of silk. Suffice to say, Mrs. Thornton had much to think on. Fanny, however as was her wont, complained about the Hale’s lack of piano and Margaret’s lack of skill upon such.

Margaret flew upstairs as soon as their visitors were gone, and put on her bonnet and shawl, to run and inquire how Bessy Higgins was, and sit with her as long as she could before dinner. As she went along the crowded narrow streets, she felt how much of interest they had gained by the
simple fact of her having learned to care for a dweller in them.

Mary Higgins, the slatternly younger sister, had endeavored as well as she could to tidy up the house for the expected visit. There had been rough-stoning done in the middle of the floor, while the flags under the chairs and table and round the walls retained their dark unwashed appearance. Although the day was hot, there burnt a large fire in the grate, making the whole place feel like an oven. Margaret did not understand that the lavishness of coals was a sign of hospitable welcome to her on Mary's part, and thought that perhaps the oppressive heat was necessary for Bessy. Bessy herself lay on a squab, or short sofa, placed under the window. She was very much more feeble than on the previous day, and tired with raising herself at every step to look out and see if it was Margaret coming. And now that Margaret was there, and had taken a chair by her, Bessy lay back silent, and content to look at Margaret's face, and touch her articles of dress, with a childish admiration of their fineness of texture.

'Yes! I lived there for some years. But my home was i'I never knew why folk in the Bible cared for soft raiment afore. But it must be nice to go dressed as yo' do. It's different fro' common. Most fine folk tire my eyes out wi' their colors; but somehow yours rest me. Where did ye get this frock?'

'In London,' said Margaret, much amused.

'London! Have yo' been in London?'

'Yes! I lived there for some years. But my home was in a forest; in the country.'

'Tell me about it,' said Bessy. 'I like to hear speak of the country and trees, and such like things.' She leaned back, and shut her eye and crossed her hands over her breast, lying at perfect rest, as if to receive all the ideas Margaret could suggest. Margaret had never spoken of Helstone since she left it, except just naming the place incidentally. She saw it in dreams more vivid than life, and as she fell away to slumber at nights her memory wandered in all its pleasant places. But her heart was opened to this girl.

'Oh, Bessy, I loved the home we have left so dearly! I wish you could see it. I cannot tell you half its beauty. There are great trees standing all about it, with their branches stretching long and level, and making a deep shade of rest even at noonday. Here and there, there are wide commons, high up as if above the very tops of the trees--'

'I'm glad of that. I felt smothered like down below. When I have gone for an out, I've always wanted to get high up and see far away, and take a deep breath o' fulness in that air. I get smothered enough in Milton, and I think the sound yo' speak of among the trees, going on for ever and ever, would send me dazed; it's that made my head ache so in the mill. Now on these commons I reckon there is but little noise?'

'No,' said Margaret; 'nothing but here and there a lark high in the air. Sometimes I used to hear a farmer speaking sharp and loud to his servants; but it was so far away that it only reminded me pleasantly that other people were hard at work in some distant place, while I just sat on the heather and did nothing.'

'I used to think once that if I could have a day of doing nothing, to rest me--a day in some quiet place like that yo' speak on--it would maybe set me up. But now I've had many days o' idleness, and I'm just as weary o' them as I was o' my work. Sometimes I'm so tired out I think I cannot enjoy heaven without a piece of rest first. I'm rather afeard o' going straight there without getting a good sleep in the grave to set me up.'

'Don't be afraid, Bessy,' said Margaret, laying her hand on the girl's. 'I would rather hear
something about what you used to do when you were well.'

'I think I was well when mother died, but I have never been rightly strong sin' somewhere about that time. I began to work in a carding-room soon after, and the fluff got into my lungs and poisoned me.'

'Fluff?' said Margaret, inquiringly.

'Fluff,' repeated Bessy. 'Little bits, as fly off fro' the cotton, when they're carding it, and fill the air till it looks all fine white dust. They say it winds round the lungs, and tightens them up. Anyhow, there's many a one as works in a carding-room, that falls into a waste, coughing and spitting blood, because they're just poisoned by the fluff.'

'How old are you?' asked Margaret.

'Nineteen, come July.'

'And I too am nineteen.' She thought, more sorrowfully than Bessy did, of the contrast between them. She could not speak for a moment or two for the emotion she was trying to keep down.

'About Mary,' said Bessy. 'I wanted to ask yo' to be a friend to her. She's seventeen, but she's th' last on us. And I don't want her to go to th' mill, and yet I dunno what she's fit for.'

Margaret looked at the uncleaned corners of the room. 'She could hardly undertake a servant's place, could she?

We have an old faithful servant, almost a friend, who wants help, but who is very particular; and it would not be right to plague her with giving her any assistance that would really be an annoyance and an irritation.'

'No, I see. I reckon yo're right. Our Mary's a good wench; but who has she had to teach her what to do about a house? No mother, and me at the mill till I were good for nothing but scolding her for doing badly what I didn't know how to do a bit. But I wish she could ha' lived wi' yo', for all that.'

'But even though she may not be exactly fitted to come and live with us as a servant--and I don't know about that--I will always try and be a friend to her for your sake, Bessy. And now I must go. I will come again as soon as I can; but if it should not be to-morrow, or the next day, or even a week or a fortnight hence, don't think I've forgotten you. I may be busy.'

'I'll know yo' won't forget me again. I'll not mistrust yo' no more. But remember, in a week or a fortnight I may be dead and buried!'

'I'll come as soon as I can, Bessy,' said Margaret, squeezing her hand tight. 'But you'll let me know if you are worse.'

'Ay, that will I,' said Bessy,
Sleep came to Margaret long after she lay down on her bed that night; there was much to think upon. To visit Bessy was right and her charitable duty but to diminish her time with her mother, who was, to Margaret’s thinking, ailing seriously, this was a painful dilemma. Despite knowledge of the next day’s appointment, she tossed in her bed and it was not until the clock struck one that Margaret finally slept.

The morning sun fighting its way through the omnipresent cloud hovering over Milton woke Margaret. After dressing, she went down to break her fast and continue her contemplations of the night previous. A year ago, or when she first returned to Helstone and her family, and first became silently conscious of the querulousness in her mother's temper, she would have groaned bitterly over the idea of a long illness to be borne in a strange place, with diminished comforts on every side of the home life. But with the increase of serious and just ground of complaint, a new kind of patience had sprung up in her mother's mind. She was gentle and quiet in intense bodily suffering, almost in proportion as she had been restless and depressed when there had been no real cause for grief. Margaret longed for time, quite a length of time, in which to silently plan. But it was not to be, as she was due in three hours to appear and follow Mrs. Thornton as she pointed out what was great and important in her son’s mill.

‘Margaret,’ her mother queried, ‘Was not today fixed for you to call upon Mrs. Thornton?’

‘Mrs. Thornton?’ asked Mr. Hale, ‘Are you to visit with Mrs. Thornton? I should like to accompany you.’

‘She is to show me through Marlborough Mills,’ Margaret answered, ‘Surely, Papa, she would not begrudge you the time.’

‘Ah, the mill! I have so wanted to see myself the wonderful machines of which Mr. Thornton speaks.’

And so it was, that both Margaret and her father found themselves knocking at the lodge-door at the appointed time. It was like a common garden-door; on one side of it were great closed gates for the ingress and egress of lorries and wagons. The lodge-keeper admitted them into a great oblong yard, on one side of which were offices for the transaction of business; on the opposite, an immense many-windowed mill, whence proceeded the continual clank of machinery and the long groaning roar of the steam-engine, enough to deafen those who lived within the enclosure. Mrs. Thornton was standing inside of the gate, dressed in a spotless black silk and adorned by snow white lace. She offered a small nod toward both Hales and advanced toward them.

‘Mr. Hale, I am pleased to find you joining us on our tour today,’ stated she with stately dignity.

‘Mrs. Thornton, it is merely an answer to a desire of mine to view your son’s work. He has spoken so often of his machines and their grandness that I had to come.’

Mrs. Thornton was decidedly pleased by this response and again inclined her head. ‘It is excellent to find that you appreciate my son’s endeavors, as he values the hours he spends with you.’ She moved in the direction of a staircase, which led by a heavy door into the interior of the mill. Mr. Hale and Margaret promptly followed her, both curious to see the interior of the highly touted and extremely noisy manufactory. The noise was no less once inside of the large edifice and only seemed to increase. Margaret was fascinated by the sheer power put forth by the rows upon rows of great metal spiders, constantly spinning and moving while attended by men, women and children. Her father was struck speechless, overwhelmed by the scale of the room and its
inhabitants. Margaret tightened her hold upon her father’s arm to provide him a steadying influence. He patted her hand lightly and in a low voice murmured, ‘It is more than one can comprehend.’

After sighting several other rooms of equal size and occupation, the three turned back and exited the mill by the same door through which they had entered. Margaret said, ‘Mrs. Thornton, I would like to thank you for your patience today in providing my father and myself, strangers to Milton and to the North, with an intimate view of Mr. Thornton’s mill.’

Mrs. Thornton was too much surprised by Margaret’s statement to hide her emotion for a moment but then calmly replied, ‘Miss Hale, it was an honor to escort you and your father.’

Mr. Hale then put in, ‘Mrs. Thornton, we should like to return your call tomorrow. Would that suit your plans?’

She answered, ‘Certainly. Our home is across the courtyard from the mill,’ and she pointed with a steady hand toward a handsome stone-coped house,—blackened, to be sure, by the smoke, but with paint, windows, and steps kept scrupulously clean. It was evidently a house which had been built some fifty or sixty years. The stone facings—the long, narrow windows, and the number of them—the flights of steps up to the front door, ascending from either side, and guarded by railing—all witnessed to its age. Margaret only wondered why people who could afford to live in so good a house, and keep it in such perfect order, did not prefer a much smaller dwelling in the country, or even some suburb; not in the continual whirl and din of the factory.

‘We shall then see you on the morrow,’ Mr. Hale said and bid the lady farewell.

That evening, Mr. Hale being absent, her mother began to talk to her about her brother Frederick, the very subject on which Margaret had longed to ask questions, and almost the only one on which her timidity overcame her natural openness. The more she wanted to hear about him, the less likely she was to speak.

‘Oh, Margaret, it was so windy last night! It came howling down the chimney in our room! I could not sleep. I never can when there is such a terrible wind. I got into a wakeful habit when poor Frederick was at sea; and now, even if I don't waken all at once, I dream of him in some stormy sea, with great, clear, glass-green walls of waves on either side his ship, but far higher than her very masts, curling over her with that cruel, terrible white foam, like some gigantic crested serpent. It is an old dream, but it always comes back on windy nights, till I am thankful to waken, sitting straight and stiff up in bed with my terror. Poor Frederick! He is on land now, so wind can do him no harm. Though I did think it might shake down some of those tall chimneys.’

‘Where is Frederick now, mamma? Our letters are directed to the care of Messrs. Barbour, at Cadiz, I know; but where is he himself?’

‘I can't remember the name of the place, but he is not called Hale; you must remember that, Margaret. Notice the F. D. in every corner of the letters. He has taken the name of Dickenson. I wanted him to have been called Beresford, to which he had a kind of right, but your father thought he had better not. He might be recognized, you know, if he were called by my name.’

‘Mamma,’ said Margaret, ‘I was at Aunt Shaw's when it all happened; and I suppose I was not old enough to be told plainly about it. But I should like to know now, if I may—if it does not give you too much pain to speak about it.’

‘Pain! No,’ replied Mrs. Hale, her cheek flushing. ‘It is pain to think that perhaps I may never see
my darling boy again. Or else he did right, Margaret. They may say what they like, but I have his
own letters to show, and I'll believe him, though he is my son, sooner than any court-martial on
earth. Go to my little cabinet, dear, and in the second left-hand drawer you will find a packet of
letters.'

Margaret went. There were the yellow, sea-stained letters, with the peculiar fragrance which ocean
letters have. Margaret carried them back to her mother, who untied the silken string with trembling
fingers, and, examining their dates, she gave them to Margaret to read.

Margaret slowly read the letter, half illegible through the fading of the ink. It might be— it probably
was—a statement of Captain Reid's imperiousness in trifles, very much exaggerated by the
narrator, who had written it while fresh and warm from the scene of altercation. Some sailors
being aloft in the main-topsail rigging, the captain had ordered them to race down, threatening the
hindmost with the cat-of-nine-tails. He who was the farthest on the spar, feeling the impossibility
of passing his companions, and yet passionately dreading the disgrace of the flogging, threw
himself desperately down to catch a rope considerably lower, failed, and fell senseless on deck.
He only survived for a few hours afterwards, and the indignation of the ship's crew was at boiling
point when young Hale wrote.

'But we did not receive this letter till long, long after we heard of the mutiny. Poor Fred! I dare say
it was a comfort to him to write it even though he could not have known how to send it, poor
fellow! And then we saw a report in the papers—that's to say, long before Fred's letter reached us--
of an atrocious mutiny having broken out on board the Russell – that was Fred's boat, and that the
mutineers had remained in possession of the ship, which had gone off, it was supposed, to be a
pirate; and that Captain Reid was sent adrift in a boat with some men—officers or something--
whose names were all given, for they were picked up by a West-Indian steamer. Oh, Margaret!
How your father and I turned sick over that list, when there was no name of Frederick Hale. We
thought it must be some mistake; for poor Fred was such a fine fellow, only perhaps rather too
passionate; and we hoped that the name of Carr, which was in the list, was a misprint for that of
Hale—newspapers are so careless. And towards post-time the next day, papa set off to walk to
Southampton to get the papers; and I could not stop at home, so I went to meet him. He was very
late-- much later than I thought he would have been; and I sat down under the hedge to wait for
him. He came at last, his arms hanging loose down, his head sunk, and walking heavily along, as
if every step was a labor and a trouble. Margaret, I see him now.'

'Don't go on, mamma. I can understand it all,' said Margaret, leaning up caressingly against her
mother's side, and kissing her hand.

'I think, Margaret,' Mrs. Hale continued, after a pause, in a weak, trembling, exhausted voice, 'I
am glad of it-- I am prouder of Frederick standing up against injustice, than if he had been simply a
good officer. It was not for himself, or his own injuries, he rebelled; but he would speak his mind
to Captain Reid, and so it went on from bad to worse; and you see, most of the sailors stuck by
Frederick.'

'I am sure I am,' said Margaret, in a firm, decided tone. 'Loyalty and obedience to wisdom and
justice are fine; but it is still finer to defy arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used—not on behalf
of ourselves, but on behalf of others more helpless.'

'For all that, I wish I could see Frederick once more— just once. He was my first baby, Margaret.'
Mrs. Hale spoke wistfully, and almost as if apologizing for the yearning, craving wish, as though
it were a depreciation of her remaining child. But such an idea never crossed Margaret's mind. She
was thinking how her mother's desire could be fulfilled.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I wanted to make an extra long chapter this time, as I will not be able to post again until Wednesday or Thursday and I do love posting.

‘Margaret,’ said her father the next day, ‘We are to call upon Mrs. Thornton this afternoon. Your mother is not very well and thinks she cannot walk so far so we two are to go. Should we consult a doctor, do you suppose?’

‘If I knew of some good doctor, I would go this afternoon and ask him to come, for I am sure mamma is seriously indisposed.’

Mr. Hale answered in a despondent tone: ‘Do you think she has any hidden complaint? Do you think she is really very ill? Has Dixon said anything? Oh, Margaret! I am haunted by the fear that our coming to Milton has killed her. My poor Maria! We will ask Mrs. Thornton if she can tell us of a good doctor. We won’t throw away our money on any but someone first-rate.’

Knowing that she was to visit Mrs. Thornton in the afternoon, Margaret had planned to visit Bessy Higgins in the morning. She saw unusual loiterers in the streets: men with their hands in their pockets sauntering along; loud-laughing and loud-spoken girls clustered together, apparently excited to high spirits, and a boisterous independence of temper and behavior. The more ill-looking of the men—the discreditable minority—hung about on the steps of the beer-houses and gin-shops, smoking, and commenting pretty freely on every passer-by.

Nicholas Higgins was sitting by the fire smoking, as she went in. Bessy was rocking herself on the other side. Nicholas took the pipe out of his mouth, and standing up, pushed his chair towards Margaret; he leant against the chimney piece in a lounging attitude, while she asked Bessy how she was.

'Hoo’s rather down i’ th’ mouth in regard to spirits, but hoo’s better in health. Hoo doesn’t like this strike. Hoo’s a deal too much set on peace and quietness at any price.'

'This is th’ third strike I’ve seen,' said she, sighing, as if that was answer and explanation enough.

'Well, third time pays for all. See if we don’t dang th' masters this time. See if they don’t come, and beg us to come back at our own price. That’s all. We’ve missed it afore time, I grant yo'; but this time we’n laid our plans desperate deep.'

'Why do you strike?' asked Margaret. 'Striking is leaving off work till you get your own rate of wages, is it not? You must not wonder at my ignorance; where I come from I never heard of a strike. If the people struck, as you call it, where I come from, as they are mostly all field laborers, the seed would not be sown, the hay got in, the corn reaped.'

'Well?' said he. He had resumed his pipe, and put his 'well' in the form of an interrogation.

'Why,' she went on, 'what would become of the farmers.'

He puffed away. 'I reckon they'd have either to give up their farms, or to give fair rate of wage.'
'Suppose they could not, or would not do the last; they could not give up their farms all in a minute, however much they might wish to do so; but they would have no hay, nor corn to sell that year; and where would the money come from to pay the laborers' wages the next?'

Still puffing away, at last he said, 'I know nought of your ways down South. I have heerd they're a pack of spiritless, down-trodden men; welly starved to death; too much dazed wi' begging to know when they're put upon. Now, it's not so here. We known when we're put upon; and we'en too much blood in us to stand it. We just take our hands fro' our looms, and say, "Yo' may starve us, but yo'll not put upon us, my masters!" And be danged to 'em, they shan't this time!'

'I wish I lived down South,' said Bessy.

'There's a deal to bear there,' said Margaret. 'There are sorrows to bear everywhere. There is very hard bodily labor to be gone through, with very little food to give strength.'

'But it's out of doors,' said Bessy. 'And away from the endless, endless noise, and sickening heat.'

'It's sometimes in heavy rain, and sometimes in bitter cold. A young person can stand it; but an old man gets racked with rheumatism, and bent and withered before his time; yet he must just work on the same, or else go to the workhouse.'

'I thought yo' were so taken wi' the ways of the South country.'

'And yo' say they never strike down there?' asked Nicholas, abruptly.

'No!' said Margaret; 'I think they have too much sense.'

'An' I think,' replied he, dashing the ashes out of his pipe with so much vehemence that it broke, 'it's not that they've too much sense, but that they've too little spirit.'

'O, father!' said Bessy, 'what have ye gained by striking? Think of that first strike when mother died--how we all had to starve--you the worst of all; and yet many a one went in every week at the same wage, till all were gone in that there was work for; and some went beggars all their lives at after.'

'Ay,' said he. 'That there strike was badly managed. Folk got into th' management of it, as were either fools or not true men. Yo'll see, it'll be different this time.'

'But all this time you've not told me what you're striking for,' said Margaret, again.

'Why, yo' see, there's five or six masters who have set themselves again't paying the wages they've been paying these two years past, and flourishing upon, and getting richer upon. And now they come to us, and say we're to take less. And we won't. We'll just starve them to death first; and see who'll work for 'em then. They'll have killed the goose that laid 'em the golden eggs, I reckon.'

'And so you plan dying, in order to be revenged upon them!'

'No,' said he, 'I dunnot. I just look forward to the chance of dying at my post sooner than yield. That's what folk call fine and honorable in a soldier, and why not in a poor weaver-chap?'

'But,' said Margaret, 'a soldier dies in the cause of the Nation--in the cause of others.'

He laughed grimly. 'My lass,' said he, 'yo're but a young wench, but don't yo' think I can keep three people--that's Bessy, and Mary, and me--on sixteen shilling a week? Dun yo' think it's for mysel' I'm striking work at this time? It's just as much in the cause of others as yon soldier – only yon soldier, the cause he dies for is just that of somebody he never clapt eyes on, nor heerd on all
his born days, while I take up John Boucher's cause, as lives next door but one, wi' a sickly wife, and eight childer, none on 'em factory age; and I don't take up his cause only, though he's a poor good-for-nought, as can only manage two looms at a time, but I take up th' cause o' justice. Why are we to have less wage now, I ask, than two year ago?'

'Don't ask me,' said Margaret; 'I am very ignorant. Ask some of your masters. Surely they will give you a reason for it. It is not merely an arbitrary decision of theirs, come to without reason.'

'Yo're just a foreigner, and nothing more,' said he, contemptuously. 'Much yo' know about it. Ask th' masters! They'd tell us to mind our own business, and they'd mind theirs. Our business being, yo' understand, to take the wage, and be thankful, and their business to bate us down to starving point, to swell their profits. That's what it is.'

'But,' said Margaret, 'the state of trade may be such as not to enable them to give you the same remuneration as formerly.'

'State o' trade! That's just a piece o' masters' humbug. It's rate o' wages I was talking of. Th' masters keep th' state o' trade in their own hands; and just walk it forward like a black bug-a-boo, to frighten naughty children with into being good. I'll tell yo' it's their part,—their cue, as some folks call it,—to beat us down, to swell their fortunes; and it's ours to stand up and fight hard,—not for ourselves alone, but for them round about us—for justice and fair play. We help to make their profits, and we ought to help spend 'em. It's not that we want their brass so much this time, as we've done many a time afore. We'n getten money laid by; and we're resolved to stand and fall together; not a man on us will go in for less wage than th' Union says is our due. So I say, "Hooray for the strike," and let Thornton, and Slickson, and Hamper, and their set look to it!'

'Thornton!' said Margaret. 'Mr. Thornton of Marlborough Street?'

'Aye! Thornton o' Marlborough Mill, as we call him.'

'He is one of the masters you are striving with, is he not? What sort of a master is he?'

'Did yo' ever see a bulldog on hind legs, and dress him up in coat and breeches, and yo'n just getten John Thornton.'

'Nay,' said Margaret, laughing, 'I deny that. Mr. Thornton is plain enough, but he's not like a bulldog, with its short broad nose, and snarling upper lip.'

'No! Not in look, I grant yo'. But let John Thornton get hold on a notion, and he'll stick to it like a bulldog; yo' might pull him away wi' a pitch-fork ere he'd leave go. He's worth fighting wi', is John Thornton. As for Slickson, I take it, some o' these days he'll wheedle his men back wi' fair promises; that they'll just get cheated out of as soon as they're in his power again. He'll work his fines well out on 'em, I'll warrant. He's as slippery as an eel, he is. He's like a cat,—as sleek, and cunning, and fierce. I'll never be an honest up and down fight wi' him, as it will be wi' Thornton. Thornton's as dour as a door-nail; an obstinate chap, every inch on him,—th' oud bulldog!'

'Poor Bessy!' said Margaret, turning round to her. 'You sigh over it all. You don't like struggling and fighting as your father does, do you?'

'No!' said she, heavily. 'I'm sick on it. Bless yo'r sweet pitiful face! But yo' duno't know what a strike is yet.'

'Come, Bessy,' said Margaret, 'I won't say you're exaggerating, because I don't know enough about it; but, perhaps, as you're not well, you're only looking on one side, and there is another and a brighter to be looked to.'
'It's all well enough for yo' to say so, who have lived in pleasant green places all your life long, and never known want or care, or wickedness either, for that matter.'

Margaret suddenly recollected her visit to Mrs. Thornton and put on her bonnet. ‘Bessy, I shall call another time but must take my leave now. My father has scheduled an appointment for us today.’

Bessy reached out and grabbed Margaret’s hand ‘Yo’ like a breath of country air, somehow. Yo’ freshens me up above a bit.’

Margaret hurried to the house in Crampton – she did not wish to be unpunctual, particularly for Mrs. Thornton. Her father was waiting, pacing, on the street directly before the door. His face brightened when Margaret came into view. ‘Ah, Margaret, you are come! I was so worried that I would have to present just myself at Marlborough Street.’

‘No, Papa,’ Margaret gently replied whilst taking his arm and beginning their walk, ‘I would not have let you to make the call yourself. I was off speaking with Bessy Higgins. She spoke of a strike coming but perhaps we should not mention such a subject to Mrs. Thornton.’

‘I would agree. She has pride enough in her son – justifiably I believe, so she would not look favorably upon striking or the Union.’

Father and daughter fell silent at this and continued their walk thus until they reached the mill gate. Just as she had done the day previous, Mrs. Thornton was waiting their presence. She looked her usual self – at once dignified and grave – but there seemed to be an air of being gratified about her, as well. Greetings were exchanged and the trio mounted the old-fashioned, curved stairs. Margaret and Mr. Hale were ushered into the drawing-room by their hostess. The room as a whole gave the impression of ornamentation but not comfort. The chandelier and most of the furniture were bagged in either netting or linen covers, which impressed Margaret with the peculiar cleanliness required to keep everything so white and pure in such a smoky atmosphere, and of the trouble that must be willingly expended to secure that effect of icy, snowy discomfort. Mrs. Thornton bade them take a seat as she rang for tea. Margaret explained that her mother was too unwell to come and tried, while not wanting her father to become anxious, to convey that Mrs. Hale would certainly not have ignored her neighborly duty else.

‘You might have deferred the call until she was able,’ Mrs. Thornton stated, wondering if Mrs. Hale's was some temporary or fanciful fine-ladyish indisposition.

‘I am sorry but it is rather a consistent trouble which grows better or worse on any individual day.’ Margaret glanced at her father to ensure that he was not overly fretting and continued, ‘We wanted to see if you knew the name of a first rate doctor, since we have no connections here and you have the advantage of long acquaintance.’

Mr. Hale decidedly did not like his daughter’s speech but merely hung his head and looked distraught. He lifted his face to their contemplative hostess – for Margaret had given her much to think upon – and asked after Mr. Thornton’s health. ‘I was afraid he was not well, from his hurried note yesterday.’

Mrs. Thornton replied, ‘My son told me he could not get leisure to read with you last night, sir. He regretted it, I am sure; he values the hours spent with you.’

‘I am sure they are equally agreeable to me,’ said Mr. Hale. 'It makes me feel young again to see his enjoyment and appreciation of all that is fine in classical literature. His opinions are much enjoyed during our discussions and he has taught me quite a lot of manufacturing and the like.'
'I have no doubt the classics are very desirable for people who have leisure. But, I confess, it was against my judgment that my son renewed his study of them. The time and place in which he lives, seem to me to require all his energy and attention. Having many interests does not suit the life of a Milton manufacturer. It is, or ought to be, enough for him to have one great desire, and to bring all the purposes of his life to bear on the fulfilment of that: To hold and maintain a high, honorable place among the merchants of his country--the men of his town. Such a place my son has earned for himself. Go where you will--I don't say in England only, but in Europe--the name of John Thornton of Milton is known and respected amongst all men of business.'

Margaret and her father sat, uneasy with the consciousness that neither had heard of John Thornton’s name prior to Mr. Bell mentioning him. The proud mother's world was not their world of Harley Street gentilities on the one hand, or country clergymen and Hampshire squires on the other. Margaret's face, in spite of all her endeavors to keep it simply listening in its expression told the sensitive Mrs. Thornton this feeling of hers.

'You think you never heard of this wonderful son of mine, Miss Hale. You think I'm an old woman whose ideas are bounded by Milton, and whose own crow is the whitest ever seen.'

'No,' said Margaret, with some spirit. 'It may be true, that I was thinking I had hardly heard Mr. Thornton's name before I came to Milton. But since I have come here, I have heard enough to make me respect and admire him, and to feel how much justice and truth there is in what you have said of him.'

'Who spoke to you of him?' asked Mrs. Thornton, a little mollified, yet jealous lest anyone else's words should not have done him full justice.

Margaret replied, 'It was as much from what Mr. Thornton withheld of that which we had been told of his previous life by Mr. Bell,--it was more that than what he said, that made us all feel what reason you have to be proud of him.'

'Mr. Bell! What can he know of John? But I'm obliged to you, Miss Hale. Many a missy young lady would have shrunk from giving an old woman the pleasure of hearing that her son was well spoken of.'

'Why?' asked Margaret, looking straight at Mrs. Thornton, in bewilderment.

'Why! Because I suppose they might have consciences that told them how surely they were making the old mother into an advocate for them, in case they had any plans on the son's heart.' She smiled a slight smile, for she had been pleased by Margaret's frankness; and perhaps she felt that she had been asking questions too much as if she had a right to interrogate.

'I hope Miss Thornton is well,' put in Mr. Hale, desirous of changing the current of the conversation.

'She is as well as she ever is. She is not strong,' replied Mrs. Thornton, shortly.

'And Mr. Thornton? I suppose I may hope to see him on Thursday?' queried Mr. Hale.

'I cannot answer for my son's engagements. There is some uncomfortable work going on in the town; a threatening of a strike. If so, his experience and judgment will make him much consulted by his friends. But I should think he could come on Thursday. At any rate, I am sure he will let you know if he cannot.'

'What are they going to strike for?' asked Margaret.
'For the mastership and ownership of other people's property,' said Mrs. Thornton, with a fierce snort. 'That is what they always strike for. If my son's work-people strike, I will only say they are a pack of ungrateful hounds. But I have no doubt they will.'

'They are wanting higher wages, I suppose?' asked Mr. Hale.

'That is the face of the thing. But the truth is, they want to be masters, and make the masters into slaves on their own ground. They are always trying at it; they always have it in their minds and every five or six years, there comes a struggle between masters and men. They'll find themselves mistaken this time, I fancy,—a little out of their reckoning. If they turn out, they mayn't find it so easy to go in again. I believe, the masters have a thing or two in their heads which will teach the men not to strike again in a hurry, if they try it this time.'

The Hales took their leave shortly after this and Mrs. Thornton returned to her mending of household articles. She sat without movement, unseeing of the tablecloth in her hands, deep in thought. ‘A fine proud miss, she is too,’ Mr. Thornton’s mother reflected quietly after a time.
Mr. Thornton came that evening to Mr. Hale's. He was shown up into the drawing-room, where Mr. Hale was reading aloud to his wife and daughter.

'I am come partly to bring you a note from my mother, and partly to apologize for not keeping to my time yesterday. The note contains the address you asked for; Dr. Donaldson.'

'Thank you!' said Margaret, hastily, holding out her hand to take the note, for she did not wish her mother to hear that they had been making any inquiry about a doctor. She was pleased that Mr. Thornton seemed immediately to understand her feeling; he gave her the note without another word of explanation. Mr. Hale began to talk about the strike. Mr. Thornton's face assumed a likeness to his mother's worst expression, which immediately confused the watching Margaret.

'Yes; the fools will have a strike. Let them. It suits us well enough. But we gave them a chance. They think trade is flourishing as it was last year. We see the storm on the horizon and draw in our sails. But because we don't explain our reasons, they won't believe we're acting reasonably. We must give them line and letter for the way we choose to spend or save our money. Henderson tried a dodge with his men, out at Ashley, and failed. He rather wanted a strike; it would have suited his book well enough. So when the men came to ask for the five per cent. they are claiming, he told 'em he'd think about it, and give them his answer on the pay day; knowing all the while what his answer would be, of course, but thinking he'd strengthen their conceit of their own way. However, they were too deep for him, and heard something about the bad prospects of trade. So in they came on the Friday, and drew back their claim, and now he's obliged to go on working. But we Milton masters have to-day sent in our decision. We won't advance a penny. We tell them we may have to lower wages; but can't afford to raise. So here we stand, waiting for their next attack.'

'And what will that be?' asked Mr. Hale.

'I conjecture, a simultaneous strike. You will see Milton without smoke in a few days, I imagine, Miss Hale.'

'But why,' asked she, 'could you not explain what good reason you have for expecting a bad trade? I don't know whether I use the right words, but you will understand what I mean.'

'Do you give your servants reasons for your expenditure, or your economy in the use of your own money? We, the owners of capital, have a right to choose what we will do with it.'

'You have a right to choose but do not the workers have a right to know of their own future? If, as you say, there is going to be trouble, then why should not the people whose own livelihood depends upon your mill know? How can one practice economy if one does not realize that it must be done? However, I know so little about strikes, and rate of wages, and capital, and labor, that I had better not talk to a political economist like you.' said Margaret.

'Nay, the more reason,' said he, eagerly. 'I shall only be too glad to explain to you all that may seem anomalous or mysterious to a stranger; especially at a time like this, when our doings are sure to be canvassed by every scribbler who can hold a pen.'

'Thank you,' she answered, softly. 'Of course, I shall apply to my father to request of you in the first instance for any information you can give me, if I get puzzled with living here amongst this strange society.'
'You think it strange. Why?'

'I don't know--I suppose because, on the very face of it, I see two classes dependent on each other in every possible way, yet each evidently regarding the interests of the other as opposed to their own; I never lived in a place before where there were two sets of people always running each other down.'

‘And who have you heard running the masters down?’

‘I will not give up my informant. Besides, it has nothing to do with the fact. You must take my word for it, that I have heard some people, or, it may be, only someone of the workpeople, speak as though it were the interest of the employers to keep them from acquiring money--that it would make them too independent if they had a sum in the savings' bank.'

'I dare say it was that man Higgins who told you all this,' said Mrs. Hale. Mr. Thornton did not appear to hear what Margaret evidently did not wish him to know, but he caught it, nevertheless.

'I heard, moreover, that it was considered to the advantage of the masters to have ignorant workmen—not hedge-lawyers, as Captain Lennox used to call those men in his company who questioned and would know the reason for every order.' This latter part of her sentence she addressed rather to her father than to Mr. Thornton. Catching Mr. Thornton’s inquiring look, she explained, ‘Captain Lennox is lately married to my cousin, Edith.’

Mr. Hale spoke, 'You never were fond of schools, Margaret, or you would have seen and known before this, how much is being done for education in Milton.'

'No!' said she, with sudden meekness. 'I know I do not care enough about schools. But the knowledge and the ignorance of which I was speaking, did not relate to reading and writing,--the teaching or information one can give to a child. I am sure, that what was meant was ignorance of the wisdom that shall guide men and women. I hardly know what that is. But he--that is, my informant--spoke as if the masters would like their hands to be merely tall, large children--living in the present moment--with a blind unreasoning kind of obedience. I do not know if this faithfully represents Milton and its people, but it seems to come close at least to the truth.'

Mr. Thornton was undecided as to whether he was offended by Margaret’s statement or whether she was merely seeking a justification of the masters’ actions.

Mr. Hale spoke next, 'I must confess that, although I have not become so intimately acquainted with any workmen as Margaret has, I am very much struck by the antagonism between the employer and the employed, on the very surface of things. I even gather this impression from what you yourself have from time to time said.'

Mr. Thornton paused awhile before he spoke. Margaret had just left the room, and he was vexed at the state of feeling between himself and her. However, the little annoyance, by making him cooler and more thoughtful, gave a greater dignity to what he said.

'My theory is, that my interests are identical with those of my workpeople and vice-versa. Miss Hale, I know, does not like to hear men called 'hands,' so I won't use that word, though it comes most readily to my lips as the technical term, whose origin, whatever it was, dates before my time. On some future day--in some millennium--in Utopia, this unity may be brought into practice--just as I can fancy a republic the most perfect form of government.'

'We will read Plato's Republic as soon as we have finished Homer.'

'Well, in the Platonic year, it may fall out that we are all--men women, and children--fit for a
Republic: but give me a constitutional monarchy in our present state of morals and intelligence. In our infancy we require a wise despotism to govern us. Indeed, long past infancy, children and young people are the happiest under the unfailing laws of a discreet, firm authority. I agree with Miss Hale so far as to consider our people in the condition of children, while I deny that we, the masters, have anything to do with the making or keeping them so. I maintain that despotism is the best kind of government for them; so that in the hours in which I come in contact with them I must necessarily be an autocrat. I will use my best discretion—no humbug or philanthropic feeling, of which we have had rather too much in the North—to make wise laws and come to just decisions in the conduct of my business—laws and decisions which work for my own good in the first instance—for theirs in the second; but I will neither be forced to give my reasons, nor flinch from what I have once declared to be my resolution. Let them turn out! I shall suffer as well as they: but at the end they will find I have not bated nor altered one jot.

Margaret had re-entered the room and was sitting at her work; but she did not speak.

Mr. Hale answered—'I dare say I am talking in great ignorance; but from the little I know, I should say that the masses were already passing rapidly into the troublesome stage which intervenes between childhood and manhood, in the life of the multitude as well as that of the individual. Now, the error which many parents commit in the treatment of the individual at this time is, insisting on the same unreasoning obedience as when all he had to do in the way of duty was, to obey the simple laws of "Come when you're called" and "Do as you're bid!" But a wise parent humors the desire for independent action, so as to become the friend and adviser when his absolute rule shall cease. If I get wrong in my reasoning, recollect, it is you who adopted the analogy.'

'I used the comparison (suggested by Miss Hale) of the position of the master to that of a parent; so I ought not to complain of your turning the simile into a weapon against me. But, Mr. Hale, when you were setting up a wise parent as a model for us, you said he humored his children in their desire for independent action. Now certainly, the time is not come for the hands to have any independent action during business hours; I hardly know what you would mean by it then. And I say, that the masters would be trenching on the independence of their hands, in a way that I, for one, should not feel justified in doing, if we interfered too much with the life they lead out of the mills. Because they labor ten hours a-day for us, I do not see that we have any right to impose leading-strings upon them for the rest of their time. I value my own independence so highly that I can fancy no degradation greater than that of having another man perpetually directing and advising and lecturing me, or even planning too closely in any way about my actions. He might be the wisest of men, or the most powerful—I should equally rebel and resent his interference I imagine this is a stronger feeling in the North of England that in the South. I am sorry to say, I have an appointment at eight o'clock, and I must just take facts as I find them to-night, without trying to account for them; which, indeed, would make no difference in determining how to act as things stand—the facts must be granted.'

'But,' said Margaret in a low voice, 'it seems to me that it makes all the difference in the world—'. Her father made a sign to her to be silent, and allow Mr. Thornton to finish what he had to say. He was already standing up and preparing to go.

'You must grant me this one point. Given a strong feeling of independence in every Darkshire man, have I any right to obtrude my views, of the manner in which he shall act, upon another (hating it as I should do most vehemently myself), merely because he has labor to sell and I capital to buy?'

'Not in the least,' said Margaret, determined just to say this one thing; 'not in the least because of your labor and capital positions, whatever they are, but because you are a man, dealing with a set of men over whom you have, whether you reject the use of it or not, immense power, just because
your lives and your welfare are so constantly and intimately interwoven. We may ignore our own
dependence, or refuse to acknowledge that others depend upon us in more respects than the
payment of weekly wages; but the thing must be, nevertheless. Neither you nor any other master
can help yourselves. The most proudly independent man depends on those around him for their
insensible influence on his character--his life.'

Her father was smiling, yet uneasy at the thought that they were detaining Mr. Thornton against
his will, which was a mistake; for he rather liked it as long as Margaret would talk.

'Just tell me, Miss Hale, are you yourself ever influenced--no, that is not a fair way of putting it;--
but if you are ever conscious of being influenced by others, and not by circumstances, have those
others been working directly or indirectly? Have they been laboring to exhort, to enjoin, to act
rightly for the sake of example, or have they been simple, true men, taking up their duty, and
doing it unflinchingly, without a thought of how their actions here to make this man industrious,
that man saving? Why, if I were a workman, I should be twenty times more impressed by the
knowledge that my master, was honest, punctual, quick, resolute in all his doings (and hands are
keener spies even than valets), than by any amount of interference, however kindly meant, with
my ways of going on out of work-hours. I do not choose to think too closely on what I am myself;
but, I believe, I rely on the straightforward honesty of my hands, and the open nature of their
opposition, in contra-distinction to the way in which the turnout will be managed in some mills,
just because they know I scorn to take a single dishonorable advantage, or do an underhand thing
myself. It goes farther than a whole course of lectures on "Honesty is the Best Policy"--life diluted
into words. No, no! What the master is, that will the men be, without over-much taking thought on
his part.'

'That is a great admission,' said Margaret, laughing. 'So when I see men violent and obstinate in
pursuit of their rights, I may safely infer that the master is the same? Or perhaps I have not
correctly taken your meaning?'

'You are just like all strangers who don't understand the working of our system, Miss Hale,' said
he, hastily. 'You suppose that our men are puppets of dough, ready to be molded into any amiable
form we please. You forget we have only to do with them for less than a third of their lives; and
you seem not to perceive that the duties of a manufacturer are far larger and wider than those
merely of an employer of labor; we have a wide commercial character to maintain, which makes
us into the great pioneers of civilization.'

'It strikes me,' said Mr. Hale, smiling, 'that you might pioneer a little at home. They are a rough,
heathenish set
of fellows, these Milton men of yours.'

'They are that,' replied Mr. Thornton. 'Rosewater surgery won't do for them. Cromwell would
have made a capital mill-owner, Miss Hale. I wish we had him to put down this strike for us.'

'I am trying to reconcile your admiration of despotism with your respect for other men's
independence of character,' Margaret stated in a confused manner.

'I choose to be the unquestioned master of my hands, during the hours that they labor for me. But
those hours past, our relation ceases; and then comes in the same respect for their independence
that I myself exact.'

He bade Mr. and Mrs. Hale good night. Then, drawing near to Margaret, he said in a lower voice-
' 'I spoke hastily to you once this evening, and I am afraid, rather rudely. But you know I am but
an uncouth Milton manufacturer; will you forgive me?'

'Certainly,' said she, smiling up in his face, the expression of which was somewhat anxious and
oppressed. She put her hand out to shake his in farewell and his countenance cleared of its storminess in the face of her sweet, sunny appearance. He even went so far as to smile before taking his leave.

The next afternoon Dr. Donaldson came to pay his first visit to Mrs. Hale. The mystery that Margaret hoped their late habits of intimacy had broken through, was resumed. She was excluded from the room, while Dixon was admitted. She went into her mother's bed-room, just behind the drawing-room, and paced it up and down, while awaiting the doctor's coming out. Every now and then she stopped to listen; she fancied she heard a moan. She clenched her hands tight, and held her breath. She was sure she heard a moan. Then all was still for a few minutes more; and then there was the moving of chairs, the raised voices, all the little disturbances of leave-taking. When she heard the door open, she went quickly out of the bed-room.

'My father is from home, Dr. Donaldson; he has to attend a pupil at this hour. May I trouble you to come into his room down stairs?'

She saw, and triumphed over all the obstacles which Dixon threw in her way; assuming her rightful position as daughter of the house in something of the spirit of the Elder Brother, which quelled the old servant's officiousness very effectually. Margaret's conscious assumption of this unusual dignity of demeanor towards Dixon, gave her an instant's amusement in the midst of her anxiety. She knew, from the surprised expression on Dixon's face, how ridiculously grand she herself must be looking; and the idea carried her down stairs into the room; it gave her that length of oblivion from the keen sharpness of the recollection of the actual business in hand. 'What is the matter with mamma? You will oblige me by telling the simple truth.' Then, seeing a slight hesitation on the doctor's part, she added--'I am the only child she has--here, I mean. My father is not sufficiently alarmed, I fear; and, therefore, if there is any serious apprehension, it must be broken to him gently. I can do this. I can nurse my mother. Pray, speak, sir; to see your face, and not be able to read it, gives me a worse dread than I trust any words of yours will justify.'

'My dear young lady, your mother seems to have a most attentive and efficient servant, who is more like her friend--'

'I am her daughter, sir.'

'But when I tell you she expressly desired that you might not be told--'

'I am not good or patient enough to submit to the prohibition. Besides, I am sure you are too wise—too experienced to have promised to keep the secret.'

'Well,' said he, half-smiling, though sadly enough, 'there you are right. I did not promise. In fact, I fear, the secret will be known soon enough without my revealing it.'

He paused. Margaret went very white, and compressed her lips a little more. Otherwise not a feature moved. With the quick insight into character, without which no medical man can rise to the eminence of Dr. Donaldson, he saw that she would exact the full truth; that she would know if one iota was withheld; and that the withholding would be torture more acute than the knowledge of it. He spoke two short sentences in a low voice, watching her all the time; for the pupils of her eyes dilated into a black horror and the whiteness of her complexion became livid. He ceased speaking. He waited for that look to go off,--for her gasping breath to come.

Then she said, 'I thank you most truly, sir, for your confidence. That dread has haunted me for many weeks. It is a true, real agony. My poor, poor mother!' her lips began to quiver, and he let her have the relief of tears, sure of her power of self-control to check them.
A few tears--those were all she shed, before she recollected the many questions she longed to ask. 'Will there be much suffering?'

He shook his head. 'That we cannot tell. It depends on constitution; on a thousand things. But the late discoveries of medical science have given us large power of alleviation.'

'My father!' said Margaret, trembling all over.

'I do not know Mr. Hale. I mean, it is difficult to give advice. But I should say, bear on, with the knowledge you have forced me to give you so abruptly, till the fact which I could not withhold has become in some degree familiar to you, so that you may, without too great an effort, be able to give what comfort you can to your father. Before then,--my visits, which, of course, I shall repeat from time to time, although I fear I can do nothing but alleviate,--a thousand little circumstances will have occurred to awaken his alarm, to deepen it—so that he will be all the better prepared.--Nay, my dear young lady--nay, my dear--I saw Mr. Thornton, and I honor your father for the sacrifice he has made, however mistaken I may believe him to be.--Well, this once, if it will please you, my dear. Only remember, when I come again, I come as a friend. And you must learn to look upon me as such, because seeing each other--getting to know each other at such times as these, is worth years of morning calls.' Margaret could not speak for crying: but she wrung his hand at parting.

'That's what I call a fine girl!' thought Dr. Donaldson, when he was seated in his carriage, and had time to examine his ringed hand, which had slightly suffered from her pressure. 'Who would have thought that little hand could have given such a squeeze? But the bones were well put together, and that gives immense power. What a queen she is! With her head thrown back at first, to force me into speaking the truth; and then bent so eagerly forward to listen. Poor thing! I must see she does not overstrain herself. Though it's astonishing how much those thorough-bred creatures can do and suffer. That girl's game to the back-bone. Another, who had gone that deadly color, could never have come round without either fainting or hysterics. But she wouldn't do either--not she! And the very force of her will brought her round. Such a girl as that would win my heart, if I were thirty years younger. It's too late now.'

Meanwhile, Margaret had returned into her father's study for a moment, to recover strength before going upstairs into her mother's presence.

'Oh but this is terrible. How shall I bear it? Such a deadly disease! No hope! Oh, mamma, mamma, I wish I had never gone to Aunt Shaw's, and been all those precious years away from you! Poor mamma! How much she must have borne! Oh, I pray that her sufferings may not be too acute, too dreadful. How shall I bear to see them? How can I bear papa's agony? He must not be told yet; not all at once. It would kill him. But I won't lose another moment of my own dear, precious mother.'

She ran upstairs. Dixon was not in the room. Mrs. Hale lay back in an easy chair, with a soft white shawl wrapped around her, and a becoming cap put on, in expectation of the doctor's visit. Her face had a little faint color in it, and the very exhaustion after the examination gave it a peaceful look. Margaret was surprised to see her look so calm.

'Why, Margaret, how strange you look! What is the matter? You have not been seeing Dr. Donaldson, and asking him any questions--have you, child?' Margaret did not reply--only looked wistfully towards her. Mrs. Hale became more displeased. 'He would not, surely, break his word to me, and'—

'Oh yes, mamma, he did. I made him. It was I--blame me.'

She knelt down by her mother's side and implored, 'Let me be your nurse. I will learn anything
Dixon can teach me. But you know I am your child, and I do think I have a right to do everything for you.'

'You don't know what you are asking,' said Mrs. Hale, with a shudder.

'Yes, I do. I know a great deal more than you are aware of. Let me be your nurse. Let me try, at any rate. No one has ever shall ever try so hard as I will do. It will be such a comfort, mamma.'

'My poor child! Well, you shall try. Do you know, Margaret, Dixon and I thought you would quite shrink from me if you knew--'

'Dixon thought!' said Margaret, her lip curling. 'Dixon could not give me credit for enough true love--for as much as herself! She thought, I suppose, that I was one of those poor sickly women who like to lie on rose leaves, and be fanned all day; Don't let Dixon's fancies come any more between you and me, mamma. Don't, please!' implored she.

'Don't be angry with Dixon,' said Mrs. Hale, anxiously.

'No! I won't. I will try and be humble, and learn her ways, if you will only let me do all I can for you. Let me be in the first place, mother--I am greedy of that. I used to fancy you would forget me while I was away at Aunt Shaw's, and cry myself to sleep at nights with that notion in my head.'

'You know, I shall never see Helstone again, Margaret,' said Mrs. Hale, the tears welling up into her eyes. Margaret could not reply. Mrs. Hale went on. 'While I was there, I was forever wanting to leave it. Every place seemed pleasanter. And now I shall die far away from it. I am rightly punished.'

'You must not talk so,' said Margaret, impatiently. 'He said you might live for years. Oh, mother! We will have you back at Helstone yet.'

'No never! That I must take as a just penance. But, Margaret--Frederick!' At the mention of that one word, she suddenly cried out loud, as in some sharp agony. It seemed as if the thought of him upset all her composure, destroyed the calm, overcame the exhaustion. Wild passionate cry succeeded to cry--'Frederick! Frederick! Come to me. I am dying. Little first-born child, come to me once again!'

She was in violent hysterics. Margaret went and called Dixon in terror. Dixon came in a huff, and accused Margaret of having over-excited her mother. Margaret bore all meekly, only trusting that her father might not return. In spite of her alarm, which was even greater than the occasion warranted, she obeyed all Dixon's directions promptly and well, without a word of self-justification. By so doing she mollified her accuser. They put her mother to bed, and Margaret sat by her till she fell asleep. 

On Margaret's exiting from her mother's room, she found two letters on the table: one was a note for her mother,--the other, which had come by the post, was evidently from her Aunt Shaw--covered with foreign post-marks--thin, silvery, and rustling. She took up the other, and was examining it, when her father came in suddenly.

'So your mother is tired, and gone to bed early! I'm afraid, such a thundery day was not the best in the world for the doctor to see her. What did he say? Dixon tells me he spoke to you about her.'

Margaret hesitated. Her father's looks became more grave and anxious. 'He does not think her seriously ill?'

'Not at present; she needs care, he says; he was very kind, and said he would call again, and see
how his medicines worked.'

'Only care--he did not recommend change of air?--he did not say this smoky town was doing her any harm, did he, Margaret?'

'No! Not a word,' she replied, gravely. 'He was anxious, I think.'

'Doctors have that anxious manner; it's professional,' said he.

Margaret saw, in her father's nervous ways, that the first impression of possible danger was made upon his mind, in spite of all his making light of what she told him. He could not forget the subject--could not pass from it to other things; he kept recurring to it through the evening, with an unwillingness to receive even the slightest unfavorable idea, which made Margaret inexpressibly sad.

'This letter is from Aunt Shaw, papa. She has got to Naples, and finds it too hot, so she has taken apartments at Sorrento. But I don't think she likes Italy.'

'He did not say anything about diet, did he?'

'It was to be nourishing, and digestible. Mamma's appetite is pretty good, I think.'

'Yes! And that makes it all the more strange he should have thought of speaking about diet.'

'I asked him, papa.' Margaret paused again and then went on, 'Aunt Shaw says, she has sent me some coral ornaments, papa; but,' added Margaret, half smiling, 'she's afraid the Milton Dissenters won't appreciate them.'

'If ever you hear or notice that your mother wishes for anything, be sure you let me know. I am so afraid she does not tell me always what she would like. Pray, see after that girl Mrs. Thornton named. If we had a good, efficient house-servant, Dixon could be constantly with her, and I'd answer for it we'd soon set her up amongst us, if care will do it. She's been very much tired of late, with the hot weather, and the difficulty of getting a servant. A little rest will put her quite to rights--eh, Margaret?'

'I hope so,' said Margaret,--but so sadly, that her father took notice of it. He wandered the house, pacing restlessly and came back at last, somewhat comforted.

'She's awake now, Margaret. She quite smiled as she saw me standing by her. Just her old smile. And she says she feels refreshed, and ready for tea. Where's the note for her? She wants to see it. I'll read it to her while you make tea.'

The note proved to be a formal invitation from Mrs. Thornton, to Mr., Mrs., and Miss Hale to dinner, on the twenty-first of the month. Margaret was surprised to find an acceptance contemplated, after all she had learnt of sad probabilities during the day. But so it was. The idea of her husband's and daughter's going to this dinner had quite captivated Mrs. Hale's fancy, even before Margaret had heard the contents of the note. It was an event to diversify the monotony of the invalid's life; and she clung to the idea of their going, with even fretful pertinacity when Margaret objected.

'Nay, Margaret? If she wishes it, I'm sure we'll both go willingly. She never would wish it unless she felt herself really stronger--really better than we thought she was, eh, Margaret?' said Mr. Hale, anxiously, as she prepared to write the note of acceptance the next day.

'I do think she is better since last night,' said she. 'Her eyes look brighter, and her complexion clearer.'
So he went cheerfully away to his day's duties, now increased by the preparation of some lectures he had promised to deliver to the working people at a neighboring establishment.
Chapter 10

'Well, mother,' asked Mr. Thornton that night, 'who has accepted your invitations for the twenty-first?'

'Fanny, where are the notes? The Slicksons accept, Collingbrooks accept, Stephenses accept, Browns decline. Hales--father and daughter come.--mother too great an invalid--Macphersons come, and Mr. Horsfall, and Mr. Young. I was thinking of asking the Porters, as the Browns can't come.'

'Very good. Do you know, I'm really afraid Mrs. Hale is very far from well, from what Dr. Donaldson says.'

'It's strange of them to accept a dinner-invitation if she's very ill,' said Fanny.

'I didn't say very ill,' said her brother, rather sharply. 'I only said very far from well. They may not know it either.'

'Mother,' said he, stopping, and bravely speaking out the truth, 'I wish you would like Miss Hale.'

'Why?' asked she, startled by his earnest, yet tender manner. 'You're never thinking of marrying her?--a girl without a penny.'

'I don't think she would have me,' said Mr. Thornton, with a short laugh.

'No,' agreed his mother, 'She may not. She as good as laughed in my face when I praised her for speaking out something Mr. Bell had said. I liked the girl for doing it so frankly but the mother--she seems to hold herself above others, with her lady's indisposition. She likely is of a mind with her mother and would refuse a man because he is a manufacturer. I would like to know where she would find a better man!'

He came up quite cheerfully to his mother, and putting one hand lightly on her shoulder, said, 'Well, as I'm just as much convinced of the truth of what you have been saying as you can be; and as I have no thought or expectation of ever asking her to be my wife, you'll believe me for the future that I'm quite disinterested in speaking about her. I foresee trouble for that girl--perhaps want of motherly care--and I only wish you to be ready to be a friend to her, in case she needs one.'

'I would befriend any by your asking, John,' said his mother, 'But I will not permit any lack of respect to be shown my son.'

'This is so tiring a topic; we should speak of something else,' said Fanny pettishly.

'What do you say to a strike, by way of something pleasant to talk about?' asked Mrs. Thornton, with vivid interest.

'Hamper's men are actually out. Mine are working out their week, through fear of being prosecuted for breach of contract I'd have had every one of them up and punished for it, that left his work before his time was out.'

'The law expenses would have been more than the hands themselves were worth--a set of ungrateful naughts!' said his mother.
'To be sure. But I'd have shown them how I keep my word, and how I mean them to keep theirs. They know me by this time. Slickson's men are off--pretty certain he won't spend money in getting them punished. We're in for a turn-out, mother.'

'I hope there are not many orders in hand?'

'Of course there are. They know that well enough. But they don't quite understand all, though they think they do.'

'What do you mean, John?' asked his mother.

'Why,' said he, 'the Americans are getting their yarns so into the general market, that our only chance is producing them at a lower rate. If we can't, we may shut up shop at once, and hands and masters go alike on tramp. Yet these fools go back to the prices paid three years ago. It is too bad to find out that fools--ignorant wayward men like these--just by uniting their weak silly heads, are to rule over the fortunes of those who bring all the wisdom that knowledge and experience, and often painful thought and anxiety, can give. The next thing will be--indeed, we're all but come to it now--that we shall have to go and ask--stand hat in hand--and humbly ask the secretary of the Spinner' Union to be so kind as to furnish us with labor at their own price. That's what they want--they, who haven't the sense to see that, if we don't get a fair share of the profits to compensate us for our wear and tear here in England, we can move off to some other country; and that, what with home and foreign competition, we are none of us likely to make above a fair share, and may be thankful enough if we can get that, in an average number of years.'

'Can't you get hands from Ireland? I wouldn't keep these fellows a day. I'd teach them that I was master, and could employ what servants I liked.'

'Yes! To be sure, I can; and I will, too, if they go on long. It will be trouble and expense, and I fear there will be some danger; but I will do it, rather than give in.'

'If there is to be all this extra expense, I'm sorry we're giving a dinner just now.'

'So am I,--not because of the expense, but because I shall have much to think about, and many unexpected calls on my time. But we must have had Mr. Horsfall, and he does not stay in Milton long. And as for the others, we owe them dinners, and it's all one trouble.'

All his business plans had received a check, a sudden pull-up, from this approaching turn-out. The forethought of many anxious hours was thrown away, utterly wasted by their insane folly, which would injure themselves even more than him, though no one could set any limit to the mischief they were doing. And these were the men who thought themselves fitted to direct the masters in the disposal of their capital! Hamper had said, only this very day, that if he were ruined by the strike, he would start life again, comforted by the conviction that those who brought it on were in a worse predicament than he himself,--for he had head as well as hands, while they had only hands; and if they drove away their market, they could not follow it, nor turn to anything else. But this thought was no consolation to Mr. Thornton. It might be that revenge gave him no pleasure; it might be that he valued the position he had earned with the sweat of his brow, so much that he keenly felt its being endangered by the ignorance or folly of others,--so keenly that he had no thoughts to spare for what would he the consequences of their conduct to themselves. He paced up and down, setting his teeth a little now and then. At last it struck two. The candles were flickering in their sockets.

He lighted his own, muttering to himself: 'Once for all, they shall know whom they have got to deal with. I can give them a fortnight,--no more. If they don't see their madness before the end of that time, I must have hands from Ireland. I believe it's Slickson's doing,--confound him and his dodges! He thought he was overstocked; so he seemed to yield at first, when the deputation came
to him,—and of course, he only confirmed them in their folly, as he meant to do. That's where it spread from.'

Mr. Thornton slept but poorly that night; however, he did not shirk his responsibilities. That evening, he sought to forget — if only for a moment — the subject of the strike by reading with Mr. Hale. Their lessons usually ended in discussion with both parties not necessarily satisfied but certainly happier.

Margaret was sitting in a side chair in her father’s study with her needlework when Mr. Thornton arrived. As she listened to their discourse, she had to admit secretly that the conversations were often quite interesting. The strike was not spoken of and Margaret was much absorbed by her thoughts on such. She had visited with Bessy Higgins just that afternoon and the strike was much the topic. When Nicholas returned, upon his hearing of Margaret and her father attending the Thornton’s dinner on the twenty first, he demanded that Margaret inquire of Mr. Thornton on his orders. Nicholas believed that come the twenty first, Marlborough Mills would be in a deal of trouble. Margaret had hastily taken her leave. Mr. Hale had also thoughts which he desired to present to Mr. Thornton’s notice. He had been amongst tradesmen while his giving of speeches and been given information, as the sole stranger who could act as an intermediary and impartial judge. He was to ask of Mr. Thornton to weigh such statements this evening and proffer his opinion.

Certainly, the conversation turned to the strike, with Mr. Hale curious and inquiring and Mr. Thornton freely providing his views. Margaret was disappointed in Mr. Thornton’s speech; he spoke coolly of masters and workmen alike being either trampled into ruin or pulling themselves up by dint of their own efforts.

‘If the hands remain out too long, my standing orders will not get filled and I will begin to lose money. I’ll have to bring in workers from Ireland.’

Margaret looked up immediately and stared at Mr. Thornton. ‘Will they not be in danger from the striking Union men?’ asked she with deep concern.

He got up from his chair and began to pace the floor of Mr. Hale’s study with a scowl. ‘Miss Hale, I do not believe that there is sufficient time to divulge all of my plans, if indeed you are of a mind to listen to them all. However, if it does indeed come to my importing hands — my pardon, workers — I shall take all necessary precautions to ensure secrecy and safety and I would hope that you would be so good as to hold this as confidential.’

Margaret drew herself up offended at this doubt of her honor. ‘Of course. If you wish no word to leave this room, ask and it shall be. For a listener, you know, you could do far worse than to speak with my father. He is discreet. I personally would be interested to hear your ideas; it is so outside of my own existence and sphere that there would be great novelty to be had.’ She spoke with a grave demeanor so as make Mr. Thornton aware that she was indeed in earnest. ‘If the Union were to hear of your bringing in Irish, they would surely do something rash.’

‘With certainty. A riot would ensue and I would be required to call the soldiers to attend my mill,’ he replied with equal gravity.

‘Would your household be in danger? Yourself, your mother? Would the soldiers shoot the workers? They are merely men driven mad by hunger and desperation,’ Margaret asked.

Mr. Thornton hesitated to answer, as he saw that Margaret was endeavoring to remain calm despite her belief in the injustice of the situation. It more firmly entrenched in his mind her strength
and beauty. ‘Yes, danger is to be expected when men turn out but we masters have dealt with such circumstances before and likely will again. A person cannot be a coward and shrink from an action they know to be right if it carries with it risk to their person. I am not one to run from peril.’ Here he stood up to his full height as if daring trouble to come.

Mr. Hale replied, ‘A man must not distance himself from his duty regardless of hazard or obstacle, provided he holds it to be correct and good.’

‘But by declaring one thing to be right, then you are declaring its opposite wrong. Both are frequently subjective labels and few will agree fully on their application. How is a human to affirm that which should be considered right for all men? You and I have differing views on many subjects, will we then agree completely on our basis for moral behavior?’ pronounced Margaret.

Dixon entered the room and informed Mr. Hale that her mistress had requested his presence. He stood and said, ‘I will return momentarily, Mr. Thornton. Margaret, see to our guest’s comfort.’

With the short respite, Margaret now had to thank Mr. Thornton for his kindness of offering her every convenience which he could provide for the comfort of her mother. ‘Mr. Thornton, your generosity to my mother is great and I must let you know my appreciation for that and for your discretion. However, I have been troubled and must make mention of something so perhaps you may alleviate my concerns. On one side, you have been kind to our family and my mother’s feelings. On another side, you speak of men and masters as if they were no more than a hurdle to be overcome and any who cannot overcome, will fall to their deserved ruin. It jars me inexpressibly.’

Mr. Thornton began to perceive hope growing inside of him as he had never before experienced. She thought of him! He could not reply immediately, his feelings must be controlled. ‘I have had to tread a difficult and unforgiving path with none to lift or aid me. My mother taught me very young that sacrifice is a means to an end. Money is not my ultimate goal but the maintenance of my work, of my mill and my position is of paramount importance. The strike is not to be avoided – the workers from other mills are already turned out. How, Miss Hale, would you propose we settle this strike? The Union refuses compromise and demands the wages be raised. I foresee a reduction in business ahead, even if I were to have all of my standing orders filled. To capitulate to Union dictates would spell disaster for all of the mills, not just my own.’

‘Mr. Thornton, there is such a surfeit of mistrust between the masters and the men that neither side will truly believe the other. If you were to apply to an obliging mediator, conceivably the argument could be settled before too long,’ replied Margaret reflectively.
Mr. Thornton was about to reply when Mr. Hale’s footsteps were heard a moment before his form passed through the study door. ‘I do apologize, Mr. Thornton. Mrs. Hale has requested that we move to the drawing room. She is quite anxious to ask of you some detail concerning your upcoming dinner.’ He spoke with a contrite air, as if worrying his wife’s desire would somehow give Mr. Thornton offense.

‘Papa,’ began Margaret, ‘We were just speaking of the strike. Mr. Thornton is endeavoring to solve a riddle as complex as that of the Sphinx. How to end the strike with the least difficulty? The suffering of the workers is significant –’

‘I would not give the Union a thought, if I were you, Miss Hale. It is known that they have hidden stores of money to distribute to the turn-outs. No, their suffering is only to forward their cause against the masters,’ Mr. Thornton firmly stated.

Margaret and Mr. Hale were both clearly surprised by this declaration. Mr. Hale slowly replied, ‘I have seen with my eyes families whose situation is dreadfully desperate due to the sudden loss of income. The men need the wages and do not wish to threaten their livelihood but the Union tells them that they must turn out, when it so decides. Know you what form of beast is the Union? Furthermore, if there were sufficient funds for ten families, once it is distributed to a hundred families, no one person will have adequate money to eat.’

Waving his hand dismissively, Mr. Thornton said, ‘It is of no consequence. One hand is the same as another, if both are respectable workers, and if they are Union, so much more. They act as an entity to cause turmoil and dissension.’

Margaret was annoyed by the cold and unsympathetic appearance of Mr. Thornton’s countenance as he spoke thus and wished to enlighten him as to the true situation. ‘I have heard that there is long history between masters and men; the fathers – or grandfathers – of your turn-outs formed the Union many years past to protect themselves from cruel, unscrupulous masters who cared more for money than their workers. Truly, you do not appear to be amongst that set and men in Milton consider you a worthy foe.’

At this, Mr. Thornton gave a dour smile and Margaret blushed, realizing what it was that she had uttered. Keeping her eyes focused upon her father, she lifted her chin and continued.

‘There are those amid the men who even call the Union a more grievous tyrant than the masters. These people feel that the Union would see them starve before allowing for any to go against the whole. Workers who do not belong to the Union are shunned, ignored and can find no relief. One man – whom I will not name – deems his neighbors kind hearted men but likens them to ravenous wolves once together. And this, sir, is what you would fight against? So I would ask you once more, could you and your fellow masters see your way to arbitration?’

Mr. Hale cleared his throat and stood from the stuffed chair upon which he had been lightly
perching. Said he, ‘Perchance we could speak with my wife prior to ending the strike and solving the kingdom’s greatest concerns?’

The three stood to leave the study, with Mr. Hale in the lead. Mr. Thornton straightened his waist coat and followed Mr. Hale; Margaret tidied up her sewing before descending the stairs to the drawing room where Mrs. Hale was reclining, wrapped in a knitted white shawl. Mrs. Hale was curiously amused and interested by the idea of the Thornton dinner party. She kept wondering about the details, with something of the simplicity of a little child, who wants to have all its anticipated pleasures described beforehand. But the monotonous life led by invalids often makes them like children, inasmuch as they have neither of them any sense of proportion in events, and seem each to believe that the walls and curtains which shut in their world, and shut out everything else, must of necessity be larger than anything hidden beyond. Mr. Hale fretted over his wife’s comfort for a moment before settling into a chintz armchair next to her.

Mrs. Hale bid Margaret and Mr. Thornton to sit and began to voice queries, her yearning for distraction obvious. Mr. Thornton kindly and calmly answered every demand and assured her that altogether the Hale family would be most welcome at the impending dinner. Although pleased with his responses, Mrs. Hale was clearly tiring rapidly, so Mr. Thornton stood to take his leave.

‘Margaret, please escort our guest to the door,’ Mr. Hale appealed to his daughter. Margaret silently stood and showed Mr. Thornton to the hall. She felt strongly the need to impart a vital communication to him.

‘My mother will not be in attendance, Mr. Thornton. Could you please forward my sincere regrets to your mother? Will it be acceptable to her for solely my father and myself to attend?’ inquired Margaret in a rather concerned voice, as she held out to him the invitation reply.

Taking the card, he responded, ‘We will be honored to host your father and yourself and I will inform my mother of... extenuating circumstances.’ Mr. Thornton then unlatched the front door and left, with a curiously light feeling. He would not glance back at the Hales’ residence, despite his elation at the knowledge of Margaret’s presence. She would be attending the Thornton’s dinner and he would ensure that both Mr. Hale and his daughter were at ease in his home.
Chapter 12

‘Think you shall wear your white silk tonight?’ nervously inquired Mrs. Hale of her daughter. ‘Are you sure it will fit? Your cousin’s wedding was nearly a year ago.’

‘Yes, mamma. It was made by my aunt’s best woman so I’m sure it is still right. It may be a bit tight or loose, depending upon if I have grown fat or thin but I don’t think I have changed in the least.’

Mrs. Hale was not satisfied. The idea of Margaret dressing up and going to the Thornton’s dinner had taken hold of her mind and she would not let it go, like a dog gnawing on a favored bone. ‘Perhaps it has gone yellow in storage?’

Margaret was amused by her mother’s anxiety but decided to placate her. ‘If so, I have a very nice pink gauze which Aunt Shaw gave me two or three months before Edith’s wedding. That cannot have gone yellow.’

‘It may have faded?’

‘Well then, I have the green silk.’

‘I wish I knew what you were to wear,’ Mrs. Hale said anxiously. Margaret saw that her mother was truly uneasy, so she offered to put the dresses on, one after another, so that Mrs. Hale could resolve upon the best one. After a time, Mrs. Hale hit upon the white silk with her sister’s – Mrs. Shaw’s – coral necklace to add color else, in Dixon’s words, ‘Miss Margaret would have been too pale.’ Margaret’s black, silky hair was too thick to be braided so it was twisted up around her head, like a crown, and then secured at the back of her head with two coral hair pins.

‘Oh, Margaret! How I should like to be going with you to one of the old Barrington assemblies, taking you as Lady Beresford used to take me.’ Margaret kissed her mother for this little burst of maternal vanity; but she could hardly smile at it, she felt so much out of spirits with worry for her mother.

‘I would rather stay at home with you, much rather, mamma.’

‘Nonsense, darling! Be sure you notice the dinner well. I shall like to hear how they manage these things in Milton. Particularly the second course, dear. Look what they have instead of game.’

Margaret descended the steps to her father’s study and he declared her beautiful; now they might go. Mr. Hale was fretful about being punctual to his friend’s home so they were the first guests to arrive.

Mrs. Hale would have been more than interested -she would have been astonished - if she had seen the sumptuousness of the dinner-table and its appointments. Margaret, with her London cultivated taste, felt the number of delicacies to be oppressive. One half of the quantity would have been enough, and the effect lighter and more elegant but it was one of Mrs. Thornton's rigorous laws of hospitality that of each separate dainty enough should be provided for all the guests to partake, if they felt inclined. it was part of her pride to set a feast before such of her guests as cared for it. Her son shared this feeling. He had never known--though he might have imagined, and had the capability to relish--any kind of society but that which depended on an exchange of superb meals and even now, though he was denying himself the personal expenditure of an unnecessary sixpence, and had more than once regretted that the invitations for this dinner had been sent out. There was, as yet, no one in the drawing room other than Mrs. Thornton and Fanny. The covers
had been taken off of the room and it blazed in yellow damask and flowered carpet. Mrs. Thornton stood to greet Margaret and father with a slight rustle of silk.

‘Mr. Hale, Miss Hale. I am glad to see you were able to attend. My son was engaged until the last moment on business but he will be here directly. May I offer you a seat?’

Mr. Hale had been standing near a window during this speech and perusing the now quiet mill yard. He turned and asked, ‘Do you not find such close proximity to the mill unpleasant sometimes?’

Mrs. Thornton drew herself up to her full height and replied with great dignity, ‘I have not grown so comfortable with riches to forget where it came from. Besides, this is one of the finest mills in all Milton.’

‘I merely meant that the smoke, the noise, the comings and goings of the laborers at all hours—might be annoying.’

‘Mr. Hale, I have heard noise that was called music far more deafening. The engine-room is at the street-end of the factory; we hardly hear it, except in summer weather, when all the windows are open; and as for the continual murmur of the work-people, it disturbs me no more than the humming of a hive of bees. If I think of it at all, I connect it with my son, and feel how all belongs to him, and that his is the head that directs it. Just now, there are no sounds to come from the mill; the hands have been ungrateful enough to turn out, as perhaps you have heard.’

Her countenance darkened into anger at this statement and it did not lighten when Mr. Thornton entered the room. She saw that her son was still oppressed by care and anxiety but their guests received a cordial and pleasant greeting. Mr. Hale and Margaret ad inquired as to Mrs. Hale’s health. He noticed the worried strain upon her face, which she was endeavoring to hide. As he looked with this intention, he was struck anew with her great beauty. He had never seen her in such dress before and yet now it appeared as if such elegance of attire was so befitting her noble figure and lofty serenity of countenance that she ought to go always thus apparelled. She was talking to Fanny; about what, he could not hear; but he saw his sister's restless way of continually arranging some part of her gown, her wandering eyes, now glancing here, now there, but without any purpose in her observation; and he contrasted them uneasily with the large soft, grey eyes that looked forth steadily at one object, as if from out their light beamed some gentle influence of repose: the curving lines of the red lips, just parted in the interest of listening to what her companion said—the head a little bent forwards, so as to make a long sweeping line from the summit, where the light caught on the glossy raven hair, to the smooth ivory tip of the shoulder; the round white arms, and taper hands, laid lightly across each other, but perfectly motionless in their pretty attitude. Mr. Thornton sighed as he took in all this with one of his sudden comprehensive glances. And then he turned his back to the young ladies, and threw himself, with an effort, but with all his heart and soul, into a conversation with Mr. Hale.

More and more people came and Margaret was left unattended. She herself did not notice as she was busy and amused watching and listening to the company. A gentleman escorted her to dinner—she did not catch his name. The men were conversing loudly and Margaret caught a part of it. She became attentive and grew interested. Mr. Horsfall, a stranger to town, was asking questions pertaining to mills and manufacturing and trade and the masters were responding with explanations. A dispute arose—of what topic Margaret was unsure—and the question was put to Mr. Thornton to decide. Margaret's attention was thus called to her host; his whole manner as master of the house and entertainer of his friends was so straightforward, yet simple and modest, as to be thoroughly dignified. Margaret thought she had never seen him to so much advantage. When he had come to their house, there had been always something, either of over-eagerness or of that kind of vexed annoyance which seemed ready to pre-suppose that he was unjustly judged,
and yet felt too proud to try and make himself better understood. But now, among his fellows, there was no uncertainty as to his position. He was regarded by them as a man of great force of character; of power in many ways. There was no need to struggle for their respect. He had it, and he knew it; and the security of this gave a fine grand quietness to his voice and ways, which Margaret had missed before.

She was surprised that she had enjoyed the dinner, particularly the discussion – and she took a very decided, if silent, position in the ongoing one. The strike was not spoken of, which was confusing, but Margaret did not yet know that the masters were not troubled about it. In their thinking, there was only one outcome and the hands were cutting their own throats by their striking. She was contemplating the exchange when Mr. Thornton spoke suddenly at her side.

‘I could see you were on our side in the conversation at dinner, were you not?’

Margaret answered, ‘Certainly, but I know so little of it. I was surprised, however, to find from what Mr. Horsfall said, that there were others who thought in so diametrically opposite a manner, as the Mr. Morison he spoke about. Is he a gentleman?’

‘I do not know this Mr. Morison and can only judge him from Mr. Horsfall’s account. However, it seems to me that he is not a true man.’

Margaret glanced at him curiously but then said, ‘Have you given consideration to our discussion of yesterday?’

Mr. Thornton’s face changed, tightened ever so slightly and he replied, ‘I cannot speak of it now but when I next visit your father, we could address the topic.’

Margaret thought a moment, but before she could speak her slow conviction, he was called away by some of the eager manufacturers, whose speeches she could not hear, though she could guess at their import by the short clear answers Mr. Thornton gave, which came steady and firm as the boom of a distant minute gun. They were evidently talking of the turn-out, and suggesting what course had best be pursued. She heard Mr. Thornton say: ‘That has been done.’ Then came a hurried murmur, in which two or three joined.

‘All those arrangements have been made.’

Some doubts were implied, some difficulties named by Mr. Slickson, who took hold of Mr. Thornton’s arm as Margaret watched, the better to impress his words. Mr. Horsfall came over to converse with Mr. Thornton, Margaret assumed on the same subject, but he was in fact asking about her. Mrs. Slickson was asking Fanny that same thing. Fanny replied that Margaret’s father was a tutor who taught even her brother, John, but responded in the way of those who take the ‘ought to’ of others to be their rule.
Chapter 13

The nightmare that Margaret and her father found upon their return to Crampton was terrifying and, after seeing off Doctor Donaldson with his promise to visit on the morrow, Margaret sent her father to bed. Mr. Hale resisted but he was given to believe that he could shortly take his turn observing his wife sleep. Dixon strenuously rebuffed any efforts to remove her from her mistress’ room and sat in a chair opposite Mrs. Hale’s bed with full view of her dear face. Before long, Margaret could hear snores coming from that direction and she began to reflect upon her life and the many transformations she had undergone within barely one year. Helstone, with its fragrant freshness, now simply existed within Margaret’s memory and there was no belief that she would be restored to its greenness. Her mother would pass away here, in smoky Milton, far away from her fondly remembered youth in Sir John’s home as a Miss Beresford, along with her sister, the renowned beauties of the county. And it was amongst these recollections and musings that Margaret came upon a startling consciousness – While she most assuredly did not favor Milton, it had at some point become a more real, more vibrant reality than that of London, where she floated along with daily calls and dinners and shopping or of Helstone, and the beloved parsonage. When had Bessy supplanted Edith as beloved companion? How did Margaret now think of all of her new acquaintance, as for instance, the Thorntons? In the silent darkness only relieved by a guttering candle and Dixon’s sporadic snores, Margaret struggled with her own mind and heart. Hours slipped by as she deliberated and reflected, then after what seemed to be a rather short interval, the grey light of dawn appeared in the window. Mrs. Hale had slept fitfully but had found temporary solace in her slumber. Margaret was pale from watching and remaining awake and quite prepared to give over her duty to Dixon, whose protective instincts had roused with her stirring.

Margaret quitted her mother’s room and refreshed herself. Mr. Hale was heard nervously walking the floorboards, pacing in front of his wife’s bedroom.

‘Papa, mamma is still asleep.’

‘Margaret, is she – is she well?’ Mr. Hale could not but be fretful; he had been so very alarmed at the vague, shadowy supposition of the true state of his wife’s health. Doctor Donaldson’s presence in their home had been unexpected and bewildering and anxiety had robbed him of his serenity and rest.

‘The doctor said that he was coming back to check her this morning. Dixon is with her now –’

Mr. Hale straightaway entered his wife’s room to sit mutely in a corner chair, watching her silent form thankfully still breathing under the covers. Margaret went down to her father’s study to break her fast and perhaps further her new-found self-knowledge. The bell sounded at the front door, startling Margaret from her ruminations and she perceived that Dixon was as yet not come down stairs. Margaret hastily stood and opened the door herself, welcoming Doctor Donaldson into the study.

‘You are returned,’ she cried, ‘Mamma was sleeping when I last saw her.’

Doctor Donaldson noted the pallor and gauntness in her face and admonished Margaret to maintain her own health for ‘she must be a prop to her father.’ He repaired promptly to Mrs. Hale’s chamber to examine her and ensure that his instructions were being followed. Margaret heard indistinct murmurs and presently her father and the doctor slowly descended the steps. Mr. Hale was bowed down with worry and grief; the doctor was speaking to him gently as to child. Margaret stepped over and softly guided her father to his customary chair in his study.
‘Is there anything my mother needs or an item which I should purchase?’ she inquired.

‘No, most likely Mrs. Hale will develop fever soon from the great amount of laudanum which I administered last night. Contact me if she appears to be in much pain or if she experiences more convulsions similar to yesterdays.’ Doctor Donaldson shook her hand and took his leave, glancing back at Margaret, once more fascinated by her strength.

He was walking deep in thought when the doctor heard Mr. Thornton’s voice calling his name. The doctor regarded him for a moment before replying, ‘Good morning, Mr. Thornton.’

‘You are come from the Hale’s home, I suppose? How is the mother?’

Doctor Donaldson responded, ‘She is as well as can be expected. You have referred me a very good client, you know. There is little hope for recovery and all I can do is ensure her comfort for now.’ He smiled slightly to minimize the callousness of his words.

‘Does she require anything particular? Wine or meat.’

‘Mrs. Hale requests fruit constantly, as she has a fever upon her.’

‘Would any specific fruit be preferred, grapes, possibly? Or peaches?’

‘No, there are a good supply of pears on the market. Those should suffice.’

‘You will let me know if there is anything which she requires for her comfort, will you not?’

‘Ah, Mr. Thornton, I wish that all of my patients had a carte blanche but I will not concern myself. I know your pockets are deep enough.’ With a wink and a hearty hand shake, the doctor moved off. Mr. Thornton gazed after him meditatively and proceeded to the fruit vendor to procure the plumpest, juiciest grapes he could find to bring to Mrs. Hale. He carried the basket himself to the Hale’s door and rang the bell. Dixon was slow to answer the door and did not brighten upon beholding his face.

‘I’m sorry, sir. The master is –‘

‘Who is at the door, Dixon?’ called Mr. Hale.

‘It is Mr. Thornton,’ replied Dixon with disdain.

‘Show him in then to Papa’s study. He is welcome to visit,’ directed Margaret, who had heard the conversation by now. Mr. Thornton glanced at her tired countenance and extended the basket, which was taken by Margaret who curiously peeked inside.

‘I met the doctor and he mentioned Mrs. Hale desired fruit. Here are some grapes for her.’

‘Your kindness, Mr. Thornton, does you a great service and I will make sure that my mother is aware of whose benevolence she is a recipient.’ Margaret gave him a grateful smile, small though it was due to her exhaustion. She led Mr. Thornton into the study, where Mr. Hale was slumped in his chair, head forward, resting on his hands.

‘Mr. Thornton,’ came a tremulous voice from behind the hands, ‘I apologize for not being quite prepared to see you this morning. My wife suffered a difficult night.’

‘Do not concern yourself,’ evenly replied Mr. Thornton. ‘I can return later for our reading if you will be home.’
‘Yes, I would derive great pleasure in that,’ replied Mr. Hale.

‘Until this afternoon, sir,’ Mr. Thornton said and quietly took his leave
Mr. Thornton had not gotten twenty steps from the Hale’s door when he was assaulted by what appeared to be a group of ruffians – fierce looking men wearing fustian and yelling and cursing angrily. A great commotion ensued and much shouting was heard. Margaret remained in her father’s study after Mr. Thornton had left and Mr. Hale had retired upstairs to check on his wife. Dixon was loyally attending to her weakened mistress and, thus, only Margaret perceived the noise which seemed to come from immediately outside their home. Curious, she stood and opened the door. She was stunned to note Mr. Thornton in a pugilist’s stance, legs firmly planted and arms up at the ready. There was evidence of a fresh cut on his right cheek and a severe look upon his countenance. Margaret hurried to Mr. Thornton to be of what assistance she may and was shocked that a large crowd of striking workers were gathered warily in a loose circle around the mill owner. Several of the assailants were reaching down for stones or to remove their wooden clogs for throwing at their adversary. As she dashed in front of him to place herself between Mr. Thornton and his aggressors, Margaret was taken aback at the hatred and implacability in the faces surrounding the both of them. The men were startled momentarily by this development but one of the men – Margaret was not sure of his name, she did not recognize him – pulled his arm back preparing to fling his weapon at its target. Fortunately, the fellow’s aim was significantly off the mark and Margaret grabbed the opportunity to disburse the group. She had distinguished Boucher and so she cried, ‘Boucher! What is this? Do you attack a man for no purpose? He is lately come from our home and reading with my father.’

Boucher was visibly confused but one of the remaining men responded, ‘Ay, wench. He’s nobbut a measter and them as forced us to strike. Childers are clemming because of him and his like and yo’re but a stranger to these parts so I’ll thank yo’ to leave us.’

This declaration invigorated the men’s resolve and Margaret, who had been closely watching their hands, noted a burly fellow about to lob a stone at Mr. Thornton’s head. She lunged forward and desperately pushed him out of the way of the rock but it glanced off of her forehead. There was a searing pain, a too bright light and Margaret swooned, senseless. Mr. Thornton caught her in his arms and glared menacingly at the encircling men.

‘A nice piece of work you’ve done yourselves,’ he growled, ‘All but killing this lady. Let me but see her safe and we can finish what we had started.’

‘Th’ stone were meant for thee; but thou wert sheltered behind a woman!’

Even with those harsh words, the assailants had already begun to back up, slowly at first, looking frightened and as if they were suddenly not sure why they were standing thus, and then they ran, retreating and disappearing as quickly as they could. Mr. Thornton observed them closely and then gathered Margaret tightly to his chest. He turned and opened the unlatched door of the Hale’s residence, not worrying about propriety or permission, and he hurried into Mr. Hale’s empty study. Mr. Thornton gently laid Margaret upon a blue settee, carefully positioning a small cushion beneath her head. He felt her hands – they were so cold! – and began to chafe them between his own, larger ones to restore warmth and health. Abruptly, Mr. Thornton put his head down and cried out softly, ‘Margaret! You lie there as one dead, white and cold, and none know what you are to me – the only woman I have ever loved!’

He was rocking and quietly whispering to her, trying to force life into her face. Margaret could not move; she felt immobilized and yet, she could hear. Likely she was not hearing correctly, as the words she perceived were astounding. She could not see nor open her eyes for the pain was too great. Mr. Thornton took his pocket handkerchief and dabbed the wound. He looked around
anxiously for water or for help to arrive in the person of Mr. Hale or even grouchy Dixon. His quiet ministrations continued until a footstep outside of the study door alerted him to the presence of another; it was Dixon.

‘Bless me, sir! What has happened to Miss Margaret?’ Dixon looked upon him with considerable suspicion. This large tradesman in their home frequently, she knew it would come to no good. She bustled over to check
Margaret’s wound and, with another glance of deep mistrust, hastily left to procure water for cleansing and a vial of smelling salts to awaken Margaret. Once Dixon quit the room, directly Mr. Thornton was back, kneeling by the settee which was supporting his beloved. Margaret moved slightly and carefully opened her eyes. She was not quite sure that she had opened them, as the sight which met her vision was rather fantastic. Mr. Thornton, the proud master and powerful man, was stooping next to her with such a look upon his face that she had never seen – except once, differently, on the face of Henry Lennox immediately before he had proposed to her. She would not think on it now but Margaret was not certain of the emotions he was engendering within her. She struggled to sit up and make light of her weakness but Dixon returned at that moment and would not hear of such nonsense, while Mr. Thornton jumped away rapidly with two large strides to a chair opposite where Margaret was reclining.

‘Tut, Miss Margaret. Now how did you get so hurt? Your poor father would worry himself to illness if he saw you in this way, so it is well that he is keeping your mother company.’ Dixon compelled Margaret to drink a draught to ‘relax her nerves, it is’ and to lay back so that Dixon could wash the wound and bind it up.

‘Now we have to hide it else your parents will have it out of me how I came upon you and Mr. Thornton alone in the master’s study.’

Margaret laughed lightly and replied, ‘Now Dixon, you will oblige me by not mentioning this. I heard a loud noise coming from just outside and saw a large group of rough men attacking Mr. Thornton, who had been in this neighborhood only as our guest. Could I do otherwise than to protect him? Otherwise, he would have been your suffering patient but I am not sure this settee would be long enough for him.’

A loud knocking on the Hale’s door diverted their attention and Margaret sat up straight and, with a glance at Mr. Thornton, self-consciously smoothed her skirt and hair to receive what visitors Dixon might find calling.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. So here’s the situation: Margaret threw a hissy fit and locked herself in her trailer for a week. John was stomping around growling at people and yelling at his agent on the phone that ‘this is a total period piece and there’s, like, NO action!’ He also seemed to be particularly worried that his persona would be stereotyped and he wouldn’t get any other good roles. Nicholas was hitting on two prop girls and was heard muttering about how he USED to be a great character actor but, no, he is brought in for some ancillary part in this knock-off remake.

‘Pardon, Miss Margaret,’ Dixon said re-entering the study, ‘It’s that Higgins fellow. He’s asking to see you.’

‘Show him in, Dixon,’ Margaret responded calmly, appearing outwardly as though she were in control of the situation when she was, in fact, quite flustered. Higgins come to visit when another was present and, oh - worse! She was yet in company with Mr. Thornton and had not time for reflection upon his recent passionate speech. Just the remembrance caused her to redden and she immediately hoped that the color was not visible. Margaret was so much taken with how to act now around Mr. Thornton that she did not think to be concerned over both Nicholas Higgins, Union man, and the master of Marlborough Mills sharing her father’s study.

Mr. Thornton was uncertain if Margaret had heard his fervent declaration and found that, upon examination, her wan face looked tired but still very beautiful. There was a slight flush of color on her cheeks and Mr. Thornton both admired the blush and pondered on its reason. He was of a mind to stay until Mr. Hale came to ensure his daughter’s continue health but now with the entrance of a Union man, he desired nothing more than to take his leave. Mr. Thornton began to stand just as Nicholas crossed the threshold, clearly distraught but still able to take note of both occupants of the room.

‘Miss Marget!’ Nicholas announced, ‘Bessy a heerd some great noise up this way an’ hoo was a feared that harm had come to yo’. Hoo were told ‘bout a scuffle with som’un Union men an’ a measter an’ a lady.’

‘Please have a seat, Nicholas,’ Margaret requested softly, feeling her duty as hostess. ‘May I introduce you to Mr. Thornton?’

‘I’d say sarvant, sir,’ said Nicholas with a wry grin, ’but wit’ th’ strike an’ all, it’s nobbut a good time for such things.’ He looked down contritely at his stockinged feet and apologized that ‘I been i’ the street all day and my shoes are none the cleanest.’ Mr. Thornton merely nodded at the Union fellow and bit back the curt rejoinder sitting upon his tongue.

Margaret went on, ‘Several men attacked Mr. Thornton a bit ago on the street in front of our home. He had been in this neighborhood to visit with my father and, therefore in this case, his safety was assuredly our responsibility. The odds were decidedly unfair and my obligation was to provide all possible protection.’

‘Di’ yo’ know any on the men?’ Nicholas inquired, curious.
Margaret glanced at Mr. Thornton and saw that he was trying to keep his anger under control. She determined what her course must be – to thank Mr. Thornton for his help and ensure his safe exit from Crampton. Perhaps he would not be too put out by her offer.

She addressed him, ‘Mr. Thornton, please let me express my great distress at your being accosted thus and you should know that your subsequent help was invaluable and that of a true friend. I would be glad to escort you out of this neighborhood to prevent a second occurrence and warrant your safety, for who would confront violently a man accompanying a woman?’

Mr. Thornton was visibly nettled by this concept and was simply going to bid farewell and depart. He did not require the assistance of a girl to walk the streets of Milton. If there were those who wished to make trouble, they would not find an easy target in John Thornton. Margaret saw and thought that she understood – his pride would not allow him to agree.

She stood with an effort – the feeling of weakness persisted - and addressed both men, ‘Nicholas, I will return shortly. Mr. Thornton, at least permit me to walk you to the door?’ she asked mildly.

He stood as well and cursed his silent tongue which, although it did wish to speak unpleasant and harsh words to that Higgins, did not seem to be working at the moment. Could he not explain to Margaret his very good reasons that he wished not to leave? And these were reasons that any person might understand, regardless of their being a manufacturer or gently-born. His mind whirled with ideas and then the notion of inviting the Hales to dine with his family forwarded itself. His mother’s permission would have to be obtained but that would not be terribly difficult.

As the two reached the door, Margaret extended her hand to Mr. Thornton with a grateful look. ‘Mr. Thornton, I am truly sorry that you were importuned on our doorstep. Are you averse to keeping your appointment with my father for later today? He was not present as he is attending my mother currently but his disappointment if he were to lose your presence will be keen.’ Margaret spoke as persuasively as was proper and then blushed prettily as he looked closely at her. Although she truly did not believe that she returned his sentiments, the memory of his impassioned words was disconcerting and unsettling.

Mr. Thornton clasped her hand for a gentle handshake but held it a few moments longer than necessary, while beholding her lovely confusion. ‘My schedule is open for the greater part of this afternoon, Miss Hale. I plan to attend your father, as his society is one of my few indulgences,’ he replied with a smile before his long strides took him rapidly away from the Hale’s home.

Margaret stood a moment watching his black clad form maneuver smoothly through the streets, feeling a sense of she knew not what. Perhaps it was merely a belated reaction to her injury. Sighing, she went to rejoin Nicholas in Mr. Hale’s study but now, her father had resumed his previous chair and was conversing easily with their guest. The tradesman gave her a knowing look and a wink upon her entrance, to her bewilderment.

‘Margaret, Higgins tells me there was trouble earlier and Mr. Thornton was drawn in. Was John here? Was he injured?’ her father anxiously queried in his quavering voice. Mr. Hale was so concerned with ascertaining the extent of Mr. Thornton’s involvement in the scuffle that he missed Margaret’s pallid face and her surreptitiously placing a bit of hair over her cut.

‘Papa, Mr. Thornton was indeed here just recently but he has left and promises to resume your conversation later today.’ Margaret spoke quickly and hurried to her seat, as she was feeling faint. She faced Higgins and said, ‘Nicholas, please let Bessy know that we are all well and I am touched by her concern. To answer your question – which I have not forgotten - I had the opportunity of seeing Boucher earlier but he was too occupied at the time to greet me.’ Margaret hoped that Nicholas would comprehend her message so that her father would remain unaware of the true circumstances.
‘Glad t’ hear, miss. Mebbe I’ll go an’ tell Bessy. Take care, lass,’ The last was said as Nicholas squeezed Margaret’s hand with a look of fatherly concern on his countenance. As Margaret went to rise to show him out, he chided her with a smile, ‘Don’ bother yo’rself – I can find me way ou’.’
Chapter 16

John Thornton made his rapid way through Milton back to Marlborough Mills. Mrs. Thornton looked up from her customary seat in the dining room, examining linens for necessary mending, when she heard his step upon the stairs and entering their door. The windows were open to allow any small breeze but the Venetian blinds were down, causing anyone in the room to appear grayish and unhealthy. Although to any other person his face would have given the impression of passivity, his mother detected strong emotion in his lineaments. His upright posture was almost relaxed, far more so than any recent time due to the strike and its attendant troubles. Mrs. Thornton was puzzling over this change while her son was ecstatically thinking of what he would say to Margaret when he returned to Crampton later in the day. Then Mr. Thornton came closer to his mother and she noticed with her sharp eye the bleeding cut on her beloved son’s cheek. Her countenance darkened and her hands stopped their methodical motions.

‘John,’ asked she tersely, ‘What has happened to your face?’

‘Ah, mother. I was set upon by a group of angry turn outs but they got as good as they gave.’

If possible, Mrs. Thornton’s visage grew even more irate and she sneered contemptuously, ‘The ingrates! They will blame you for their troubles but had their mighty Union already agreed to the reasonable terms offered, there would by now be plenty of work to go around.’

‘Now mother, do not upset yourself about it. We will outlast the hands and teach them not to trifle with the mill owners. If there were any in the Union who understood the state of trade, this strike would never have occurred. I have been to Crampton and spoken with the Hales. Miss Hale would like to see a compromise agreed upon in order to end the strike. She feels that the mill owners stand to lose commerce and customers and the hands need work to be able to eat so both sides would perhaps benefit from an ending to this strike.’ Mr. Thornton watched his mother carefully as he spoke, wondering at her opinion of Margaret.

Mrs. Thornton waved her hand dismissively and answered with scorn. ‘Miss Hale? What does a girl from the South know of business? Despite her touring the mill, I don’t believe that she can yet understand the difference between the carding room and the one for spinning. How then could she possibly comprehend the importance of the places master and hands hold in Milton society? If I wished to ask her about useless embroidery, we may have a topic of conversation.’

‘Mother! After having spoken with Miss Hale upon this matter, I imagine that her understanding of the situation may be clearer than you might credit. The ideas she has put forth have merit and I must speak with one or two fellows to clarify my own designs. As you well know, the mill is losing money each day that the machines stand quiet and the hands remain out. There are a great number of open orders waiting to be filled and if Marlborough Mills doesn’t satisfy its customers, then they will take their business to another mill that will. Miss Hale’s goal is to shorten the strike and this is my objective, as well.’ With that, Mr. Thornton continued upstairs to prepare and soon descended with no more words spoken to leave for his next destination.

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Once Nicholas had gone, Margaret pled a headache and slowly climbed the steps to her room. She lay down on her bed, fully clothed, and allowed the fatigue and strain to weigh her down. Margaret was greatly appreciative of finally having silence and solitude for there was much upon which to meditate. The pain from her throbbing wound only reminded Margaret of the men who had attacked Mr. Thornton. It was obvious that the Union was pushing the workers to remain strong in the face of grueling circumstances, asking the men to ignore want so that they might
achieve the collective ambition of higher wages. Poor Boucher! Driven by the cares of his wife and hungry children to attack the one master who would dare to set foot in Crampton. And Mr. Thornton. . . . . Margaret blushed again just to think of his whispered words of love, spoken when he must have thought her insensate and unable to comprehend what was being breathed into her ear. Those murmured endearments took wing, flying and encircling her like silken threads, wrapping her in a cocoon until breathing was hardly possible. So what then, wondered Margaret, did she feel about Mr. Thornton? Indeed, she respected him as both a mill owner and a man. His tall frame was not an unpleasant prospect and his face was assuredly not unattractive. He listened to her opinions as if she were a man herself – their many disagreements were proof of that. In contrast, Henry Lennox had always been a friend to Margaret but she disliked his habit of never disagreeing with her views. Rather, he twisted his own attitudes to match hers. Aunt Shaw would not like him because of his profession; Edith would tolerate him for Margaret’s sake. How would her parents react? Margaret suddenly realized she was assuming not only that Mr. Thornton would propose but also that she would accept. But would he? Would she? Would Mrs. Thornton be accepting of Margaret as a daughter? She was forever criticizing and finding fault. Margaret was even more fatigued as thoughts whirled through her tired mind, confusing more than clarifying. Knowing one’s heart looked as if it were a colossal endeavor, wading through question after question. How did Edith know the point at which she had determined to have Captain Lennox? Margaret was sure she could never bring herself to ask.

With a resigned sigh that Margaret was not conscious of releasing, she slipped into slumber.
Nicholas, after leaving the Hale’s home, went directly to speak with Boucher. Higgins was a committee man on this special strike and had to ensure that all workers upheld the law of the land, as laid down by the Union and the committee. He was furious at the men who had possibly betrayed all of their fellow strikers and undone untold hard work and planning by their unthinking and foolish actions. Nicholas was ready to threaten to turn the lot of them into the police – assuming, of course, that Mr. Thornton was not already preparing to do so, seeing as he was magistrate. The committee needed to show the world that Boucher and his lot were not the leaders of the strike and the real leaders were steady thoughtful men; good hands, and good citizens, who were friendly to law and judgment. They would uphold order and only wanted their right wage, and wouldn't work even though they starved until such time as they got their demands but would never injure property or life.

He found Boucher rocking in a chair, over and over, muttering to himself. Nicholas was furious and let Boucher know precisely what he and the committee thought of hands that went against the orders of the committee. All members of the Union had been charged to lie down and die, if need be, and to strike no blows. The public was sure to be with them and the Union would carry the strike. Attacking a master?! Was there a more fool bunch of men that existed? When Nicholas mentioned giving Boucher up to the police, Boucher gave a great cry and struck Higgins in the face with his fist but turned right around and ran out like lightning. Nicholas was stunned by the blow and sat down for a moment in the chair just recently vacated by Boucher to collect himself. Bessy was shocked when her father walked in and sat heavily down. His face was pasty white, excepting where the blood had flowed from his nose. Mary came in from the kitchen and retreated straightaway upon seeing their father’s countenance. Finding strength, Bessy walked over to Nicholas and grabbed him around his shoulders, as best she could in her weakened condition.

"Father, father!" she cried, "Thou'll never go peach on that poor clemmed man. I'll never leave go on thee, till thou sayst thou wunnot."

"Dunnot be a fool," answered her father, "Words come readier than deeds to most men. I never thought o' telling th' police on him; though by G-- he deserves it, and I should na' ha' minded if someone else had done the dirty work, and got him clapped up. But now he has strucken me, I could do it less nor ever, for it would be getting other men to take up my quarrel. But if ever he gets well o'er this clemming and is in good condition, he and I'll have an up and down fight and I'll see what I can do for him."

&&&&&&

When Margaret awoke and checked on her mother, she found that Mrs. Hale was in the drawing room, as this seemed to be one of her better days. She was full of praise for Mrs. Thornton’s waterbed, comparing it to a bed in Sir John Beresford’s elegant home.

‘I don’t know how, Mr. Hale, but the art of making a good bed has been lost since they made the beds at Sir John’s. There are feathers enough and of the same type but none have provided me similar rest. Margaret, how do you find your repose? I appeal to you. Do you toss and turn attempting to find an easy position and waken in the morning as tired as you lay down?’

Margaret disclaimed any knowledge of Sir John Beresford’s beds and laughingly informed her mother that, in general, she was so sleepy at night that falling asleep was not really a difficulty. Mr. Hale entered the room and reminded Margaret that Mr. Thornton was due shortly. Mrs. Hale was confused by the notice and asked her husband why Margaret’s presence should be necessary to a discussion.
Mr. Hale answered her with a smile, ‘Ah Mrs. Hale, she had a notion about the strike which has taken Mr. Thornton’s fancy. Our Margaret believes that there may be a method to end the strike which will prevent so much trouble from befalling the mill owners and the workers.’

Mrs. Hale was not best pleased with this reply and responded sharply, ‘Margaret, what are you about concerning yourself with a tradesman’s problems? Let the mill owners deal with their workers; they are more intimately connected to each other. What would your Aunt Shaw say if she were to hear of you forming agreements and writing contracts for manufacturers and their men? I would be obliged to send you down to London the instant she received such a report.’

‘Mamma,’ Margaret said gently, ‘You should not get overwrought. I am not writing contracts or any such thing. Mr. Thornton is coming to speak on an idea of mine to end the hunger and pain for Nicholas Higgins and others like him. There should be a trustworthy person that the masters and the men agree upon who can hear their arguments and make a decision that both sides will honor. Possibly neither side will be fully satisfied but if this can stop children from starving, then I am proud to do it.’

From the pinched look on Mrs. Hale’s face, it was clear to her family that she was not comfortable with this knowledge but she remained silent on the subject. Instead she quietly stated, ‘Perhaps I shall rest for a time. This heavy air is rather exhausting and Dixon has been at me to maintain equanimity. She feels it will help my dizzy spells.’ Thus saying, Mrs. Hale moved with Margaret’s help into her bedroom.

Margaret looked abashed at her father who did not appear to notice. Mr. Hale was distracted by the clock on the mantle, which indicated that Mr. Thornton should be arriving momentarily. ‘We should go down to the study, my dear. Tardiness in one’s own home is inexcusable.’ So Mr. Hale and Margaret settled themselves in Mr. Hale’s study in preparation for Mr. Thornton’s appointment.
At precisely half past two, Mr. Thornton arrived at the Hale’s. He was a stoic man and not prone to sentimentality, however, his present mood was eager and almost buoyant. On his current walk to his friend’s home, there had been much time for reflection. Was it possible that Miss Hale – Margaret, he thought with a private smile - had feelings for him? Recollecting her lovely blush as she bid him farewell, Mr. Thornton allowed himself a slight hope. He abruptly shook his head to bring his thoughts to the issue at hand; that is, the strike and Miss Hale’s optimistic plan to bring the troublesome thing to a close.

‘You are come!’ called Mr. Hale jovially. Mr. Thornton was gladdened to note the older man’s obvious pleasure in his presence and fleetingly wondered if Mr. Hale would be equally agreeable to his suit for Margaret’s hand. Mr. Hale was seated in the chair nearest the fireplace and Margaret was perched upon her usual chair, studiously embroidering what looked to be intended for an infant. She briefly raised her eyes and wordlessly nodded at Mr. Thornton as he chose the seat closest to Margaret, who colored as he did so.

‘I believe this meeting was at Miss Hale’s behest, so perhaps she should be the first to speak. Miss Hale, what are your thoughts upon the strike? How propose you to conclude this nasty business as soon as may be possible?’

Margaret was endeavoring to appear unaffected in Mr. Thornton’s company and nearly missed his question. She smiled - they were on to the business of the strike. Mr. Thornton’s forthright and resolute nature would allow nothing else.

‘Actually, sir, whatever plans I may have conceived will of necessity require others for their fulfillment. In Milton, there are two separate classes of people who are wholly interdependent upon each other for their livelihood; yet, these classes continually are at odds or, at best, apparently indifferent to the welfare of the other. The masters are obliged to retain workers in their mills so that the businesses may remain successful and those who work in the mills are, of course, dependent on their employers. I have heard you, Mr. Thornton, on many occasions refer to your workers as ‘hands’ instead of men (as seems to be common parlance) and I have also heard you referred to by those same people in less than complimentary terms. Although it may be difficult to hear, it is my fervent belief that this discord, this foundational lack of respect is the groundwork for any strikes. If it is plain to those who labor in a place that the master does not hold his employees in any esteem, the natural result can only be strife. Intelligence is not in the sole possession of the wealthy; there are those from straitened circumstances who hold great cleverness. It does not follow that for one to be an employee and not the owner means that individual is not worthy of notice or appreciation. I believe that if you and the other mill owners were to explain thoroughly to representatives of the Union, likely their Committee, your reasons for not wishing to increase wages - understanding that both you and the Committee will be liable to compromise at least part of your positions – and then the Committee was to explain their particular situation, perhaps a solution may be found.’

From his demeanor, Mr. Thornton had been listening closely but not necessarily with pleasure. He nodded and looked up. ‘I do have a few questions, Miss Hale. If the mill owners were to agree to this . . . . . . discussion, would it be witnessed so that neither party could claim abuse?’ He paused to give Margaret a chance to answer.

‘The process is called arbitration. I have done research on it lately in order that my knowledge might cause a lessening of suffering for all involved. The meeting is overseen by an objective, learned individual, who makes the final ruling in the case. Both sides of the dispute sign a legally
binding document agreeing to the arbitrator’s ruling and terms. You may certainly have a solicitor present if that were to make you more easy.’

‘Who will be these representatives of the Union? Will these be men, similar to those who (with a glance to Mr. Hale) might seek to harm the masters?’

Margaret compressed her lips, still upset by the memory of Boucher and his cohorts attacking Mr. Thornton. She replied quietly, ‘No, Mr. Thornton, the men of their Committee are thinking, patient individuals who had tried to impress the other workers of the import of waiting and doing no harm. I am acquainted with one such person and, if you wish, you could be introduced to him.’ She watched his face carefully, determining his comfort with such an idea.

‘Nay, Margaret,’ interrupted Mr. Hale nervously, ‘Let us not force an introduction upon Mr. Thornton if he is not amenable. We are at a preliminary stage of your idea, are we not?’ Mr. Hale desired an equitable outcome of the strike but, as the Hales were so recently moved to Milton and not intimately familiar with its history and workings, he fretted that Margaret’s proposal would distress his friend.

Mr. Thornton replied, ‘In truth, this concept is one of which I had heard but have not had the opportunity to see in practice. My curiosity is certainly aroused and if it can assist in diminishing the persistent rancor between the owners and the men, perhaps this is very worth the time to inquire about its efficacy.’

Turning to Margaret, he asked, ‘My final question, for the moment, is wondering whether this arbitration procedure would force itself upon all involved if were to be a future strike? Are we legally required to return to this same method, if a better one may be available?’

Smiling, Margaret realized that Mr. Thornton was interested in hearing her idea in its entirety. She truly had never met a man who listened to her so completely and without the usual condescension shown to a female, which she had received even from Henry Lennox who professed to love her. Was there conceivably a chance for happiness between Mr. Thornton and herself? Margaret shook her head to clear these distracting thoughts and turned her full attention to the dark man (although, she had to admit, he was also handsome) sitting near her. ‘To the best of my knowledge and, of course, I do hope that you would protect yourself and your investments by checking all of this information independently, engaging in arbitration this time does not necessitate repeating the process a second time. I would be pleased to provide you with the name of a solicitor who is familiar with these types of proceedings and likely he could direct you to an appropriate arbitrator.’

Mr. Hale looked with surprise upon his daughter. ‘Margaret, how did you come to be in possession of this information and a solicitor’s name? This is the first I have heard of such things.’

Margaret appeared somewhat disconcerted by the question and Mr. Thornton wondered if she had deliberately kept her father uninformed. ‘Papa,’ she responded gently without looking up, ‘I do not believe that Mama would approve of my newfound pursuit so my investigations were done very discreetly. Henry Lennox was kind enough to provide the name of a local solicitor experienced in these matters and – ‘ Her voice died away for a moment until she lifted her chin and faced her father bravely. ‘I contacted him under an assumed name and have been in correspondence with him for about a month. His name is Mr. Joseph Scott, Esquire of Manchester. If you would like, Mr. Thornton, I could give you his address so that you may make your own inquiries.’

Mr. Thornton was wrestling with his pride in Margaret’s courage at seeking answers to aid so many others, despite having to do so in a clandestine manner, and his burning need to know who Henry Lennox was to Margaret. He answered in a voice more calm than he felt, ‘My appreciation,
Miss Hale. You have done an excellent job of exploring avenues for returning Milton to a productive town. I would welcome it if you would write out the direction for Mr. Scott so that I may contact him.’ He desperately wanted to ask Margaret about Henry Lennox but knew that it was not his right.

Mr. Hale rose from his seat to bid farewell to Mr. Thornton, relief that the younger man had not taken offense obvious on his features. ‘John, may I expect you tomorrow at our regular time for reading? I do enjoy our time and our conversations.’

After taking his leave of Mr. Hale, Margaret asked Mr. Thornton to wait for a moment while she collected the address he had requested. She returned quickly with a scrap of paper and silently handed it to Mr. Thornton who placed the bit in his pocket without reading. He left and walked with his usual rapid pace as he navigated the familiar streets of Milton. Margaret found herself again watching Mr. Thornton’s figure as it disappeared, confused as to the source of discomfiture that seemed to radiate off of the man when he had left. Was it the plan that had upset him so? No, she had felt in accord with him during most of their conversation. Margaret stood, deep in contemplation. He had appeared to close up when they had discussed her contacting the solicitor. Did he find that inappropriate for a woman? Did he know Mr. Scott previously and disapproved of him? But he made no complaint and she had noted no sign of recognition, so that could not be the reason. Margaret continued her analysis throughout the remainder of the day but could not settle upon a firm answer. She couldn’t ask him directly – that would be much too forward but she could not request her father to glean understanding. It was going to persist in bothering her because . . . why? Did she seek Mr. Thornton’s good opinion? If she had to admit it, then yes, she desired his thinking well of her. Margaret comprehended that she had much ruminating to do on this subject and waited patiently through the rest of her day until night so that she might have the silence and privacy to seek the answers that she needed.
The week following Mr. Thornton’s visit was uniformly dull and dispiriting. The man himself had not visited the Hales during that time which left Margaret, not being able to satisfactorily solve the puzzle of Mr. Thornton’s behavior, befuddled and worked into quite a passion against him. Visiting Bessy and Nicholas was a pleasant way to spend an afternoon which otherwise would have been spent ruminating over her confused emotions and their object.

Mrs. Hale’s health was declined to the point of her not being able to leave her bed. Death was not imminent but anyone who viewed her visage could plainly see that it was not far in coming. Dixon religiously waited upon her mistress and her every desire and disapproved of any who would dare to usurp her service. Margaret, therefore, found it rather odd one day when Dixon sidled up to her and said that Mrs. Hale had requested Margaret to come to her bedroom. On entering the sick woman’s room, Margaret’s eyes had to adjust to the dimness of the lighting and made out the form of her mother prone on her bed. Intense worry and a vague sense of the fleetingness of mortality caused Margaret to hesitate before approaching her mother.

‘Mama!’ she called softly, ‘You asked that I attend you?’

At Margaret’s words, Mrs. Hale turned her head slowly and with great effort toward her daughter, her vanity even now causing her to attempt to hide the grimace of pain which the motion had caused. ‘My child, I know that I am not much longer for this world. Please ask Mrs. Thornton to visit as soon as she may, as I have a request of her.’

Margaret’s soft grey eyes widened at her mother’s plea. “Mama, can I help you instead? Is Mrs. Thornton necessary?”

‘Margaret, there are some things only a mother may understand. I must speak with Mrs. Thornton.’ Having spoken her piece, Mrs. Hale closed her tired, filmy eyes with a soft sigh and clearly ended the conversation. Dixon signaled for silence and escorted Margaret into the adjoining sitting room.

‘Miss Margaret, she’s been going on and on for some weeks about taking care of you and doing her best to ensure you have a mother’s care after she is gone. I know you have no love for that woman but you need to do what your poor, dear mother wanted to ease her mind and out of respect for her.’ Dixon quickly tried to turn away so that Margaret would not see the tears in her eyes, even though the momentary sight only increased Margaret’s affection for the long-standing servant.

Resolved to perform her duty, Margaret stepped out of her house with the determination not to allow Mr. Thornton or his forthright, overbearing mother to dissuade her. She discharged her obligation to the immense surprise and bewilderment of Mrs. Thornton, who promised to call on Mrs. Hale later that afternoon. Margaret was both relieved and disappointed to not have seen Mr. Thornton during her visit to his home. Being in his personal abode, despite the absence of his actual person, was no less disturbing to her equanimity than being in his presence. The walk back to Crampton was a respite and afforded an opportunity to breathe deeply. After informing Dixon of the success of her mission, Margaret decided to stop at Bessy’s home, as the last time she had seen her friend, Bessy had been feverish and extremely weak. After knocking at the door and receiving no answer from within, Margaret tried the latch which was unlocked. There was no fire in the grate and the room had no signs of having been tended to recently. She heard the sound of weeping coming from the kitchen and, upon investigating, found Mary standing in the middle of the space sobbing into her apron.
'Mary, what has happened? How is Bessy today - not worse?’ she cried. As Mary looked up with reddened, immensely sad eyes, Margaret felt as if a hand were squeezing her chest, so great was the fear for her friend.

‘It’s too late, Miss Hale. Bessy pass’d this morn. She’d axed if she coul’ be buried in one o’ yourn lovely garments. She did,’ Mary gasped with the effort not to burst out crying again, ‘She did so love yo’r finery. Woul’ yo’ be so kind?’

Margaret asked urgently, ‘Would you take me to see her, Mary? I very much want to see Bessy again.’ The two quickly and quietly passed through the house and upstairs into the silent presence of the dead. Margaret was glad, exceedingly glad that she had come for Bessy’s face, which had been so pinched and weary with pain in life, was now graced with a peaceful smile. As tears gathered in her eyes, she stood in wonderment at the serenity that was death. Mary was softly weeping behind her and Margaret stared at the still countenance of her beloved friend.

‘I will bring you a beautiful lace nightcap, Mary. Bessy can go to her final rest arrayed as she would have wished. Will you be arranging the funeral?’

Mary spoke up in a muffled voice, ‘Yo’ll have to be axing Father on the funeral. Yo’ know, she were thinkin’ of yo’ at the end. Her last words were, ‘Give her my affectionate respects; and keep father fro’ drink.’ Can yo’ get Father an’ tell him? He’ll be sore upset when he hears and he all’ays did take a shine to yo’.’

‘Where is Nicholas, Mary? Is he around the corner?’

Mary nodded her head without speaking and, taking a last glance at her unmoving sister, crept back downstairs. How many such grave commands can a person be given in just one day? It was this question that Margaret deliberated while descending the stairs and leaving the Higgins’ home to find its master who was, at that moment most likely, drinking in the Goulden Dragon.
The strike was over. Mr. Thornton had been busy – exceedingly so – and mentioned such in a note which had been delivered to the Hales nestled in a generous and delicious basket of fruit. He had not yet come back to read with Mr. Hale and that gentleman was sorely missing his friend’s presence. From what rumors and gossip both Dixon and Margaret had been able to glean, Mr. Thornton had led a committee of masters during negotiations with the Union and its committee. Supposedly, the colorful bruises and scars on his face went a long way toward improving the negotiable position of the masters. Like any good compromise, neither side was completely happy but the general consensus appeared to be that the masters had walked away with the superior outcome. Of course, Margaret mused silently, likely the mill owners would say that the Union had procured a more favorable arrangement than themselves. Nevertheless, Mr. Thornton remained fully occupied in reopening his mill and did not come to call on the Hales.

Bessy had been laid to rest and Nicholas Higgins, at Margaret’s instigation, had come several times to visit with Mr. Hale ostensibly for consolation. However, it was rapidly becoming apparent that Mr. Hale had found a new mission in which to engage his energies – namely, the spiritual rejuvenation of Bessy’s father. The former pastor had been shocked upon their first meeting, as Margaret had described Nicholas in terms that almost bordered on heretical, but Higgins was clearly and firmly not in that camp. He was a questioning sort of fellow who did not merely swallow that which had been forced into his gullet but rather wondered at humankind and equality. Since he had been for his entire life a working man, Nicholas was curious why, if men were all created alike, there were entire classes of individuals who believed themselves to be by birth and lineage above their fellow. Why, he wanted to know, was his blood and that of his brothers less dear than that of the nobility and the wealthy? Mr. Hale, the dissenter with unanswered questions of his own, was more than willing to participate by delving into books from which to derive adequate solutions. Mr. Hale and Nicholas were so engrossed in their philosophical discussions that neither man realized the full extent of their mutual delight in the interchanges. Dixon did not – and could not be brought to – fully approve of ‘that working man’s presence’ in the master’s study but she eventually grudgingly accepted Higgins attendance as the results produced were a livelier and less morose Mr. Hale.

One evening as Margaret was settling in with her notepad and pen to translate yet more Dante, there came such a forceful pull on the bell that she was afraid the wires might snap. Before Dixon could engage the latch, Margaret threw the door open and saw the slender silhouette of a man facing the street, his back to Margaret. At the sound of the door opening, he turned and faced the house.

‘Is this the Hale residence?’ he asked clearly. Margaret stared closely at the person and, with a noise of recognition, she cried, ‘Frederick!’ She pulled him through the portal and quickly closed the door to prevent any possible sighting of her endangered brother.

‘Margaret?’ he queried softly then encircled her in a fervent hug.

‘Come, Fred, Papa is in the study. He has been hoping for your coming these many weeks but Mama . . . ’ and here Margaret faltered, trying hard not to cry, ‘Mama is still alive but doing very poorly. She will gain strength from your being here.’

‘You did not expect me?’

‘No, we haven’t received any letter from you. Did you send one?’

‘It appears I have arrived before my note. Where should I deposit my bag?’ Fred asked, gesturing
to the obviously stuffed carpet bag in his hand. Margaret gently guided her brother to their father’s study and motioned for him to place the case upon a chair just inside of the opening.

‘Papa!’ she cried, ‘Look who is come!’

Mr. Hale lifted his head from where it had lain upon his desk, blinking blearily at Margaret. ‘Child, tell me – is it Frederick?’ He worked to focus his weary and troubled eyes on the figure standing in the darkness just behind Margaret. She gathered tapers and lit them so that the room would have illumination and her father would be able to see the beloved features of his eldest child. Both siblings moved toward their father but Fred, the taller and longer-legged, arrived first. Margaret turned to allow them their privacy; such a reunion after such a lengthy absence deserved nothing less. After some minutes, Fred inquired of his sister if he could see Mrs. Hale. She gave him a long, intense look letting him know to be prepared for what he was going to see; he seemed to feel optimistic that his mother could not truly lay dying. Mr. Hale pled fatigue – he did not wish to witness the bittersweet meeting between mother and son. As both siblings ascended the stairs, Fred attempted to cajole and pry details and information out of Margaret on their life in Milton. On reaching Mrs. Hale’s sitting room, they were greeted – albeit quietly – by Dixon, who embraced her ‘young master’ and wept on his shoulder. Margaret waited very patiently while Dixon accompanied Frederick into their mother’s bedroom. She could not hear many sounds after an initial exclamation in a masculine voice. There were low voices, halting and soft, and then footsteps heading out of the room, toward Margaret. She looked up and saw her older brother who emerged seemingly hopeful but with tears in his eyes and on his cheeks.

Dixon stepped out after him and shut the door so as not to disturb the invalid and addressed Margaret. ‘Miss Margaret, the doctor is due to arrive soon. Perhaps you could escort Master Frederick to his room while Dr. Donaldson is here?’

After adjuring Fred repeatedly to remain silent and out of sight during the visit, Dixon went below stairs and the young people proceeded to Fred’s room to acclimate the newcomer to his temporary surroundings.

‘It may be selfish but I am very glad that I am come to see Mama. Are you pleased with this Dr. Donaldson? Is his care up to that of London doctors? Should we send for a physician from there?’ Fred would have continued but Margaret hushed him and reminded him of Dixon’s injunction of silence. She also explained that the doctor had been recommended by Mr. Thornton who had assured them of the man’s references.

‘And who is this Mr. Thornton that father sees fit to follow his recommendation in a matter of this importance?’ asked Frederick curiously. Margaret blushed and then told him how Mr. Thornton was their family’s first friend in Milton and of his standing in the community. While speaking thus, she became aware of her brother’s scrutiny. He smiled and exclaimed, ‘So that is how the wind blows, is it then? I should like to have a look at this Thornton for myself.’

Margaret strongly insisted that he had misunderstood but her efforts only caused Fred to laugh – silently though, in observance of the doctor being below.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Here is the beginning of the train station scene. I had to chop it up, since my kids wouldn't let me ignore them any longer. :)

Dr. Donaldson had warned that, although Mrs. Hale might appear stronger for now, the end was approaching with much rapidity. Frederick was inclined to disbelieve what he termed ‘doomsday prophecies’ and renewed his queries about London physicians being brought in. However, by nightfall it was clear that the doctor had been in the right of the matter. Mrs. Hale had suffered some severe convulsions and when they ended, she was no longer conscious. Mr. Hale, Frederick and Margaret each took a turn sitting and watching – and truthfully, waiting – in the event there would be a change. In the grey darkness of pre-dawn, the Hale family bid a final, tearful farewell to Maria Hale. There was comfort, small though it was, in the knowledge that that she was finally at peace, untroubled by the smoke and grime of Milton and no longer wracked with constant spasms of pain. Mr. Hale laid his head upon the deathbed and would neither speak nor move. He remained in this attitude until his children forced him into the chair which sat near to the bed, teary eyes shut and insensible of his surroundings. Frederick, despite his credo of perpetual optimism, cried bitterly and loudly until Dixon and Margaret nervously reminded him that the walls were none too thick.

The next morning, Margaret approached her father about the funeral. He sat listlessly and agreed with every suggestion put forth, merely asking to be left to himself. Dixon was waiting to speak with Margaret but obviously anxious. Apparently, she had been out heading to the market and saw a fellow on the street that she recognized. His name was Leonards and he hailed originally from Southampton, like Dixon - who was feeling very out of place in Milton – and she had opened the conversation. However, Dixon was greatly sorry for such an action almost immediately, as in her estimation, Leonards was ‘a nasty, good for nothing fellow’ and ‘impudent’. But her fear, the one leading her to approach Margaret, was that Leonards had been on the same ship and at the same time as Frederick but Dixon was unsure if Leonards had been still stationed on the Orion at the time of the mutiny. Dixon was gravely worried about Mr. Hale that he might have a stroke with his deep mourning and was resolved to tell him of Leonards presence in Milton if, for no other reason, than to rouse him from his despair. Margaret’s concerns of the court martial and subsequent noose that was dangling over Frederick’s head every instant that he was on English soil only served to increase her desire to see him safely away. Unfortunately, Frederick was determined not to leave until after the funeral which he could not, of course, attend but he wished to be a prop and support for Mr. Hale in his grief. So Margaret and Dixon laid their heads together and prepared a plan for Frederick’s eventual removal from the neighborhood. Sad as the sister was to wish her own brother gone again to his adopted country and likely forever from their little family, the dread of exposure was far worse.

Margaret ensured that Frederick was told of the danger present in the vicinity and about her and Dixon’s ideas for his quitting Milton unharmed. He approved of their proposal but wished that he might first have a chance to whip the blackguard. Then he said, ‘Do you know, Margaret, I was very nearly giving both Dixon and myself a good fright this afternoon. I was in my bedroom and had heard a ring at the front door but I thought the ringer must have done his business and gone away long ago. I was on the point of making my appearance in the passage when, as I opened my room door, I saw Dixon coming downstairs. She frowned and kicked me into hiding again. I kept
the door open and heard a message given to some man that was in my father's study who then went away. Who could it have been? One of the shopmen?’

Margaret replied that it was probably the man who came to take an order somewhere around two o'clock.

‘No,’ Frederick answered, ‘He was a tall, strong-looking fellow, dressed completely in a black suit.’ Margaret was painfully confused and her anger at the mill owner was renewed – Mr. Thornton had come and left from their home and she had heard nothing of it. Mr. Hale was in his study and when asked his son’s question of the identity of the caller, he informed Margaret that it had indeed been Mr. Thornton coming to offer any possible assistance to their family. He had also, according to Mr. Hale, asked after Margaret but when Dixon had been sent to find her, she had not been at home. Mr. Thornton had sent his regrets for not being able to offer his condolences in person to her. The bitter disappointment that, despite herself, Margaret felt (but to which she would never admit) at missing Mr. Thornton, not having seen or spoken with him for nigh unto a month, was made no less keen by the amused looks being directed at her by her brother.

When the three remaining Hales broke their fast in the morning, Mr. Hale was hardly able to eat or sit still, so restless and uneasy was he that Frederick was in danger and should leave immediately. Every noise made him startle and it was with anxiety in his tone that Mr. Hale inquired of Margaret if she would accompany her brother to the train station. Margaret assured him of her cooperation and that she would see Frederick safely to the station and would do all in her power to ensure no one would recognize him as Lieutenant Hale the mutineer. Fred’s train was due at 6:10 which was, based on the time of year, going to be at dusk. Margaret wished to comfort her father that she was not concerned with her return from the station as the road home was well lit and she was accustomed to the area and felt no potential for harm.

Frederick bid his last farewell to his silent mother and took his leave from his father and then he and his sister climbed into a cab to take them to the station. Due to Margaret’s haste to remove Frederick from a painful good-bye with Mr. Hale and the fact that the trains were not consistently on schedule, they arrived about twenty minutes early. The siblings were strolling on a flagstone path next to the station and having a pleasant discussion about possibilities for Fred to be exculpated when Margaret suddenly stopped and stiffened. She appeared to struggle with herself momentarily but then exclaimed, ‘Mr. Thornton! I trust you are well.’

In the receding light, a man slowly dismounted from his horse and advanced toward them, eyeing Frederick suspiciously and wondered disconsolately if this was Henry Lennox. Frederick snorted softly and leaned down to whisper in Margaret’s ear, ‘So THAT is your Mr. Thornton?’ Margaret could not respond as the object of the exchange was coming over. Mr. Thornton had not missed their intimate exchange, oh, how it pained him, and said stiffly, ‘Miss Hale, I am sorry for having missed the chance to extend my condolences before. For your mother’s sake, I would greatly appreciate if you would keep me informed of the time of the funeral so that I might attend. As I had offered to your father, if there is anything that you or Mr. Hale may need, you should notify either myself or my mother.’

The anger which had been simmering inside of Margaret against Mr. Thornton resurfaced fleetingly at his cold speech until she noticed what looked to be hurt on his face. Was Mr. Thornton distraught over her walking alone with Fred? She suddenly was struck by a powerful realization – Mr. Thornton thought she was involved romantically with Frederick. And then suddenly his professions of love in her father’s study came rushing into her head and she could neither move nor speak for a full minute, blushing furiously. She came to an exceedingly difficult decision and determined to trust Mr. Thornton totally. He was a man of integrity and honor. Margaret finally lifted her head and looked directly at Mr. Thornton.
‘Mr. Thornton, may I speak frankly with you? I have a delicate matter which I would like to discuss but your absolute discretion is necessary.’

Mr. Thornton was at once in a struggle in his mind with both hope and fear – he feared that Margaret would now tell him that the man standing with her, with whom she was clearly quite familiar, was to be her husband but he hoped with all the ardor of a man in love that she might think well of him and someday might return his love. He did not miss how she held the stranger’s arm as if it were a most dear object and the blush on her beautiful pale skin; however, John Thornton knew that to keep Margaret safe, he would do anything. ‘Miss Hale, I can assure you of my complete silence on the subject. Is there something which I can do to help you?’

Frederick stood ostensibly calmly next to Margaret, having distinguished the signs of passion in the face of the man in front of them with all the wisdom and experience of a man newly in love, so he waited to see what his sister was about. Sadly Frederick thought, I will not be here to protect my baby sister. Perhaps this fellow will take be able to care of her...

Margaret tightened her hold on Frederick’s arm and stood up straight. She said quietly enough that only they three could hear, ‘May I introduce you to my brother, Frederick? He came to wish our mother farewell but cannot even stay for her funeral. I have promised not to reveal his presence in England else he would be in grave danger but thought,’ and here she faltered, blushing even more strongly, ‘I know that you are trustworthy and you have seen us here, at night, it does not look right. But there is no impropriety and I feel that it would be dishonest to allow you to think otherwise.’

Both men were astounded at her admission but the joy which took hold in Mr. Thornton’s breast was almost too great to bear. This was no beloved – he was her brother! And the faith which Margaret had shown to lay such a private matter before him caused, for the first time, an optimism that she might return his affection. Frederick and Margaret wondered and were uneasy at Mr. Thornton’s silence but his countenance did not indicate distress; rather, the look on his face was one of profound relief. Extending his hand, Mr. Thornton answered, ‘Mr. Hale, I am glad to make your acquaintance. Perhaps we will meet again in the future, when you return to visit with your family.’

Frederick shook his hand willingly but answered with regret, ‘Of necessity, I am called Mr. Dickinson and am not entirely sure if my return to England will ever occur. I have invited my father and Margaret to travel to my place of abode but cannot come here for fear of repercussions. My train will arrive momentarily so I will step over to platform and await my departure. Margaret, have you purchased the ticket?’

Margaret nodded and watched gratefully as Frederick moved a slight distance away, allowing her an instant of private conversation with Mr. Thornton. She raised her large, grey eyes to his and kept her voice low as she stated softly, ‘He is accused of mutiny and will hang if brought to court martial. I thank you for your secrecy and am indebted to you for your kindnesses to my family in our time of need.’

Glancing at the gathering darkness, Mr. Thornton asked with his usual frankness, ‘Will it not be fully dark upon your trip home, Miss Hale? Let me wait upon your brother’s train and I can escort you back. Your father, I am sure, will value the assurance of your security.’ Although he spoke somberly, there was a hopeful, almost nervous, look in his eyes as he made the request.

Margaret smiled as she replied, ‘I have made my way home on these lighted streets later than even this; however, your request is a wise one and your escort would be appreciated.’
Before Margaret, Frederick and Mr. Thornton walked onto the platform, Margaret felt one more word of caution was necessary to impart to the mill owner and she told him concisely about Leonards, Fred’s association with the man and how Leonards was not only a trouble maker but also currently in Milton. Mr. Thornton suggested that he aid Margaret in keeping a watch for Leonards and if anything were to happen, he would be a witness, particularly in his position of Magistrate. As the three traversed the flagstone steps up to the platform, there came a sound of footsteps behind them. The train was rapidly approaching and in a minute Frederick would be safe. Margaret warned him to check the carriage carefully for Leonards once inside. Unfortunately, Frederick’s face was illuminated by the lamps by the station. A mean looking, roughly dressed fellow shoved past a surprised Margaret saying, ‘By your leave’ and then he was accosting Fred. Mr. Thornton inserted himself into the argument and moved his large frame between that of Frederick and his aggressor. The fellow – it was Leonards himself – tried to reach around Mr. Thornton in order to grab hold of Frederick and, being seriously inebriated, he tripped in the process of doing so. Leonards fell from the platform about three or four feet down onto the soft ground below and Margaret handed Fred his carpet bag, hurrying him onto the train. A brief handclasp and a shared glance were all the farewell the siblings could manage and then the train hissed and was off. Margaret warned him to check the carriage carefully for Leonards once inside. Unfortunately, Frederick’s face was illuminated by the lamps by the station. A mean looking, roughly dressed fellow shoved past a surprised Margaret saying, ‘By your leave’ and then he was accosting Fred. Mr. Thornton inserted himself into the argument and moved his large frame between that of Frederick and his aggressor. The fellow – it was Leonards himself – tried to reach around Mr. Thornton in order to grab hold of Frederick and, being seriously inebriated, he tripped in the process of doing so. Leonards fell from the platform about three or four feet down onto the soft ground below and Margaret handed Fred his carpet bag, hurrying him onto the train. A brief handclasp and a shared glance were all the farewell the siblings could manage and then the train hissed and was off. Margaret stood watching the train puff away from the station, still not entirely sure what had just occurred – it had happened so fast. She could honestly tell her father that she had seen Frederick enter the train carriage and that Leonards was most assuredly not on the train with Fred. Had Mr. Thornton, Magistrate and mil owner, truly fought on Frederick’s behalf? Margaret turned around and noticed Mr. Thornton standing a short way behind her and she walked over, desiring for her equanimity a closer proximity to the man who had so forcefully defended her family.

Mr. Thornton was concerned for Margaret with all that had recently occurred. ‘Are you well, Miss Hale?’ he murmured to her. She nodded and lowered her head but he saw the slight glimmer of unshed tears before her face was averted. In unspoken agreement, they two silently checked over the edge of the platform to assess Leonards’ condition. He was gone. There being nothing else to do, Mr. Thornton collected his horse from where it had been secured and he and Margaret strolled in companionable silence in the direction of town. Margaret noted the horse and recollected that he had been on his way to a destination prior to meeting Frederick and Margaret near the train station. She felt a need to express her regrets and possibly release him from his attending her on the way to her home.

‘Mr. Thornton, may I apologize for causing you to be late to your appointment? Your defense of my brother has prevented you attending to your business and I hope that we have not cost you too much time. I would not want to impose on you to accompany me what will take you far from your previous path.’

Mr. Thornton regarded her for a moment with an unreadable expression before answering, ‘It was my pleasure, Miss Hale, to be of service and would view myself as greatly remiss in my responsibility to your father if I were to abandon you on the road to find your own way.’ He hoped that placing his presence in the guise of an obligation might prevent Margaret from refusing his company as he most assuredly wished to remain in hers. The sight of Margaret in the light of the lamps, a golden glow shining on her beautiful countenance, almost made Mr. Thornton passionately declare his love for her right there on the station platform. He had recalled himself only at the last moment.
Margaret felt dissatisfied with his explanation, as he plainly thought of their walk as no more than a duty to her father and not as – what? What did she hope that he meant? I wonder if he is even now regretting his actions and promise of discretion, Margaret mused. As she contemplated the matter, Mr. Thornton began, ‘Miss Hale, you can certainly understand my curiosity and I would ask that once we have quitted the immediate environs of the station if you could enlighten me on further details of your brother’s trouble.’

They quietly strolled for some minutes, unspeaking, until the lamp light from the train station no longer lit the way and was merely a slight illumination at their backs. Margaret glanced around to reassure herself of their relative solitude and began to speak of what she remembered of her brother until he had left to become a sailor. She somberly related the details that she had read in Frederick’s letters and the newspaper clippings kept by her parents of the cruelty of his commanding officer and the subsequent death of one of the sailors due to this man’s heartlessness. Margaret then told her rapt listener of Fred’s own part in the mutiny and how he was trying to protect his fellow sailors but ‘the Admiralty does not see it that way and Frederick, were he to be identified, would be brought for court martial and hanged.’ Mr. Thornton registered the odd incongruity in the situation, where by attempting justice for one’s subordinates, a person would be considered as treasonous to one’s superiors. It struck him as a mill owner particularly strongly and he wondered at fate and how the Hale family’s had become interwoven, so to speak, with his own. While Mr. Thornton was lost in these thoughts, Margaret was finishing her tale and so he almost missed her mention of her confidence in Frederick’s exculpation. ‘And now Fred is on his way to London to ask of our family’s friend, Henry Lennox – he is a barrister – if there is any way in which to find and bring forth witnesses to prove Fred’s innocence. If that were to happen, then Papa would be extremely relieved and Fred could visit frequently or even return to live in England,’ she stated hopefully.

Mr. Thornton’s ears caught the remark about Henry Lennox and it gave him pause. Here was reference to the man again and, once more, he speculated on how close a friend of the Hale family this fellow was and what precisely Mr. Lennox’s connection to Margaret was. To Mr. Thornton, it seemed as if a gleaming door which had been opened in front of him, beckoning, was now slammed shut. He continued to converse with Margaret but the spirit was gone from his words and looks.

Margaret noticed Mr. Thornton’s apparent preoccupation – for how else was she to explain his enthusiastic participation in their discussion one moment and his closed face and unemotional replies the next moment otherwise? Her bewilderment increased to the point where she doubted his reception of her father’s invitation to attend Mrs. Hale’s funeral and on the back of confusion, came anger.

Chapter End Notes

A small bump in the road but it will be fixed up soon. Really.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mr. Thornton had indeed declined the invitation to attend Mrs. Hale’s funeral but instead sent his carriage for the Hale’s use. Margaret was rather upset, as she could not understand how, if one did not wish to honor the dead, their empty carriage would be able to do so adequately. To further enflame her ire, she thought over his defense of Frederick, his look of jealousy before he apprehended the true relationship of the siblings (which, at the time, had quite warmed Margaret) and then his proclamation that bringing her home safely to her father was merely in the line of dutiful friend. If she were being honest, her anger was at herself for being fooled by that man. His vacillation between kind and cold was too much for a person to comprehend – and too painful - so Margaret resolved not to speak with him unless out of necessity. The funeral was supremely difficult and Mr. Hale was hardly able to maintain any semblance of composure; Margaret was required to support him, sometimes literally, and she gently repeated all of the verses spoken by the pastor. Nicholas was there and Margaret nearly wept when she saw the bit of black crepe on his hat and the truly saddened look on his face. She could focus only on her father and the service, as Mr. Hale was borne down by his grief, as if he lacked the inner strength to withstand the despair. Dixon was sobbing heartily into her handkerchief when a man’s voice asked from behind her, ‘Pardon me, but could you tell me how Mr. Hale and Miss Hale are doing?’

Dixon looked round and it was Mr. Thornton. He had been standing there with his head down for the entire time but nobody appeared to have taken note of his attendance. ‘Oh, sir. They are doing as well as can be expected. Master is completely broken down and Miss Hale is endeavoring to bear up well for her father’s sake. She was terribly out of sorts last night but she’s a spot better today.’

Mr. Thornton could not restrain himself from asking, ‘Miss Hale had mentioned a Mr. Lennox. Is he also present?’

Dixon gave him a sharp look and replied, ‘Henry Lennox? No, certainly not – he is down in London. Miss Margaret’s cousin is married to his brother, so he is family to Mrs. Shaw, sister to my late Mistress. I shouldn’t mention such a thing but for a barrister – and one who is just beginning his career, to be sure – he positively thinks a lot of himself and Miss Margaret, well, I believe she put him in his place when we were yet in Helstone.’ Dixon looked more closely up at Mr. Thornton and stopped her speech. ‘Now, sir, I wouldn’t have you thinking I go around gossiping now. My discretion is full renowned.’ She nodded brusquely at him and moved away toward Margaret and her drooping father.

Mr. Thornton needed to remain still for an instant to enable his jealous mind to process what Dixon had inadvertently let slip – but not through gossip, of course, he thought sardonically. The entire procession was now shifting in the direction of the road, away from the grave and so he put his long legs to use. Margaret was struggling with the vexing task of graciously thanking those who had come to pay their last respects to her mother while managing to comfortably ensconce her father back in Mr. Thornton’s carriage. She was weary and in desperate need of solitude and the freedom to mourn with none to watch. Therefore, it was not completely remarkable that when Mr. Thornton suddenly seemed to materialize next to her and, in a low voice, offered his assistance with her father, she accepted his help. To Margaret’s dismay, however, Mr. Thornton not only tenderly settled Mr. Hale’s slight frame comfortably in the carriage but he placed himself directly next to his friend and gently patted the older man’s hand soothingly. It was a silent, significantly silent ride with Mr. Thornton berating himself soundly for his foolishness and
Margaret miserably wondering at yet another unusual behavior of Mr. Thornton’s. After seeing the guilt wracked and nearly insensate Mr. Hale to his study, Mr. Thornton requested speech with Margaret. She complied but it was evident, particularly to a discerning and caring eye, that she was greatly fatigued and worn down.

‘Miss Hale before anything else, I must express profound apologies for my perplexing actions of yesterday and would be very appreciative of the opportunity to speak with you when you are ready. This is, certainly, not an appropriate time but I plan to check on your father daily. He seems understandably distraught but, if necessary, I would call Dr. Donaldson to administer a sedative. Until later then.’ He lightly clasped her hand and saw himself out of their home, leaving Margaret with her exhaustion and her disorderly emotions.

Dixon had given Margaret one of her powders to ensure the young miss slept and when Margaret awakened, she stretched to her fullest extent to unknot her muscles and to release tensions. It was then that her thoughts turned to the subject of so many of her contemplations of late: Mr. Thornton. He had apologized for his actions – but which ones? What did he think that he had done? She muddled through reason after reason but could no more comprehend the man after so much reflection than she could before.

After luncheon, Dixon announced a caller and brought in the day’s post. Margaret sifted through the letters and found one from Frederick, which she eagerly opened and began to read. Apparently, Henry Lennox was out of town and would not return to London until the following Tuesday. Fred did not wish to remain longer in the country, particularly after their scare at the train station, and had likely already sailed for Cadiz. Her sense of relief at her brother’s being away from England mingled with deep disappointment. She did so wish to see him proclaimed innocent but it was not yet to be. The visitor was Mr. Thornton. Margaret was thankful for his presence – he would distract her father from his morbid thoughts. Mr. Thornton walked straight to Mr. Hale and took his hands firmly between his own, showing by his look more compassion and concern than he could put into words. The two men opened a discussion, on what topic Margaret knew not, as she was occupied with keeping her eyes on her sewing and her attention anywhere but on the distracting man sitting with her father. It was then that Dixon entered and requested Margaret to come with her.

‘There’s a caller, miss, and he asked for you specifically. He’s a police inspector.’ Margaret paled and had reach out her hand to steady herself on the wall.

‘Dixon, please tell him that I will be there momentarily. I will try to have Papa go upstairs to rest.’ At the servant’s nod, Margaret returned to the study and came to her father’s side. She knew that enlisting Mr. Thornton’s help would be invaluable in this instance, so she tried to catch his eye while she spoke to her father.

‘Papa, I think that you should rest now. It has been a long, taxing day thus far and I am concerned for your well-being. Let me bring you up to your bedroom and you can relax. Dixon had forced some of her powders on me earlier, so it is your chance to take her remedies.’ Margaret infused as much humor and gladness into her voice as she felt would garner Mr. Hale’s attention. Mr. Thornton seemed to comprehend her ruse and added his weight to the plan. It was but a few minutes work to convince Mr. Hale and he tiredly acquiesced to their combined attack. Margaret quickly collected the needed powders from Dixon and once her father was calm, she descended to the study, where she found the police-inspector and Mr. Thornton in serious discussion. The men both looked up as she entered the room and Margaret noticed Mr. Thornton aim a very slight smile in her direction before turning back to the detective. He had come to speak with her, as she had been identified as a possible witness to a scuffle which may have led to a man’s death but since Mr. Thornton had requested a chance to investigate the matter first, the police-inspector asked Margaret’s pardon for interrupting her day. He tipped his hat and was shown out. Margaret sat
down heavily and placed her hands over her face. Mr. Thornton came over and sat next to her. ‘Bearing in mind all that you have dealt with in these last few days, I did not wish any further imposition on you. As Magistrate, I have certain authorities in the matter of investigations and given that I was witness to the entire incident, you have nothing to fear for your brother.’

This kindness from Mr. Thornton was simply too much and Margaret began to weep uncontrollably. She habitually hid her grieving from her father to cheer him but in the face of this puzzling man and his generous action on her behalf, she could not stop the flow of tears. Mr. Thornton handed her his large handkerchief and waited patiently as she released her sorrow. After not so many minutes, Margaret was master enough of herself to be mortified at her display of weakness. She glanced up at Mr. Thornton, expecting to see disdain of her feminine frailty but instead there was only concern and warmth. He gently spoke, ‘I am afraid my coldness to you yesterday was inexcusable and I can only ask your forgiveness for what occurred due to my,’ and here Mr. Thornton took a deep breath, ‘jealousy.’

Chapter End Notes

Touch of cliff-hanging here (ok, not really but kind of) but it's 'all good'.
Jealousy? Margaret’s shock was unable to be hidden. Of whom was the indomitable Mr. Thornton jealous? Her curiosity overcame her reticence and she could not help but ask, ‘I did not think that you would be envious of many men, Mr. Thornton.’

‘I am not by nature jealous, Miss Hale. However, of late I have found that even my mill, which has for countless years been the only focus of my energies and thoughts in order to grow business to ever greater heights, has not been able to hold my interest to the same extent. Although in truth I am occupied the majority of my day in oversight and concerns of Marlborough Mills, my enthusiasm has waned due to my growing attachment to your family.’ Here Mr. Thornton stopped but from his tone and aspect, Margaret understood there to be more to the matter than spoken. She blushed at the implications of his words, that possibly he might have a regard for her and she did sincerely hope that it were true. Mr. Thornton noted the heightened color on her previously pale cheeks and yearned to know her mind at this moment. It was astounding to John Thornton, mill owner, employer of hundreds, a man who pulled himself out of poverty by dint of his hard work and perseverance, that he was now afraid – a son of Mrs. Thornton’s, afraid! – to speak the utterance that had his entire heart and being riding upon it. But Margaret was sitting so calmly, watching him with her soft grey eyes, evidently waiting for him to communicate further and so he whispered, ‘Margaret.’

At the ardor imbued into her murmured name, she flushed a brighter red and hid her face again in her hands, finally completely understanding Mr. Thornton’s intentions. It was exciting but she was nevertheless unsettled and at a loss for how to answer such a statement, so Margaret quietly asked, ‘Yes, Mr. Thornton?’

‘Will you allow me to protect you and comfort you as one who loves you most passionately? You have been the iron prop for your family but I am aware from my own experience that even the staunchest person wearies and requires respite. Can we support each other as partners?’ Mr. Thornton’s voice was gaining strength as he spoke and the hopeful expression on his face was so endearing, so unusually open that Margaret could not have said him nay even had she wished to.

‘To understand, Mr. Thornton, are you asking me to marry you?’ Margaret inquired rather shyly.

Mr. Thornton gave one of his brilliant smiles and replied with habitual brevity, ‘I am.’

‘Then I accept your offer with not just pleasure but also with my whole heart,’ came the hesitant but clear reply. Margaret found herself firmly but lovingly surrounded by his arms and she laid her head upon his shoulder, wondering at this unfamiliar and delightful feeling of peace and shelter. After some minutes spent soundlessly enjoying their new understanding, Margaret asked the question which had been troubling her.

‘I must know – of whom were you jealous? Was it Fred, prior to your making his acquaintance?’

‘No, Margaret, I am ashamed to admit to such imaginary nonsense but it was your repeated mentions of Henry Lennox. There was an obvious intimacy between him and your family, so I
assumed wrongly that he was a suitor or, worse, held your affections.’

Margaret stiffened ever so slightly at how accurately Mr. Thornton (John, she thought bashfully) had comprehended Henry Lennox’s true motives but some correction was necessary. ‘You need not fear – he was never more than a friend to me. Since his brother Captain Lennox married my cousin, Edith, we were thrown together much in company but his desire to please and purportedly agree with all that one said, while not admitting to his own opinions, was uncomfortable and distasteful to me. It is difficult to admit that he came to Helstone and declared himself but I could not countenance such an unnerving union. How can you profess to have a regard for someone whose true mind and thoughts they will not reveal?’

Mr. Thornton was so profoundly affected by this statement that he held his beloved yet closer and took a deep, cleansing breath. This was the truth and it was fully liberating for him to know that neither he nor Margaret had formed any previous attachments - no former love about whom to repine and regret. Here was his Eden in the midst of so much trouble; the financial repercussions of the strike had been quite significant for Marlborough Mill and such happiness was not a commonplace occurrence, therefore John Thornton was going to grasp it firmly and not allow his joy to steal away. Margaret could feel him relax, enjoyed when he tightened his arms for a more secure hold. She knew that speaking of emotions was not easy for her betrothed; however, Margaret sought to know his feelings as he would surely value hers. She began asking questions which he would undoubtedly answer and gradually moved to those that he might be more diffident in his reply. Eventually, Mr. Thornton expressed his thoughts and, though not fluently, it was heartfelt.

The two sat engrossed in their private conversation, in satisfying closeness, having forgotten for the time being that there was anything outside of their secluded haven.
Chapter 25

Mr. Hale found the new couple still cozily ensconced on the settee, lost to all but each other. The sound of a throat clearing caused Margaret and Mr. Thornton to become conscious of another occupant in the study. Margaret stood immediately and hurried to her father’s side, a glad smile on her face. She imparted their joyous communication succinctly: ‘Papa, Mr. Thornton and I are to be married.’

If Margaret had imagined her father to be overwhelmed by the momentous news, then she must have been sorely disappointed in his reaction for Mr. Hale composedly but sorrowfully rose from his desk, kissed his daughter on her forehead and finally clasped his future son on the shoulder. ‘I am truly happy for you, Margaret, as would your mother have been. If you were concerned as to my permission and blessing, John, you most assuredly have it. I have thought of you as a son for some time now but you will soon become that in truth.’ A small smile appeared for an instant on Mr. Hale’s face but it disappeared almost as soon as it had come. His sigh sounded as if it emanated from the deepest depths of the older man’s being.

‘Margaret, your poor mother - my poor Maria - who was so recently laid to her final rest, would have arranged the details of your wedding and the breakfast with Mrs. Thornton. I cannot bear to think on – it is yet too painful. . . ’ Mr. Hale stopped speaking and sat down again behind the desk, his strength apparently diminished and his countenance pallid. Margaret looked in alarm at Mr. Thornton, who motioned for her to accompany him into the hall. He proposed that when Mrs. Thornton was to hear of their engagement she would likely invite Margaret to tea and at the time that Margaret was to be with Mrs. Thornton, he, John, would call on Mr. Hale for whatever discussion his new father would fancy. Margaret considered the plan put forth and agreed to visit with her future mother while Mr. Thornton was to provide companionship to the newly widowed man.

As foreseen, Mrs. Thornton, upon receipt of her son’s glad tidings, sent a note to Margaret, requesting her to call the next day for tea. Although unsure of her reception at the spotless house nearby to Marlborough Mill, Margaret was unquestionably sure that if Mrs. Thornton had something – good or bad – to say, she would voice her opinion most candidly. At the very least, thought Margaret, one has an honest idea of Mrs. Thornton’s views, contrasting the forthright Northern woman with Mrs. Hale’s sister, Aunt Shaw and those of London society who preferred to hide their true opinions behind pretty words and prevarications. Margaret rather respected Mrs. Thornton’s blunt and brusque manner and thought more on the woman behind the speech. She remembered her father mentioning that an individual’s character was formed and shaped by the experiences in their life. As no two people can possibly have precisely the same happenings occur, then no two personages could be exactly similar. Mr. Thornton and Mr. Hale had both spoken of the hardships endured by the Thornton family after Mrs. Thornton’s late husband died at his own hand – the poverty and lack were not obvious to the eye but for one who understood, the after-effects were visible. Margaret had noted when last she was in the Thornton’s home the attention to upkeep of all objects within their domain, in order that nothing should be wasted nor unnecessarily lost. She had heard the whisperings of servants discussing the Thornton’s celebrated economy and Margaret realized that Mrs. Thornton must contain within herself a font of strength which was not often seen. Assuredly, and so as not to feel overcome, Margaret immediately reflected on her own actions and that she had was engineered in its entirety the Hale’s removal to Milton. She had organized the closing of Helstone, the details of their interim habitation and the assignment of rooms and living spaces in their new house in Crampton. No, Margaret declared in her mind, she was of also firm character and would likely – if all went well and misunderstandings were avoided – enjoy befriending Mrs. Thornton.
Margaret duly presented herself at the appointed time and determined to increase herself in Mrs. Thornton’s estimation. She was welcomed and shown into the austere, white-clad drawing room. In rustled Mrs. Thornton shortly and she greeted Margaret in a voice which, if it was not cold, was not precisely warm either. She had given a promise to Mrs. Hale to watch out for Margaret and provide motherly advice if needed; thus, Mrs. Thornton would use this occasion to more fully take the measure of the young lady who had captured her son’s heart. From the few occasions when they two had been in company together, Mrs. Thornton had not spoken overly much with the young Miss Hale but had noticed the girl’s spirit. Perhaps this would be less unpleasant than anticipated.

‘Miss Hale, may I offer my congratulations? John has informed me of your engagement.’ Mrs. Thornton watched Margaret closely for her reaction, which was a straightening of her back and a small smile upon her countenance. There was no false modesty or any of the insipid comments so frequently heard passing the lips of young ladies, particularly those of the South, but instead Margaret emanated a quiet pride and happiness. Mrs. Thornton was almost pleased but, of course, she could not admit to such an emotion.

‘I thank you, Mrs. Thornton. How is Miss Thornton’s health?’ Margaret had resolved to be succinct in the required social greetings so that they might faster approach truly important concerns. Mrs. Thornton gave the impression of a raised eyebrow while maintaining a motionless façade.

‘Fanny is well. Let us discuss the purpose of my invitation today. John did not inform me of the length of your intended engagement period which will impact many preparatory matters. With your mother now gone, you will assume her function in the planning and execution of your wedding.’ Mrs. Thornton sat very regally on the settee facing the windows, opposite the chair in which Margaret sat. She wished to immediately give her future daughter a firm understanding of the responsibilities expected from a wife of John Thornton. Let none say that Hannah Thornton permitted a lack of attentiveness or thoroughness. ‘Please join me on a tour of our home, since it will soon be your residence as well and after we can take tea and discuss your plans for the wedding.’

Wishing to feel as bold as she appeared, Margaret lifted her chin and smiled, ‘Certainly, Mrs. Thornton. Let us commence.’
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait. Here you go and we're rapidly approaching the end.

She had seen the different floors and their respective rooms and now Margaret was seated again in the main drawing room, partaking of tea with Mrs. Thornton and fielding questions about her opinion on this room or that piece of furniture. There were far too many particulars for Margaret to assimilate in one afternoon and, as she wished for candor from her future mother, so she should too be open.

‘Mrs. Thornton, your consideration today is much appreciated. However, I would not like to make any changes to your house – the house in which you and Mr. Thornton have been living for a significant length of time – in the foreseeable future. My own mother has recently passed away and was only just buried; thus, I do not feel prepared to embark on such endeavors. Would you be willing to remain at the helm, so to speak, for quite a while longer?’ Mrs. Thornton saw that Margaret was in earnest and she found the younger woman’s frankness refreshing and contrasting strongly with the evasion and veiled words one usually expected of Southern ladies. Mrs. Thornton heartily approved of Margaret’s speech and replied in kind.

‘I would be glad to continue as I have been for these many years, Miss Hale. Your departed mother had called me to visit her – you knew, I assume? She wanted to ensure that you had someone to whom you could turn, as to a mother. She also charged me with watching over you and treating you as I would a daughter. It appears that her wishes have come to fruition and I pledge that if you have any questions or troubles that you need answered, I will attempt to provide what support I can.’ Being a person of few words, this was rather a prolonged and demonstrative discourse for Mrs. Thornton but many a more taciturn individual has been inspired to lengthy dialogue by a topic dear to them.

Margaret felt the approval of Mrs. Thornton’s words and was comforted by the older woman’s acceptance. She resolved to spend more time in Mrs. Thornton’s company in the coming weeks, to more easily develop an amicable relationship with her. ‘Would you mind, Mrs. Thornton, if I were to call on you more frequently? Although I have been running our house due to my mother’s illness, it is not of the same size as your own and your familiarity with the routine and flow of the household would be highly instructional. Also,’ and here Margaret faltered slightly, ‘I might enjoy the company.’

Mrs. Thornton had, of necessity, hardened herself to any of what she called the ‘softer’ emotions but Margaret’s plea touched something buried deep inside of her, covered over in ice for many years, and began, unbeknownst to Mrs. Thornton, a slow but gradual thaw. ‘Certainly, Miss Hale. You are welcome to visit. Send around a note to give a few hours’ notice and I will be prepared.’

She escorted Margaret to the door and bade her farewell, watching Margaret walk away and unexplainably feeling a degree of melancholy in the sight. Mrs. Thornton straightened herself to full height and shook her head to dispel the sentiment. John would return shortly and dinner must be overseen. Perhaps they three would have a more harmonious existence than Hannah Thornton had believed possible.
John Thornton had called upon Mr. Hale and they had sat in the study, unspeaking for quite a length of time. Mr. Thornton had walked in and found the former pastor at his desk with his head down, resting on his arms. Mr. Hale had looked up and his future son walked over, knelt in front of the older, grieving man and held his hands and his gaze, silent. The tall mill owner tried to convey wordlessly his sympathy and remorse for Mr. Hale’s loss – for he did not feel confident that he might speak words that could soothe such pain - and thus they remained for a long while. Mr. Hale then began to talk and spoke of what was deep in his heart, that which he kept hidden and secretive from all. He told of his doubts and his guilt; he voiced those thoughts expressed to none other. All humankind needs a connection with one other person on a profound level and it is often difficult in this life to uncover this individual. Their time of shared quietude brought the two men closer than before and slowly Mr. Hale became more peaceful again, eager to reconnect with John and exchange ideas.

Mr. Hale came into the sitting room one day with a letter in his hands. ‘Margaret, Mr. Bell is to visit. His letter says that he should arrive on the 15th, which is two days hence. I must alert Dixon to prepare his favorites.’ And off he went to find the servant.

Margaret stopped her embroidering during her father’s speech and apprehended the importance that he placed on this Mr. Bell, who had been the groomsman at her parents’ wedding. She got up and checked that the room in which Mr. Bell would sleep was properly ready and pleasant enough for an inhabitant, no matter how temporary. Margaret had, after Mrs. Hale’s passing, moved into her mother’s room and so Margaret’s former bedroom was available for use by a guest. The irony of Mr. Bell’s arrival was not lost on Margaret – she and her father had been quite aflutter with activity and preparations for their guest’s appearance but Mr. Bell’s greatest desire once arrived was idleness and indolence for, as he said, ‘I fully intend to relax and refresh myself on my holiday.’ Margaret was unsure to what extent an Oxford fellow exerted himself in the course of his duties but concluded that it was a pointless conjecture. Mr. Bell expressed that it was no surprise that Margaret had so immediately taken up a place of such importance in his regard, particularly as she was so entirely after his own heart.

The three - Mr. Bell, Mr. Hale and his daughter - were taking luncheon in the dining room engaged in comfortable conversation. Mr. Bell had charmed Dixon completely after pronouncing that he would need to remove her from the Hale’s household and employ her as his personal cook, since he had never eaten sumptuous food of this order. Dixon had colored and, to keep her dignity intact, drew herself up, sniffed and remarked that she had no plans of leaving the Master or Miss Hale but the tiny smile on her lips belied the offended sentiment conveyed.

Mr. Bell suddenly said, ‘Richard, you know that I have no heirs of my own as I have remained and plan to remain a staunch bachelor for all of my days. I plan on speaking with my solicitor on my return to Oxford and he will draw up the paperwork so that I can settle all of my property on the little Pearl upon my passing. Margaret, are you aware that I am the landlord for multiple properties in Milton, including Marlborough Mill? I had wanted to speak with my tenant, Mr. Thornton, while I was in his locale since his lawyer had contacted me to inform that his business has been steadily growing weaker since the strike and he may have to give up the lease.’

Margaret gasped, ‘Oh poor John! Mr. Bell, is there nothing that you could do to aid him?’

Mr. Bell’s bushy eyebrows were hovering around the height where his hair line had once resided. ‘So it is John, is it? I may assume that you are well acquainted with the fellow in question.’

A pretty blush rose on Margaret’s face and she replied succinctly, ‘We are recently betrothed.’
Mr. Bell smiled broadly and stated, ‘Well, he is a fine, hard-working individual and intelligent. You couldn’t do better down in London with one of those fancy boys who haven’t an original thought in their heads and you have become quite the liberal minded person during your sojourn in this Northern town.’

To this Margaret playfully retorted, ‘Papa, do not believe him. I am merely standing up for the progress of commerce. Mr. Bell would have us still trading in pelts and skins.’

Mr. Thornton was scheduled to visit soon and Mr. Bell was set to engage his tenant in verbal battle, as to the relative merits of Milton and its manufacturers versus Oxford and the South. Upon his arrival, Mr. Hale and Margaret retired, at Mr. Bell’s request, in the front sitting room and Mr. Bell and Mr. Thornton were to liaise in the study downstairs. Thinking upon Mr. Bell’s casually made comments, Margaret began to understand John’s inconsistent attendance at their home and then she started to worry for him. The mill had been the focus of his energies and existence for many, many years and now that was threatened. Possibly it was a great burden and trust to place on another person but Margaret felt that her reliance on Mr. Bell’s abilities was justified and wholly necessary, for who else would help Mr. Thornton?
Mr. Bell had finished his visit and returned to Oxford, extracting a promise from Margaret to drag her father down to his former haunts. Margaret had laughed and assented, provided Mr. Bell disclosed to her the precise details of his agreement with Mr. Thornton which he did grudgingly.

‘You are quite the irresistible force, my dear, are you not?’ Mr. Bell gazed with clear affection on the daughter of his dearest friend and made the difficult choice to not lengthen his vacation yet again. He would merely attempt to weave the loose threads of others’ lives from afar and patiently await their updates, anticipating a timely invitation to Margaret and John’s nuptials.

The requisite minimum six month mourning period had been terribly long for both Mr. Thornton and Margaret, which was as well since both parties had been exceedingly busy – the one resurrecting his mill, the other caring for an inexplicably, gradually weakening Mr. Hale and preparing for the forthcoming change to their lives. Mr. Thornton had called upon the Hales as often as possible, given his workload and schedule, and possibly even more often than he could afford. But if anyone noticed his slight preoccupation with the suburb of Crampton, there were none who would dare make mention.

Nicholas Higgins had been, at Margaret’s instigation, offered a supervisory position within Marlborough Mill and he, along with Mr. Thornton, had instituted several rather avant-garde reforms in the mill. The workers had the best working conditions of any mill in the surrounding area due to these reforms and, if it was not a perfect solution, at the very least those laboring in Mr. Thornton’s mill were aware of the care and money invested by the master in their well-being. The other mill owners remained willfully ignorant of the direct correlation between cheerful and healthy hands and increased productivity. Mr. Bell not only received regular payments from Mr. Thornton on his generous loan given with quite favorable terms and at such a critical time for the mill – which, to his credit, Mr. Bell waved aside as merely watching out for his own interests – but also was fully recompensed for his outlay within one year. Marlborough Mill had augmented its output to the extent that even Mrs. Thornton’s vaunted economy was threatened by a glut of funds and this was well and good, as she together with Margaret were apparently planning the most unassuming and yet complex wedding of memory. Margaret had wished for solely family and intimate friends but with the current state of business and Mr. Thornton’s newly found amity with the mill workers, she and her future mother had endeavored to somehow provide a pleasant experience for those who labored in Mr. Thornton’s mill.

As Margaret herself had once commented, she wished for nothing more than an unpretentious wedding with few attendees. With regards to the ceremony, she would have her desire fulfilled and Mrs. Thornton was, thankfully, a proponent of simplicity in attire. Both Margaret and Mrs. Thornton found, to their great wonder, that they shared many comparable opinions and tastes. There would always be that which was dissimilar but on the essentials, they tended toward accord and Mr. Thornton was delighted in the harmony between the two women. However, he did not have ample time to spend with his betrothed and Margaret felt his absence deeply. Contented as she was with her situation, the measured decline of her father’s health was too much reminiscent of Mrs. Hale and her illness and the burden of emotionally supporting Mr. Hale as he sank slowly was overwhelming at times. Margaret turned to Mrs. Thornton for advice but the older woman was not prepared to address the depression that was afflicting Mr. Hale; therefore, Margaret struggled on as best she could. She was grateful for the few evenings that Mr. Thornton found himself in Crampton, the two of them seated happily on the couch and she could speak out her worries and concerns. Mr. Thornton would remain silent and then present a solution or potential clarification to improve the circumstances. It was a wonderful foreshadowing of their marital life and partnership but Margaret did hope that her beloved would allocate a greater portion of his
hours to domestic felicity. She felt hesitant to suggest such a thing, as she did not wish to lay another weight upon his already busy schedule, but Mr. Thornton saw her sadness. He tried to cheer Margaret by telling her that he had spent the last six months intensively organizing and arranging Marlborough Mill to run smoothly when he would cease spending entire days in his office.

‘My plan is to step back and allow the mill to operate with the structure Nicholas Higgins and I have put into place. I wish to have an inordinate amount of time to spend with my new bride.’ John Thornton turned to Margaret as he spoke these words and was well rewarded with a smile and a blush.

Mr. Bell renewed his idea of Mr. Hale travelling to Oxford and Margaret mentioned the proposal again to her father. He sent a letter to Mr. Bell, replying that once Margaret and John were married, he would join his friend as the Hale’s home would be lonely and silent. No, Mr. Hale explained, he would not permanently remove to Oxford and leave his deceased wife to remain forever in Milton when she and had not wished to live in Milton from the beginning and now could not leave. Accordingly, plans were made for Mr. Hale to visit Mr. Bell and Dixon was to journey to her sister’s home for a long anticipated holiday. Margaret’s belongings were being brought incrementally over to the Thornton’s home, in preparation for the impending nuptials which were to occur in three days and the Thornton home had been given a complete going over by the staff with a new menu particularly suited to John and Margaret’s favorite dishes. All was in readiness for the upcoming celebration and its expected joyousness.
‘Congratulations!!’ came the loud cry from the waiting crowd outside of the church, as the newly married Mr. and Mrs. Thornton exited the building. Margaret felt the overwhelming strength of their well wishes and waved happily to each; John was strutting as if he were a pea-cock and all present were astonished at the size and duration of his smiles.

Hannah Thornton watched the pair beginning their new life and was stunned to momentarily feel sorrow for her late husband’s absence, despite her disgust at his weakness and selfishness in taking his life while condemning Hannah, John and Fanny to their own death. That the remaining Thornton family continued alive and hearty to be in attendance at this momentous occasion was testament to Hannah’s great strength and John’s willingness to bear much responsibility, even at a young age.

John and Margaret were expected to spend the next week alone in the Thornton’s home and Mrs. Thornton was to stay with Fanny and Mr. Watson for the duration, after which she was to return home. Hannah Thornton wondered silently within herself how soon Margaret would begin to make her mark as Mrs. Thornton, both within their home and in Milton society. There was no doubt of her new daughter’s courage and determination; Hannah believed that many would be taken aback by Margaret’s outspoken character but would eventually become accustomed to the younger woman’s honesty and persuasiveness.

Mr. Hale had been honored and saddened to walk his daughter – his only child whom he could see wedded – into the church. His friend, Mr. Bell, was in attendance ostensibly to watch his little pearl enter the married state but, in truth, his presence had more to do with escorting Mr. Hale to the train station and then to Oxford. It would not do for the former parson to remain in solitude, particularly as Margaret had written to Mr. Bell very specifically to mention her father’s ailing spirits and failing health. He was overcome by guilt, feeling that he had brought about the death of his beloved Maria, and the lone remedy suggested was Mr. Hale’s removal from the area directly following the wedding, to give him no opportunity to reminisce and become further depressed.

Thus, the newly married couple found themselves quietly ensconced within their home and both hoped that their idyll would be unmarred by trouble or anxiety. They two had been acquainted for some time now but the quiet, shared intimacy of marriage and their short-lived (but pleasant) seclusion forwarded their awareness of the other’s enjoyments and wishes. Both were agreeably surprised by their findings and, to maintain their current happiness and understanding, committed to that most basic of all necessities within a strong marriage – frank and open speech.

Mr. Hale and Mr. Bell traveled southward and spoke amiably but carefully of times past and shared remembrances of their youth. The grieving widower was brought to such plays and entertainments as his bosom friend thought most efficacious in dispelling gloom and he was able, for the first in a very long time, to fluently and regularly converse with another highly learned individual with whom he could philosophize. This regimen was effective to some degree but Mr. Hale’s countenance remained pallid and his energy was greatly diminished from just one year before.

Mrs. Thornton took up temporary residence with Fanny and her husband and thought of John’s future children. She had never truly given significant time to ponder such, as it had been assumed within the Thornton house that Fanny would be the person to provide offspring and that John would remain married to his ambition, but now that he was indeed starting upon the life of a husband, there might be the possibility of children residing in their home. Hannah resolved to work together with Margaret to ensure the happiness of all parties – she would not see John feel
torn between loyalty to wife and mother.

The end of Mr. Hale’s sojourn in Oxford was looming and Mr. Bell craftily approached his friend to extend the stay.

‘Not, of course, that you are to remove here, Richard. However, all who encounter you remark upon the improvement in your spirits and disposition since your arrival in this sleepy town.’ Mr. Hale therefore sent a loving missive to Margaret and his new son, extolling their similarities and compatibility, and mentioning that he may not leave Oxford quite yet due to its ‘calming and soothing qualities that act as a balm to my ruffled soul.’ He wrote of his love for Margaret and his affection for John and that they should always be assured of such.

Both of the elderly gentlemen were contemplative that evening and rather less talkative than had been their wont. Before retiring, Mr. Hale commented in a tremulous voice, ‘Bell, you have been a true and loyal friend these many years. If something were to happen to me, will you take Margaret as your own child? My mind is vastly relieved by her marrying John and I know that she will have a home and family to reside with her but you must act as her father, if she were to request advice or aid. Maria has been waiting for me to rejoin her and I find that I am loath to delay much longer.’

Mr. Bell promised all that he could and gave what reassurance he could that Margaret was to be his legal heir, regardless of ‘which of us old men outlives the other. After all, you slender fellows tend to survive beyond that of us stout men.’

Both men bade the other good night and retired to their own rooms and thoughts. When the morning light had awakened the town, Mr. Bell sought his friend to discover his whereabouts. Upon entering Mr. Hale’s bed chamber, the distinct aura of eternal stillness was palpable. Mr. Bell became alarmed and placed his shaking hands upon the brow of the apparently sleeping form - the skin was cold and there was neither movement nor the breath of life. Mr. Hale had, during the past night, released his tortured soul from its earthly home so that his essence might once again be united with his beloved Maria.
John and Margaret were thankful for their brief respite from their usual duties but were equally pleased to return to their respective occupations. They established a routine for their day which, of course, included Mr. Thornton taking lunch with his wife and mother. Margaret fully understood that her husband was required to spend long hours at the mill, ensuring its smooth running and working toward its future success; however, when the hour became too late and she realized that John had, most likely, become too consumed by his books and numbers to remember the time, the new Mrs. Thornton brought herself and some small refreshment to the mill office as a reminder of his existence outside of business. The smile with which she was greeted was precious in Margaret’s eyes and she thought of still more ways to encourage the re-appearance of such an expression.

Margaret had not slept well the previous night, as she was overwhelmed by thoughts of Mr. Hale and the relatively short period that they had been together as a family. She reminisced over her blissful childhood when their family of four was permitted to lay claim to every one of its members. The removal from London to Helstone and its subsequent series of upheavals which had concluded in Margaret and her parents making their residence in Milton were all taken out and examined minutely. Had there been opportunities for Margaret to bring greater joy or at least comfort to her father? He had permitted his only daughter to plan and execute the family’s removal to Milton and perform all of the work of establishing their new household but Margaret could not, upon reflection, assign blame for the excessive burden placed upon her. She had, at that time, recognized her father’s distress due to his agonizing decision and consequent withdrawal from necessary choices. After much introspection and many hours of lost slumber, Margaret completed her examination and found that, on the whole, she had acquitted herself well and without complaint. It is impossible for one, under close scrutiny, to say that they acted precisely as they ought and could forever be finding instances of their own neglect, but a general view of one’s actions, taken as a whole, would tend to reveal a greater picture of correctness of purpose and proceedings. Satisfied with her thoughts, Margaret at long last was able to claim some rest, enough to sustain her for the coming day.

The day was progressing as a Tuesday should and John had returned for an abbreviated meal (followed by a refreshing but short period of quiet and affectionate spousal interaction). As the afternoon wore on, wheels were heard stopping in front of the Thornton home, in contrast to the morning to night flow of wagons that passed the house and did not cease their noise until they abutted their destination, Marlborough Mills. Margaret was examining the household accounts with Hannah and took no notice of yet another wagon to pass through the yard. Shortly, there came a knocking on the front door and the maid came in announce a man to see Mrs. Thornton. Neither woman was expecting a caller but Margaret asked the maid to please show him up, regardless. When Mr. Bell’s somber face appeared behind the maid, Margaret knew in her heart that it could mean but one thing.

‘Papa!’ cried she, unable make further sounds. Hannah Thornton looked at her daughter’s palpitant countenance and gently guided her to the couch, sitting in close proximity to comfort the grieving younger woman. She sent a servant to fetch John and invited Mr. Bell to sit, inquiring whether he would like any sustenance and offering him hospitality for the duration of his stay in Milton.

Mr. Bell accepted gratefully and then addressed Margaret, ‘My dear! You have already, I see, ascertained my goal in travelling this long journey from Oxford. I wish you to know that your
father could think of naught else but you prior to his departure from this mortal coil. He bid me to treat you as my own – which I have done for some while now. Ah, John, I would greet you properly but this might not be the time for effusive welcomes.’

Mr. Thornton hurried to Margaret and knelt in front of her, allowing her to lean her head upon his shoulder, while tenderly enveloping her in a soothing embrace. She had shed no tears but, as those present were those who knew her best, they could see the strain on her visage and the sadness which threatened to overwhelm her.

She quietly murmured, ‘I should be wholly insensible if not for you and Mother’s support. You are now my entire family.’ John did not speak; he merely tightened his arms slightly about her. ‘I wish to attend my father’s funeral,’ Margaret further whispered from upon her husband’s shoulder.

John asked, ‘You attended your father at Mrs. Hale’s, did you not?’ At Margaret’s slight nod, he replied, ‘Then we will travel to Oxford, along with Mr. Bell.’ He moved to sit next to his wife and secured her again within his arms and announced, ‘Mr. Bell, Margaret and I shall journey to Oxford for Mr. Hale’s interment. I must leave now to make arrangements with my foreman for my impending absence.’

After excusing himself, Mr. Thornton left for the mill and Hannah came to sit closer to her daughter, placing her hand atop that of Margaret’s for support. Between the two women, preparations were made for the couple’s imminent departure and Mr. Bell was graciously invited to remain overnight in the Thornton’s home before accompanying John and Margaret to Oxford the following day.

The funeral was, to Margaret’s relief and dismay, sparsely attended. The Thorntons returned to Mr. Bell’s rooms for a time before they were to return to Milton. During that short interlude, Mr. Bell made both Margaret and John aware of the provisions of his, Mr. Bell’s, will – to wit, that Margaret would be his sole heir and beneficiary. He promised to travel northward for a more pleasant visit in the not too distant future and to ‘keep an eye on the scallywag that was supposed to see to his Margaret’s happiness’. As this was stated with a wink, John took no offense, at least not ostensibly.

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Upon their arrival back in Milton, life seemed to rise up and encompass both John and Margaret. They were kept busy enough with their respective duties that several months had passed before either realized the dearth of correspondence from Mr. Bell. A note reached them, stating his intention of arriving later in the week for the pledged visit. However, the stated time passed with no appearance of their guest. Margaret sent a hastily penned letter to Mr. Bell, inquiring if all was well. The communication which came in response was from Mr. Bell’s long time servant, stating that Mr. Bell had an attack of apoplexy and was not well. He was, in fact, so declined that he was not likely to be living by the time Margaret received the note.

This was yet another blow within a year containing such an excess of sorrow and it was particularly acute, as both John and Margaret had greatly wished to request Mr. Bell’s assistance in a rather personal matter. They had wanted to ask him to perform the service which he had done so long ago, for Mr. and Mrs. Hale, upon the occasion of Margaret’s birth.

Now he would be unable to execute the office of g-dfather to the hoped for arrival of a new Thornton in around six months. The thought of Margaret’s newfound wealth was not comfort enough to assuage the grief produced by Mr. Bell’s passing.
Next chapter will be the epilogue. Thanks to everyone for reading and patiently staying with me through this story!!
Chapter 30

John and Margaret Thornton’s child duly made his way into world in the usual manner and impressed all about with his healthy lungs. Fanny was quite the doting aunt and young Jack appeared to greatly appreciate the attention. John Richard Thornton rapidly became too large for the painstakingly sewn infant attire and required more manly outfitting to the dismay and pleasure of both his parents and his grandmother, who was delighted to indulge the young master’s every wish. When Jack had attained the respected age of six months, he was presented with a wrapped gift from his aunt and her husband but, much to his chagrin, when he attempted valiantly to remove the wrap on said object, his hands were removed from the present. This bundle was then opened by Fanny and carefully lifted so that all might see Jack’s new cousin, Hannah Frances Watson. The tiny girl’s mother admitted to admiring the handsome Jack so much that she desired a matching companion.

Margaret and John permitted their young whelp to be overseen quite often by his highly gratified grandmother, as they dealt with myriad details pertaining to the mill, monies loaned and legacies. At Mr. Bell’s death, Margaret had come into a more significant than expected holding of both property and bank accounts, to her surprise and she and John spent a good portion of time in learning about and, eventually, understanding the legal ramifications of her bequest. With much effort expended on the part of Margaret and Hannah the elder (as she would occasionally refer to herself, to the shock of her children), Mr. Thornton was convinced that he could not change Margaret’s opinion on her forgiveness of the loan originally extended by Mr. Bell.

The Thornton family swelled to a total of eight, inclusive of Mrs. Hannah Thornton, John and Margaret. Their three sons and two daughters were fortunate enough to all survive childhood and had the opportunity to enjoy the camaraderie unique to siblings, with the frequent addition of their three Watson cousins who, while amusing, were more likely to follow one of John and Margaret’s children into a scrape than be the perpetrator of said frivolity.

Hannah Thornton’s passing after a lengthy life was a cause of great grief for her family, as she was most truly the matriarch of their clan. John Thornton found that he was loathe to step into such distinguished shoes, but Margaret gently reminded her beloved that as he had successfully run Marlborough Mills through both times of difficulty and prosperity, in addition to his having changed the entire dynamic of master and worker interactions in Milton by his introduction of mediation and arbitration, he was eminently capable of keeping peace amongst their relations. Thus, the torch was given over into John Thornton’s hands until his eventual demise and it then passed into the strong and adept hands of his eldest son, Jack Thornton. Margaret could not bear to live more than two months beyond the decease of her lifelong and most cherished friend. Fanny Watson was doted upon in her extreme old age, much as she had entertained the children in their youth, and she regaled all who would listen with the story of how Margaret had saved Milton and, consequently, their family. Although John had been given all of the credit for instituting a more fair and impartial manner in which to settle work related disputes, the Thornton family were very well aware – due to John’s persistent mention of such – that the concept had begun in the mind of Mr. Thornton’s future wife.

Memory has a wonderful way of smoothing the rough edges of truth and so the account of what began with misunderstandings and sorrow was far, far later lovingly related as a story of joy, set to rival the finest fairy tale.

That’s it, folks! I hope you enjoyed reading as much as I enjoyed writing.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!